

## RECONSIDERATIONS

# The Case of Georges Bernanos

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**Editor's Note:** *Modern Age* will be publishing on an ongoing basis essays in the form of "Reconsiderations," of which Thomas Molnar's essay here on Georges Bernanos is a cogent example. It will be the purpose of these reconsiderations to re-examine and re-evaluate a particular conservative writer's work and thought, as well as to spur readers to return to that writer's major ideas. If and when, too, there are blemishes or controversial elements in a writer's work, they will be inspected and clarified. These reconsiderations will not be restricted to assessing just the totality of a writer's achievement, but may also choose to elucidate some single work, or issue, or quality of the writer. Some reconsiderations will focus on major conservative figures; others will direct attention to lesser-known conservative thinkers who have justifiable claim to our attention. In the latter instance, a reconsideration will strive to show why and how neglect of that writer's work should now be corrected. Relating a writer's contribution to the contemporary social, political, intellectual, religious, and economic situation will, of course, play a prominent critical role in the series of reconsiderations *Modern Age* will be presenting to its readership in future issues.

LET IT BE CLEAR from the beginning that George Bernanos would have indignantly rejected the qualifier "conservative." In Latin civilizations, as opposed to Germanic or Anglo-Saxon, the term is almost offensive, as Bernanos himself made it clear in a volume-size invective against the *bien pensants*, the Pharisee-like bourgeois equivalent of the narrow-minded conservative. All his life he was a man of the right, and the only question to clarify was whether "right" was compatible for him with "ultra-right," or with "popular right," or with "Catholic right." When we read his books, essays, or the many minor texts published in the *Cahiers* managed by one of his sons (Bernanos died in 1948, at age sixty), the salient features leave no doubt: a passionate man who

lived his ideas, and these ideas could not be contained in a quiet study. Like bullets they were directed, not to say shot, at targets: the hypocrisy of the powerful, including the clergy; the mechanical mentality of the routine-loving; the born bureaucrat who "opens his psychological consultation cabinet from nine to five, exclusive of Saturday and Sunday." When we learn that such "experts" may be, in the near future, the Jesuits, the remark acquires a sharper edge. Or when he wrote, long before the Vatican Council, that he could see himself being shoved against a wall and machine-gunned by priests who hate his kind of independent souls, we have no difficulty evaluating the weight and direction of his invectives.

I could quote many other instances of sarcasm because the trademark of his fierce indignations against “traitors and fools” was his unsparing style. The targets were France’s greatest names who happened to incur his contempt: Mauriac, Montherlant, Maurras, Claudel. They were opportunists who in his eyes humiliated themselves for favors and betrayed loyalties. This makes us think, in the Anglo-Saxon milieu, of an Evelyn Waugh coupled with Ezra Pound, then given a philosophical working over by G.K. Chesterton. Indeed, out of these three men, with Hilaire Belloc perhaps added, we might construct a simili-Bernanos, although the attacks that Bernanos launched had mostly local, political, and ecclesiastical reasons. His novels showed the qualities as well as the defects: on the one hand, some characters display an abject humanity, the farthest from grace; on the other hand, there is the saint, physically dying from the superhuman effort of saving the weak, the dried-up, the abject. Andre Gide once remarked that there could be no Catholic novel since the outcome, the triumph of virtue, is settled in advance. Bernanos was the living refutation: the dynamics of grace supply the unexpected element as it tears away the soul from the mud of wretchedness. And the protagonists of the gigantic war of souls astonish us again and again with their fresh and sharp spirit in sick bodies, and with their talent to outwit the sin of hardened souls.

All this would not make Bernanos a man of the right. But consider this. In the given French milieu, Bernanos was searching, like God in Sodom, for a few righteous men, and expected to find them among honest, devoted, patriotic, and committed Christians—over against the modern man with clockwork where the soul ought to be. This is clearly a Pascalian note, and like Pascal, Bernanos knew the layers of self-manufactured illusions, good conscience, and eager

compromise that separate one from the genuine self, naked before God. Since both “leftist” and “rightist” have their dirty little secrets, and one is not better than the other, the Bernanosian distinction does not run along party lines, programs, or conservative-liberal controversies. Instead it divides people into the innocent and the impostor whose whole life is one of playacting and dodging of reality. We should not therefore expect to find the usual right wing or indeed any kind of politics and partisanship—for Bernanos, politicians were transparent in their escape from real issues—but an altogether new lineup. The following are marked by a quasi-Luciferian falsehood: the holier-than-thou Voltairean bourgeois; the capitalist and Marxist systematizers; the spokesmen of the modern pagan state; the Tartuffes among the clerics; the technologically robotized world; the naive citizen who trusts the voting bulletin.

