

# *Raïssa's Hasidic-Catholic Spirituality*

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From a Christian perspective, to speak of a Jewish-Christian spirituality is tautological, for Christianity was born of Judaism. A Christian who does not know and treasure the Jewish Scriptures is a kind of orphan; an anti-Semitic Christian is guilty of a kind of matricide. Yet one who is born a Christian can give to this fact a merely theoretical acknowledgment; there may not be any inclination to reconcile the two Covenants, or even to become familiar with Jewish faith and prayer. Nor will such a Christian feel quite "at home" with Jewish Scripture.

However, for one born Jewish who becomes a Christian, such a reconciliation is unavoidable except at the price of becoming henceforth an exile from the spiritual home of one's childhood; the more sensitive and generous such a person is, the greater is the need to do this. That Raïssa Maritain was remarkably sensitive and generous becomes evident upon even the most casual reading of her writings. What finds expression in her spirituality is not only the depth of her commitment to Christ, but also her profound love for her Jewish heritage.

It should be emphasized that she did *not* convert from Judaism to Catholicism through any sort of gradual acceptance of the Christian interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures. Rather, she lost the faith of her childhood during adolescence because she could not reconcile the suffering and wickedness in the world with the existence of an all-good, all-powerful God;<sup>1</sup> neither could she refute the scientific materialism

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<sup>1</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *We have Been Friends Together*, trans. Julie Kernan (Garden City, New York: Image Books, 1961), 31.

to which she was exposed, first by the ardent university and medical students who visited her family,<sup>2</sup> and later by her professors at the Sorbonne.<sup>3</sup>

Although she had warm memories of celebrating the Sabbath and the holy days during her early years in Russia, after the family emigrated to Paris her parents had given up nearly all religious practices,<sup>4</sup> and her beloved grandfather, a Hasid of outstanding goodness and gentleness whom she remembered as a shining example of holiness, was far away.<sup>5</sup> Thus Raïssa was deprived of any contact with Jewish worship and scholarship at a crucial stage of her spiritual development.

It seems fairly clear that she was, by temperament, introverted, and as such, more interested in the inner world of ideas, of eternal truths, than in the outer world of people and things. Introverts need to understand life—to see pattern and meaning in it—in order to live it.<sup>6</sup> Thus Raïssa writes that she longed to know the truth about God, herself and the world, realizing that this alone could constitute an adequate foundation for her life. But she had become convinced that the certitude for which she hungered could be attained only through experimental science.<sup>7</sup>

Consequently, when, at seventeen, she enrolled in the Sorbonne, she registered at the Faculty of Sciences, full of sorrow and weariness, since nothing had been able to fill the growing inner emptiness.<sup>8</sup> She was hungry for “the joy of understanding, the light of certitude, a rule of life based on faultless truth,”<sup>9</sup> and she trusted that her professors would give her this. They, of course, did no such thing, which further increased her depression.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 36, 38.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 31, 55–57.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 14, 21, 31–32, 140.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 14–16.

<sup>6</sup>Isabel Briggs Myers, with Peter Myers, *Gifts Differing* (Palo Alto, California: Consulting Psychologists Press, 1980), 56, 62, 75, 81, 112–15. On introversion, cf. C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, trans. H. G. Banes, rev. R. F. C. Hull (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 373–407.

<sup>7</sup>*We Have Been Friends Together*, 31, 34–35, 38.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 37.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 40.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 40–41.

*Jacques and the Mutual Quest*

Then she met Jacques Maritain, who was as dissatisfied with his philosophy courses as she with science, and tormented by the same questions.<sup>11</sup> Completely disillusioned with atheistic materialism, they considered suicide,<sup>12</sup> but then they started attending the lectures of Henri Bergson, which gave them the hope of coming to know truly, absolutely, what is. Raïssa recovered the lightheartedness and joy of her first years at school.<sup>13</sup>

Although Bergson opened her mind to the inwardness of truth and delivered her from scientific materialism,<sup>14</sup> he left the God question untouched; not until the summer after their marriage did Raïssa and Jacques discover *The Woman Who Was Poor* (Bloy), which dealt, albeit through fictitious characters, with this very issue. Deeply moved, they went on to read one volume of Léon Bloy's journals, and then wrote to him. He responded with warmth; shortly thereafter he invited them to visit him.<sup>15</sup>

