AUGUSTE COMTE’S READING OF MAISTRE’S DU PAPE: TWO THEORIES OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

Tonatiuh Useche Sandoval

Introduction

It is no secret that Auguste Comte had a high opinion of Joseph de Maistre’s thought, which he certainly discovered through the master of his youth, Saint-Simon. So it is hardly surprising that Comte shared an admiration for the work of the Savoyard author. In 1826, Comte wrote: “M. de Maistre presented the most methodical, most profound, and most precise display of the old spiritual organisation.” What interested the former Polytechnic student in this work devoted to the leader of Catholicism [Du pape] was Maistre’s ‘methodical’ approach to the question. At the same time, though, he excluded the counter-revolutionary doctrine contained in the book. It was certainly necessary to put an end to the Revolution. However, he did not think that the solution consisted in restoring the old powers to the leaders of society. This would mean accomplishing historical regression. Restoring the past to the present actually implies going backwards, in other words, marching from the present towards the past and reversing the course of history. From a doctrinal point of view, for Comte, Maistre represented the leader of the “retrograde school” and consequently, an adversary to combat. Nevertheless, Comte and Maistre felt the same admiration for

---

1 This article was translated from French by Richard A. Lebrun.
2 The article owes much to the advice of my thesis director, Michel Bourdeau, to Professor Richard Lebrun’s corrections, and to the diligence of Dr. Carolina Armenteros. I thank them most sincerely.
the European monarchy of the popes and shared a common sadness in observing the downfall of the Catholic constitution.5

The purpose of this paper is to examine the notion of spiritual authority from the angle of a European bond. By spiritual authority, we understand the moral and intellectual influence that is shown by an authority worthy of faith. Three questions arise. Firstly, there is the question of how a European phenomenon became a common subject of reflection for both authors. What views about Europe brought two such distinct contemporaries together? Then, there are two more conceptual questions. Firstly, how did Joseph de Maistre conceive of relations between the papacy and European society in his work on the pope? And secondly, what is Auguste Comte’s contribution to the theorisation of spiritual authority undertaken by Maistre?

I. The Convergence Between Maistre and Comte on Two European Phenomena

A. The Critique of the Apparent Spiritual Unity of the Holy Alliance

Although Joseph de Maistre was forty-five years older than Auguste Comte, this does not prevent both men from being considered as contemporaries, that is, two minds steeped in the same period, since they both witnessed the collapse of the Napoleonic Empire. It is remarkable that both criticised, for very similar reasons, the European order that was established in September 1815 with the signing of the Treaty of the Holy Alliance. This treaty was signed on the initiative of Tsar Alexander I (1777–1825), whom Maistre knew well, having carried out the function of ambassador in St. Petersburg from 1803 to 1817. After the victory of

---

5 This sadness seeps through in the Preliminary Discourse of Du pape: “Today, the entire clergy of Europe is more or less reduced to such holy though laborious occupations, particularly those in France, who were more directly and more violently struck by the revolutionary tempest. All the flowers of the sacred ministry have been withered by it; only the thorns remain.” The Pope, trans. Aeneas McD. Dawson (New York: Howard Fertig, 1975, [London, 1850], xx. Comte, for his part, felt “a kind of philosophical repugnance” while studying the “spectacle of the destruction” of the Catholic and feudal order, in Cours de philosophie positive, 55th lesson (Paris: Hermann, 1975), 2:384–85. On this point, see Alexandre J.-L. Delamarre, “Le pouvoir spirituel et la ruine de la constitution catholique chez J. de Maistre et A. Comte,” in no. 175 (1985) of the Revue de la France et de l’étranger, devoted to Auguste Comte, 433 and 436. In this article, Delamarre undertakes an analysis of the negative movement, which, from the end of the Middle Ages disorganised European Christianity, in order to study the nature and function of political power in these two authors.