It is obvious that this is much less and much more than politics, and also that it is both left and right—and neither. It is not Germanic meta-politics (let’s say, in the Voegelinian sense), nor material for a Straussian analysis of political fundamentals. Like Pascal, Bernanos has a generally man-centered vision where the key term is divine grace, which perfects the human condition: leaves it intact, yet draws it higher. In this light, the modern world is like Cain, it hides from God and tries to postpone the reckoning. Politics is part of the vision only because we live in the midst of political realities, which must, however, be measured by a higher standard. For France these realities are a long history of kings, heroes, saints, and also of scoundrels, hypocrites, and fools; and the political goal, if there is such a thing, is the same as the underlying plot of Bernanos’s novels: to deal with the work of sin and grace in the human heart. The nation’s conscience is not different from that of its individuals.

It must be emphasized that no party, interest group, or regime carries the seal of divine or historical approval this side of salvation. But as with Charles Péguy, the maverick socialist and Catholic, there are degrees, and France is empowered with a special mission. This is perhaps the main axis of the Bernanosian political-national vision; this is what he found in his youth in the *Action Française* movement; this is what he expected to find in Franco's insurrection against the left-republicans; this is what he argued for during the war as a foreign-based (Brazil) spokesman of the expected Gaullist rejuvenation of France. Let us say that these three moments were the closest that Bernanos ever came to the political world and the game of power. All three left him more than disillusioned and shaken to the core. The "right" was no better than the "left," though at the same time Bernanos was certainly not a man made for the middle. In this connection, he found an unexpectedly sympathetic heart in Simone Weil, who had broken off from the Marxists as Bernanos himself had broken off from the Maurrassians. Simone Weil's letter to him (1937) is one of the political monuments of the century, it amounts to more than a political alliance: You, a right winger royalist, are nearer to me than my erstwhile comrades! A decade later, Bernanos turned away from de Gaulle with as much vehemence as he had denounced Franco. De Gaulle failed to bring, after all, to France what Joan of Arc had: the conciliation of a much-martyred national body *and* the kind of sainthood on the mundane level through which the French would save a materialist, mechanically thinking, derailed world.

In all this, we seem to get farther away from politics, conservatism, and the conservative *Weltanschauung*. The link does exist, but it needs a careful look since it does not only connect but also separates, often irreconcilably. Conserva-

tism, in the eyes of Bernanos, is meant to preserve the status quo of civil peace where everybody knows his place, reasonably enjoys it, and contributes to its perpetuation. It seems, therefore, that conservatism favors the economic dimension where modern society has its point of gravity and is ready for sundry compromises in religion and culture. For Bernanos this is materialism plus hypocrisy, the "bourgeois" inclination to balance not merely the budget but also social factors at the expense of superior and non-quantifiable realities. The problem is not the puritanically framed virtuous society, which can never exist in this imperfect, sinful world; the problem is that of finding one outstanding and self-sacrificing man whose love of God and country lifts society above its normal potentialities—and inertia. Let us note here again the similarity of this ideal picture to those others that Bernanos paints in his novels and in his drama, *Dialogue of the Carmelites*: one person or a saintly group suffices to redeem a collectivity, one just man to save the city.