This man of profound faith and of poverty freely chosen out of love for Him who had Himself lived in poverty and had given Himself totally for the salvation of all made a profound impression on them both: His singleness of purpose reminded them of the Hebrew prophets.<sup>16</sup> In his *Le Salut par les Juifs*, Raïssa read that the Christian Covenant is not opposed to the one that God had made earlier with the people of Israel. Rather, it is through Jesus that the promises made to Israel are fulfilled and perfected; in him the two Testaments are united.<sup>17</sup> Affected, very likely, as much by Bloy's scripturally based rejection of anti-Semitism as by the continuity he saw between the two Covenants, she wrote him an enthusiastic letter.<sup>18</sup>

A short time later, when they visited Chartres, she saw expressed in the statues and stained glass windows of the cathedral the same belief that "the two Testaments are united in the person of Christ . . . the Old

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 42, 61.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 58–59, 64–68.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 72–73.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 82.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 87–96.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 88–91, 95.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., 100.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 112.



prefigures the New and is its basis, just as the New is the fulfillment and crown of the Old.”<sup>19</sup> No doubt, this made Raïssa’s conversion easier, but it is not what brought it about. Rather, it was knowing Bloy himself that forced her and Jacques to consider the principles that motivated his life, and brought them up against the question of God in all its power and urgency.<sup>20</sup> For one does not convert primarily because of arguments, but because of the example of a person admired and loved as a living embodiment of the very highest ideals of the religious tradition. What such a person embodies will be what the observer will be moved to embrace.<sup>21</sup>

Why was Bloy’s example so decisive for Raïssa? I believe that it was because his life was characterized by a trait long familiar to her as the experience of her people, embodied especially in her grandfather: an acceptance of the costliness of fidelity to the Covenant. It was this that motivated Clotilde,<sup>22</sup> and also came to motivate Raïssa, not in her outer life (as was the case with Bloy and Clotilde), but in her inner life. Some months before her baptism, she had been awakened from sleep by a voice that said to her, a little impatiently, “You are always asking what you ought to do: the only thing is love God and serve Him with all your heart.”<sup>23</sup> From then on, she strove to do precisely that. And for her, too, it was costly: she was increasingly misunderstood by those who did not share her dedication. Her conversion caused scandal and pain to her family and friends, and she felt these estrangements deeply.<sup>24</sup>

In “The Rude Shock of Conversion,” Raïssa describes with great perspicacity the first task of the Covenant as that of establishing an equilibrium between the eternal and the temporal, assuming into the spiritual vision even the most humble activities of daily life. This trial

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<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 115. Here, of course, Raïssa speaks as a Christian—to believe this is fundamental to a Christian’s faith. From a Jewish perspective it is unacceptable, though understandable as an essential part of Christian belief.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. *ibid.*, 119–21.

<sup>22</sup>Léon Bloy, *The Woman Who Was Poor*, trans. I. J. Collins (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1947), 354.

<sup>23</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Raïssa’s Journal*, presented by Jacques Maritain, trans. Antonia White (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1974), 105. Cf. Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 138, and Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (Albany, New York: Magi Books, 1984), 20.

<sup>24</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 137, 143, 223–24, 235.

and error process, in which misjudgments at first are frequent, involves a profound rethinking of one's vocation and mission;<sup>25</sup> Jacques's fellowship for two years of study in Germany provided them with the time and privacy both needed to begin this task.

It gave them leisure for "spiritual reading," for prayer, and for endless discussions about the eternal questions of philosophy and life, for trying out various spiritual practices as they sought to discover their future path.<sup>26</sup> They had believed that becoming Catholic required them to forswear the intellectual life,<sup>27</sup> but they began to see that a restitution of reason was indeed possible. Jacques wrote: "What we want . . . is to philosophize truly."<sup>28</sup> In this he affirmed his vocation and discovered his mission.<sup>29</sup>

### *The Contemplative Path*

Raïssa, however, felt more and more drawn to a life of contemplation. She hungered for union with God with an intensity that stopped at nothing, even while feeling unable to bear the ordeals through which, she had read, it was necessary to pass to attain such union. In spite of her fear, she trusted in the Lord and prayed for generosity; as one might expect, given her temperament, she saw no middle ground between total immolation and spiritual mediocrity.<sup>30</sup> What is needed is for one to abandon oneself entirely to God, looking only at Him, in complete confidence, devoting oneself wholly to praising and loving.<sup>31</sup> She said to Jacques, "I want to detach myself from myself, without this there will be no joy for me."<sup>32</sup>

This desire to give oneself totally to God, reserving nothing for self, is the essential point of departure for contemplative prayer. While it is common to devout believers in every religious tradition, it is especially

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 316–18.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 171; Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 43, 50.

