Julian the Apostate, Democrat: Montaigne, Lévinas, and the Otherness of Democracy

Research Proposal for the Democracy, Culture and Catholicism

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In his brief essay "De la liberté de conscience", the Renaissance author and philosopher Michel de Montaigne holds up as his hero the fourth-century Roman emperor Julian, labeled by later (hostile) generations the Apostate. Montaigne's anticipation of that arch-freethinker Edward Gibbon got him in immediate trouble with Church authorities, and was one of the reasons his *Essais* were placed on the *Index librorum prohibitorum*; Montaigne had to travel to Rome in person in order to persuade the Vatican censors to allow him to publish his work. One wonders what Montaigne could have said to get himself off the hook, as the essay lauds the pagan Julian as an exemplum of moral and political virtue, praising the religious pluralism he fostered as a civic ideal, while ridiculing his Christian opponents as narrow-minded bigots.

Montaigne wrote during the Wars of Religion, when French Catholics and Protestants spent more than twenty years slaughtering each other. The questions of freedom of conscience, of religious toleration, and of the kind of state most likely to foster internal and external peace were therefore not abstractions to Montaigne, himself a moderate Catholic who played an important role in bringing about the compromises that brought an end to the civil war. Montaigne's responses to these questions are conditioned, then, by his experience of the Wars of Religion, but also by his ancestry--he descended from Spanish Jews who fled religious persecution in their homeland--and by Renaissance encounters with the New World, which

provide for Montaigne examples of what *not* to do when face-to-face with those different from ourselves. At the heart of his thought on these issues are two fundamental questions: First, what are we to do when confronted with the Other, a person who is unlike us and whose very being therefore constitutes a radical challenge to our values and existence? Second, what civic structure, what political framework is most likely to provide the conditions necessary for peaceful, even fruitful coexistence with that Other?

These problems have not gone away; if anything, they have presented themselves over the last century on a larger scale, and with even more urgency, than in Montaigne's time. One of the most important modern responses to this set of issues is found in the work of Emmanuel Lévinas, who examines, like Montaigne, the relationship between subject and Other, between ourselves and those who--simply by virtue of not being ourselves--constitute a fundamental challenge to our existence. This challenge is, in Lévinas's view, *the* philosophical question that must be answered before any other, and like Montaigne, his response to this question is conditioned by direct experience, in his case that of the Holocaust. Given that the Other is, *a priori*, a potential--and often an actual--threat, how are we to respond? And what are the philosophical conditions of possibility, and the real-world civic frameworks, that will allow us to do so, particularly when entire political entities--whole states--may have been organized on the principle that the Other must be not engaged but annihilated?

I propose to examine the writings of these two authors--one a Jew whose work has greatly influenced contemporary Catholic thinkers, the other a professing Catholic of Jewish familial (and, I shall argue, intellectual) antecedents--in order to understand how the direct philosophical and practical experience of the Other, and of *being* the Other, may constitute for them the starting point for all possible right action, and for any possible civic order that allows such right action. Montaigne may have been a loyal servant of the French Crown, but subsequent generations of readers have had no trouble discerning in him one of the first theorists of the modern democratic state. Likewise, the thought of Lévinas is fundamentally democratic in nature, insofar as it offers a radical critique of any state that denies the humanity of any person

or group of persons; Lévinas shows further that only a in civic order that acknowledges the fundamental rights, even *demands*, of the Other is it possible to be fully human.

Both Montaigne and Lévinas understand that the Kantian ideal of purely disinterested action must remain an abstract ideal; for both thinkers, we are always already as it were embodied, engaged with our own interest, and any possibility for right action in the world, whether between individuals or within a society, i. e. political action, must therefore take this prior engagement into account. Hence, they ask, how, and under what conditions, can we constitute ourselves in such a way as to have as a condition of our existence--or to demand by right--*mutual* recognition of our identity and our status as Other? It seems to me that their answers to these questions are of fundamental importance in envisioning the possibility, and in understanding the nature, of any conceivable democratic society in the modern world. This is especially true in a time when democracy is simultaneously sought and challenged, demanded and decried, by ever greater numbers of people living in an ever greater range of cultures. Julian the Apostate, as Montaigne shows, was on to something; only in a political environment that not only tolerates but recognizes and encourages all voices can a society truly live. Democracy itself will need to recognize its own Others if it is to survive and thrive in the 21st century, and the thought of Montaigne and of Lévinas has much to teach us in this regard.

As will be seen from the foregoing, the project I am proposing is situated at the intersection of several disciplines: literature, intellectual history, and philosophy. It takes as its starting point close readings of specific texts, and will at all times remain grounded both in those texts and in their intellectual and historical contexts. In this I am merely following the lead of the authors I propose to study, since both Montaigne and Lévinas anchor their work firmly in the real world of human experience. For Montaigne, works to be studied will include, in addition to "De la liberté de conscience", "De la coustume", "Des cannibales", "De l'inequalité qui est entre nous", "De l'inconstance de nos actions", "Des coches", "De l'experience", and of course the *Apologie de Raimond Sebond*, and for Lévinas, *Totalité et infini*, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, and *Difficile liberté*, among others. The essay I am here proposing, specific to the

Democracy, Culture and Catholicism International Research Project, will likely be a part of a larger investigation of approaches to the Other in Montaigne, Lévinas, and other authors, portions of which will be suitable for publication in literary journals such as *PMLA*, *L'Esprit créateur*, or *Modern Philology*, as well as interdisciplinary journals such as *Critical Inquiry* or *Representations*; I plan ultimately to bring the various parts of the project together in a monograph. It is my hope in any case that this project will contribute to an informed discussion of contemporary modes of democratization, and help illuminate how democracy can take on forms adapted to real people and real experience in the 21st century.