Such men cannot be produced by a differently oriented civilization, born from the wedlock of merely smart people and the machine. Bernanos calls the offspring "robot," perhaps his main enemy because the machine had been intended in pre-mechanical, pre-industrial times to ease the poor man's daily efforts, but came to be expropriated by ruthless manipulators, and ultimately by the bureaucrat behind his office desk, the professor at his lectern, the priest in his pulpit, the international official at his podium. This arsenal of machines and manipulators, whether utilized by Marxists or capitalists, results in dehumanization, the robbing of people of their innocence. It is astonishing how this view of modernity coincides with that of Dostoevsky, who dramatized it in the portrait of the Grand Inquisitor and in half-a-dozen characters like Ivan

Karamazov, Shatov, and Smerdyakov. Today we can see how this same human product gains the upper hand, as reliably solid communist officials get recycled as solidly reliable free-marketeers.

As one of Bernanos's biographers, Gaetan Picon, writes, Bernanos had no interest in political systems, his was rather a moral affirmation. In a way, Bernanos illustrates a point Berdyaev makes in his reflections on Dostoevsky. There have been two periods in Christian history, the second being the modern when the believer feels exiled from transcendence (the first phase) and must shoulder the new status by re-creating the inner light in his own self. Bernanos belonged to both parts of this spiritual history; his faith is that of the old peasant's, but he knows he must protect it through his own efforts, in confrontation with the world and increasingly with the Church. Hans Urs von Balthasar observes that Bernanos rejects humanism together with technology, seeing the second as a product of the first, all for the greater glory of man! Thus Bernanos would be an exile indeed if his attachment and loyalty to church and nation were not such strengthening roots. To such an extent that Bernanos excluded no Frenchman from history—although he himself was a monarchist all his life—he drew a line not between Louis XVI and the Revolution, but between the people in good faith who started the mass-movement in 1789 and the traitors who made it derail in 1793 (Robespierre and the Terror). As against the hard-core royalists, still a sizable minority in France, this can be summarized as a “popular monarchistic” sentiment.

Gradually the Bernanosian vision became more focused. It is a dualism whose two parts are reconciled in the *douce pitié de Dieu* (God's sweet mercy)—but not before, not this side of history. Again we have the Pascalian and, for that matter, the Dostoevskian, conception. The

first describes the atheist's plight and his hardly hidden dread of the “empty spaces” inhabited by atoms (the ancestors of mechanization)—but only to ask of him the leap into faith; the second describes the necessary outcome of nihilistic operations (in *The Possessed*), but offers the perpetrators peace in the bosom of czarist Russia and the Orthodox faith. Sin and pardon are organically related halves of spiritual dialectics, explaining not only Dostoevsky's reverence for the *staretz* in the role of the prophet, but also Bernanos's invectives against clerics with their outward respectability and dried-up hearts. What would he say today?

Bernanos, then, has hardly more to do with political institutions and their functioning than did the Hebrew prophets in warning their rulers. When he turns against the state and its power we should not take it as a plea for decentralization and for the rights of citizens, pressure groups, or individual states in the American sense. Let us bear in mind that the young Bernanos was a loyal and active member of the *Action Française*, and that the latter's immensely influential leader, Charles Maurras, pictured France, historically and ideally, as a multitude of quasi-autonomous “republics” held together by allegiance to king and dynasty. This somewhat ideal image is not very distant from its elaborated version in the American Constitution, except that for Bernanos (and for Maurras) we cannot speak of states and states-rights in the American sense, but as orders and corporations having acquired their considerable freedoms of legislating and acting (and refusing the implementation of the central dictates) during the feudal and the early absolutistic periods. The Jacobin revolution dismantled and destroyed nearly all of them without any constitutional recourse and restoration. Thus it is not surprising that Maurrassian thought included such philosophers as Auguste Comte and the

early socialist Joseph Proudhon, who, in a circuitous way, had been hostile to the bourgeois character of 1789 and not opposed to the rehabilitation, a deeply reformist one, of the old order. In other words, Anglo-Saxon conservatism, perhaps more the Burkean British than the Jeffersonian American, has one or two points of contact with the Maurrassian speculation, echoed by Bernanos on a more mystical plane. France was created, according to the royalist credo, by "forty kings," while the American Constitution was the product of a dozen men sitting around a table. While the emotional resonance is different, the names of Burke and Hamilton are agreeable to French right wing ears.