<sup>27</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 138.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 143.

<sup>29</sup>Cf. Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 79.

<sup>30</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 79–80. Probably there is no middle ground; one's 'yes' is always total, at least implicitly. But sensitive types may come to an explicit realization of its totality only gradually, whereas intuitives are more apt to perceive this from the beginning. Cf. Jung, *Psychological Types*, 398–405.

<sup>31</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 83–84.

<sup>32</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 56.

characteristic of Hasidic prayer.<sup>33</sup> In Hasidism worship, particularly in the form of contemplative prayer, comes to be clearly identified as the central focus of the Jew's religious life.<sup>34</sup>

There are clear parallels between Raïssa's description of the life of prayer and that of the Hasidic masters: for both, prayer springs from the soul's longing to be united—or reunited—with God, its source.<sup>35</sup> Through intimate attachment to God, one begins to experience redemption/salvation even in this life.<sup>36</sup> Both speak of two levels of prayer: For Raïssa there is prayer that springs from love of friendship and from “mad, boundless love” (*amour fou*);<sup>37</sup> and for the Hasidim there is *quatnut* and *gadlut*.<sup>38</sup> The first is the simple prayer of devotion of giving oneself to God and accepting His will;<sup>39</sup> the second, an absorption so total that the worshiper is no longer aware of himself. On wings of love and awe he rises from all conceptual thought to a wordless attachment to God, a fullness that is yet an emptiness, wholly open to the divine.<sup>40</sup> For the Hasidic masters, “a person who still knows how intensely he is praying has not yet overcome his awareness of self”;<sup>41</sup> Raïssa and Jacques quote with approval the saying of Saint Anthony, the Hermit, that “there is not perfect prayer if the religious perceives that he is praying.”<sup>42</sup> That Raïssa herself experienced this latter level of prayer seems evident from her writings.

### *Rediscovering Judaism in Catholicism*

In becoming a Catholic, Raïssa reconnected with, reclaimed her Jewish heritage; she came to see Jesus as the embodiment of the piety

<sup>33</sup>Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1989), 155–56.

<sup>34</sup>Arthur Green and Barry W. Holz, *Your Word Is Fire* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 3.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 5–6.

<sup>37</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 220–25.

<sup>38</sup>Green and Holz, *Your Word Is Fire*, 11–12. There is no evidence of a *direct* influence: Raïssa speaks out of her own experience and her knowledge of the writings of Christian mystics. But later, when she read about Hasidic prayer, she was deeply moved, and proud to claim it as part of her heritage. Cf. *Infra*, n. 44.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 12–13.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>42</sup>Cassian, IX, 31 (cf. *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité*, article on Contemplation, col. 1924 and 1926), quoted in Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, *Liturgy and Contemplation*, trans. Joseph W. Evans (New York: P. J. Kennedy, 1960), 37.



of Hasidism carried to its radical conclusion in His sacrificial death. This she tried to explain to her mother when her father was dying: "I tried . . . to show her in Catholicism the fulfillment of the Jewish religion."<sup>43</sup> At that time, however, her mother felt that nobody but Raïssa believed this. Later, Raïssa would read Shalom Asch's book *Le Juif aux Psaumes*, an account of the morals and spirituality of Hasidism in Poland in the middle of the nineteenth century. She calls it "beautiful, astonishing," and continues, "my maternal grandfather was a Hasid, too. And my father's father was a great ascetic. I have all that behind me. And for me, too, the Psalms ought to be perpetual nourishment."<sup>44</sup>

Much earlier, towards the end of 1910, she had begun the reflections that led eventually to her little book on Abraham.<sup>45</sup> Its successive retouchings and reissues over a twenty-year period indicate its importance to Raïssa.<sup>46</sup> Her essay emphasizes the continuity of Judeo-Christian history.<sup>47</sup> Jacques tells us that it was written in the light of prayer and at the cost of great interior suffering.<sup>48</sup> That Abraham's faith in God is one of the peaks in Scripture, joining together the two Testaments<sup>49</sup> was, as Judith Suther points out,<sup>50</sup> one of Raïssa's most deeply held convictions. Through Bloy's *Le Salut par les Juifs* she had come to see Christ as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and hope, and this view was continually strengthened by her subsequent study.