When Bernanos vehemently criticizes the State, he has the Jacobin state in mind, the state fallen into the wrong hands—the calculating bourgeois, the sly lawyers, the laughable parliamentarians. Starting in 1789, the kings were guilty of letting the national and Christian tragedy happen, and the Church was also guilty for acquiescing through her disloyal sons. The modern state is no longer the unity of stratified corporations; rather, it is a jealous keeper of moneybags and a servant of anti-national interest groups, eager to sell France the way Joan was sold to the English in 1431. (Since Bernanos's wife descended from Joan's brother, the history of France was for Bernanos a kind of family matter. Hence his invectives also remained, as it were, in the family).

The critique of the state was thus only marginally a "conservative" critique. The wealth-producing mechanisms of modern industrial society (which absorb the quasi-totality of governmental activity) are on the opposite pole from Bernanos: the banks, publicity, interest rates, transnational corporations, advertisement, which he described as instruments of the "pagan state," anti-Christian, impersonal, supremely exploitative, and

engendering an endless flow of vulgar slogans. By 1946, when he returned from self-exile in Brazil, the French state, whose power became familiar to him through observing the war-effort and through the totalitarian regimes, had grown in his eyes to monstrous proportions: not the welfare state as such—as a Catholic he was not in principle against it—but the mechanical-bureaucratic domination which the state now possesses and hardly can relinquish. Rather than the state itself, the object of his radical critique was the administrative mass-instrument with its ubiquitous interference. He emphasized repeatedly that there was no difference between Hitler/Stalin and the Western democracies. Both regimes, he believed, were building the universal robot, thus destroying the soul and setting up supervisory mechanisms that a credulous voter believed were to his benefit. If this remains outside of Pascal's concern, it is included in Tocqueville's with his almost Orwellian paragraph about the "tutelary state" which accepts the burden of thinking for the citizen, provided he entrusts it with the organization of his whole existence.

Who would not be tempted to draw a parallel between what Bernanos identifies as "the Voltaire-loving mediocre bourgeois" and the inhabitants of an American suburb? Who would not subscribe to the Bernanosian observation that "even if communism vanishes as did Hitler's regime, the world would still evolve in the direction of total control," whether one calls it "thought-police," "new world order," "planetary government," or United Nations? What Bernanos added to these notions during those post-war euphoric times, supposedly on the verge of permanent peace (at his death the cold war had hardly begun), was technological totalitarianism. He did not use the expression, but he was instinctively and prophetically aware of its contents. When I published my book about him in 1960,

the word "prophet" came to my mind automatically as the title. Also in the title I used his "political thought," although at the time I suspected a contradiction between his politics and his prophecy. But years later, after lengthy and frequent, in part politically motivated travels, I realized that Bernanos saw matters more deeply than he was given credit for at the time of his death. From his perspective, politics took second seat behind man's spiritual pilgrimage—the political element was man's dabbling in God's design, an amateurish exercise based on vast misunderstandings and feeble means. In 1960, squeezed between totalitarian regimes, but accepting the notion that a liberal-democratic victory would set things straight, I still did not suspect, even after much reading of Bernanos, that we had entered, with probably no exit, a more developed, less crude period of the totalist era. In short, I needed to mature to the position where I finally grasped the Bernanosian meaning which reached us through repeated warnings. And each warning, wrapped in imprecations, invectives, and vaticinations, touched the post-1945 world as a concrete diagnosis, although it seemed like a distant prophecy. Yet prophecy is only the future tense for the present of our discontent.

Many conservatives would agree with Bernanos about the sacredness of tradition because continuity and timely guidelines are the basic building blocks of society. They would agree about the nature of reality, which is coupled with responsibility—and not with, for example, a DNA-regulated moral code, modifiable as biogenetic research progress. This is because man is free: his is not Spinoza's freedom ("if provided with thought, the flying stone would think it is flying freely"), but a God-created faculty. There would be agreement that evil cannot be proscribed or chemically cured, that the art of politics grows in

moral ground, that hierarchy is the mainstay of civilized life, that whatever we do is surrounded by passions, interests, temptations.

Conservatives would, however, disagree about the role of the individual. For them, social stability, a kind of highest good, rests on a rock bottom, best adumbrated by Adam Smith: Let individuals act freely, these freedoms will balance each other out, aided by common sense and reasoned self-interest. According to this mild Pelagianism, mild because aimed mainly at economic transactions, all or most men possess enough brains to protect life, liberty, and prosperity; and out of this fortress, erected as inalienable rights, other things will follow, namely, the generally beneficent character of societal give-and-take.