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<sup>43</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *We Have Been Friends Together*, 239. It would be no tribute to Raïssa, whose own commitment to truth was so uncompromising, not to state honestly that her attitude is problematic. She seems to believe that any devout, intelligent Jew would convert if only he had true Christianity, in which there is no place for anti-Semitism, properly explained to him. Such an attitude towards Judaism is regrettable: it is not that of the Catholic Church today. But it does reflect a pre-Vatican II perspective which Raïssa, given her own hunger for truth and conviction that in converting to Catholicism she had at last laid hold on it, would find quite logical, especially since she seems not to have known any Jews who were both educated and devout.

<sup>44</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 274, #92.

<sup>45</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 67; Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 251, #60.

<sup>46</sup>Judith Suther, *Raïssa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 72–73.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>48</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 67.

<sup>49</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Histoire d'Abraham* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1947), 37–38. English translation, "Abraham and the Ascent of Conscience," in *The Bridge*, ed. John M. Oestreich (New York: Pantheon Books, 1955), 35.

<sup>50</sup>Suther, *Raïssa Maritain*, 72.

The reclamation was not merely intellectual: her journal entries during the period she was working on *Abraham* manifest a parallel between the demands of faith as she experienced them and Abraham's experience of them.<sup>51</sup> As Judith Suther writes: "Like the Old Testament God, the New Testament God-made-Incarnate demands everything, and both command in love."<sup>52</sup> "For Abraham is also the image of the Father whose Son is crucified."<sup>53</sup> Like Abraham, Raïssa willed to give herself totally, whatever the cost. And she expected it to cost; she did not believe in "cheap grace." Rather, she sees suffering as the inevitable price of human participation in the divine nature. In *The True Face of God* she writes that it is not ontologically possible for human nature to be transmuted without suffering.<sup>54</sup> And it is Abraham, the Father of Believers, whom she takes as her example: "He, too, knew the hard law of the transformation of the natural man into the spiritual and divine man."<sup>55</sup> Her *Journal* abounds with entries attesting to the strength of her conviction that only through the freely willed sacrifice of all that nature holds dear, and the human suffering this entails, can we enter into "the boundless heart of God."<sup>56</sup>

### *Sanctity and Sanity*

Because of such statements, a number of people, especially Americans, have suspected her of being a neurotic; she has even been accused of docetism.<sup>57</sup> However, the vast majority of Americans are extroverts, who often find introverts withdrawn, unfriendly, even morbid. In fact, the latter are merely shy, private by temperament, and therefore slow to make friends.<sup>58</sup> Those who become their friends are treasured for life. What has been interpreted as hypochondria can, more fairly, be seen as the natural consequences of her frail constitution and her introversion.<sup>59</sup> We must also remember that, when

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<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 73.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 74.

<sup>53</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Histoire*, 48; "Abraham," 39.

<sup>54</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 390; cf. 66.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 392; cf. also Suther, *Raïssa Maritain*, 74.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid., 239.

<sup>57</sup>Cf. Denis J. M. Bradley's review of Suther's biography in *America*, vol. 164, no. 7: 23 February 1991, 214–16.

<sup>58</sup>Cf. Jung, *Psychological Types*, 403–5.

<sup>59</sup>In dealing with the outer world, introverts are constantly using their less preferred, and therefore less developed, attitude and functions—this is exhausting. Cf. Jung, *loc. cit.* In fact,



she came to the United States in 1939, she was 56; though fluent in Russian, German, and French, she had not learned English. Learning a new language in middle age is not so easy and one's lack of facility can be a further reason for being less outgoing.

In any case, introverts *need* privacy—ideally several hours daily for reflection and/or prayer. Only thus can they bring order and meaning to the many details of everyday life—without time for this, the multiplicity becomes exhausting, even a torment, but it is not neurotic suffering. It is merely the normal discomfort and weariness of having to function for too long in ways at odds with one's natural preference.<sup>60</sup>

In fact, her perception and offering of herself as “victim” is a way of making these experiences constructive and meaningful, which is quite consistent with both her Catholic faith and her understanding of her Jewish heritage; neither is her belief that she is called to sacrifice even temporal and human happiness necessarily docetism. It would be difficult for a theist to maintain that there is never any need to sacrifice any of the good things of this world for the sake of the next world: the question is rather when, where, what, and how far? Discernment is never easy, nor can anyone, except perhaps the person's spiritual director, judge the quality of another's discernment.

And even if one is mistaken in one's choice of the means, it is the generosity with which one surrenders one's whole being to God in love rather than the concrete ways in which that surrender is expressed, which distinguishes the devout from ordinary believers. It is clear that it is this generosity which Raïssa intended: she writes “By renouncing the good things of this world, . . . by giving to God our human and temporal happiness, we give Him proportionally as much as He gives us, because we give Him *our all* . . .”<sup>61</sup>

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aside from a few instances which seem to have been the result of poor diagnosis and/or incorrect medical treatment, she herself speaks, not of disease, but of fatigue. She was not always idle nor in bed: cf. Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 399–404. Nor is it obvious that in allowing her to follow what all three perceived as her contemplative vocation, Jacques and Vera were “pampering” her. To call her “a nineteenth-century neurasthenic” as Madeline Marget does in her review of Suther's book (*The Commonweal*, vol., 127, no. 17: 12 October 1990, 586–87) without having known her personally nor, apparently, read her directly, merely on the basis of selected passages taken out of context, seems quite unfair.

<sup>60</sup>Cf. Jung, *Psychological Types*, 373–407; Briggs-Myers, 112–15.

<sup>61</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 249, #53; cf. Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 32.

In other words, that Raïssa did not seek to avoid suffering but rather accepted, even embraced it, should not surprise us: it is simply the way in which any Christian who takes seriously Jesus' invitation to follow Him and so share in His redemptive mission ought to respond. We may not feel called to respond in precisely the same ways as she, but then she never claims her way is the only way. On the contrary, it is *her* vocation, to which she strives to be totally faithful. In this she had not only the support of a long tradition but also that of her spiritual director,<sup>62</sup> of Jacques and especially, of her sister Vera, who was repeatedly told by Jesus that Raïssa's suffering was for the sake of many others.<sup>63</sup>

Was Raïssa a mystic? She was not a visionary, neither did she "hear" Jesus speaking to her during her times of prayer, as Vera did. Yet she does seem to have been given, at least at times, an experiential knowledge of God that filled her with joy and peace. It was, however, not constant: to one who has felt his presence, the times of His absence or hiddenness are intensely painful, even when accepted in love, and she was not always successful in hiding her suffering from Jacques and Vera. Like Thérèse of Lisieux, she seems to have had more of the latter than of the former; also like Thérèse, she longed for that complete union that cannot be attained on earth.

She was, nevertheless, no cloistered nun: she was a contemplative in the world. Jacques describes her as "being ever at the disposal of others"<sup>64</sup> and Olivier Lacombe, in a letter written to Jacques after her death, speaks of her numerous, varied, and time-devouring human obligations, her collaboration with Jacques in his works, her "marvelous art of making people feel welcome," of "the harmonious unity of action and contemplation,"<sup>65</sup> which characterized her life at Meudon. Jacques has written of "her indomitable humor and her vigilance in dispute";<sup>66</sup> even in their youth he could write of her that

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., 78, 167.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 209–18. One may doubt the authenticity of these "private revelations," but these, too, have the support of a long tradition, and a theist should be slow to deny their possibility *in principle*. The only objective test of their authenticity is whether the life of the person receiving them is characterized by loving service to others and patience in suffering. According to Jacques, Vera met both criteria, and both he and Raïssa took her seriously.

<sup>64</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Journal*, 402; cf. 32, n. 5.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 400–402.

<sup>66</sup>Jacques Maritain, *Notebooks*, 32.

she “always goes to the bitter end, with a direct intention and an upright will;<sup>67</sup> . . . she always gives without retaining anything.”<sup>68</sup> This is the attitude of “mad, boundless love,” so similar to the *gadlut* of the Hasidim; Raïssa’s spirituality is firmly rooted in her Jewish heritage.

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<sup>67</sup>Ibid., 31.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 32.