This is a far cry from Bernanos's thinking. For him—and for Maurras—the individual is always open to sin and evil. The soul is not protected by some socially sacralized concept like freedom, property, or individual rights, but only by the rectitude of the faith. When it comes to Lockean values, the only reasonable expectation is derived from immemorial experience and ties of loyalty. Bernanos would have agreed more with Marx and Proudhon, critics of individualistic industrial society, than with F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman. The old, pre-industrial order—called arbitrary by conservatives who are more liberal than they think—protected those whom it did not crush; the new order, falsely reassuring the individual about his social weight and his right (to happiness, no less!), his voluntarism, and his opportunities, exposes him to the fiercest competition that only a few who are not even the best can sustain.

Basically the individual needs society not in view of "free transactions" (this is a by-product and added benefit), but to imitate, no matter how imperfectly and with compromises, the community of

saints. For it is the saints who inject, through their mysterious and yet concrete ways, enough saintliness in society to balance inertia and evil. Bernanos's "sociology" comes through best in his intensely personal novels. A certain embarrassment of his style in the wartime and post-war political pamphlets merely indicates the difficulty of transcribing the intimate work of sin into the language of public affairs.

Public affairs for Bernanos do not mean the neatly trimmed garden of conservative discourses. When saintliness and sin are the stakes, passion becomes a normal reaction, hence Bernanos's burning oratory, invective, crusade. Conservative discourse espouses the mechanism of the market and electoral interests. It is an eminently serious business because it prepares compromise, the half-way house where orator X meets orator Y, and the government meets the opposition. Oratory is prelude to compromise and rational solution. Needless to say, how differently matters are viewed from the Bernanosian right. Invective and irony are weapons used not in a joust, but in an offensive seeking for the enemy's annihilation. It is the saint against the devil, and it is also the same outside the world of fiction. This is why Bernanos thinks and writes in the language of drama and sets up champions on both sides. Again Pascal has the key: "The state and its rulers have their interests; the salvation of the soul, others."

This is not an "extremist" stance, but simply the recognition that God vomits out the lukewarm: the lukewarm interior life, temperament, compromise, politics. Yet Bernanos was not what we call an idealist. The conversation between the country priest and his much older colleague, from Torcy, is a choice piece of Christian realism. "You, young priests," says the curé of Torcy, "feel crushed that your parish is not a specimen of high morals, good neighborliness, saintly

souls. You are like those church cleaning-women obsessed with sweeping out all corners. But, my boy, the world always gets dirty, and while you must attend to its faults day and night, don't expect to turn it into Paradise." The devil, in other words, is lurking in all places, and will not give up before Judgment Day. Prepare for the daily confrontation.

It must be emphasized that all the talk about saints, devils, sin, and resistance to evil is not about some romanticized world. When asked by a journalist after his first great success as a novelist if he was serious about the devil's existence in our white-washed world of rationality, Bernanos answered that the devil is a full-time participant in our life, and that in fact modernist smugness (clean out the dirt through education and social reform) is one of Satan's cover-ups. Conservatives would partly agree here, but they would be cautiously optimistic, provided the talk is not about social engineering but about the preservation of "family, church, school and neighborhood" as mainstays of a decent life. Bernanos's "conservatism" is of a different calibre and scope, closer to that of Talleyrand, who declared, in answering an inquirer whether international relations had changed qualitatively under the Holy Alliance of Christian rulers, "Not at all, but the same hypocrisy with a different verbiage." Of course, Bernanos was not a cynic; trust in grace shuts out that option. But he was not surprised by evil lurking in every corner, and while, for example, an unconditional Gaullist during the war, he refused the General's offer of heading the ministry of culture because this involved abject alliances and compromise. Indeed, he would have agreed with Baudelaire, the reprobate poet reputedly from the gutter, that "Civilization reduces the consequences of original sin, whereas barbarism means their growth."

The best way to evaluate the fraternal

tug of war between conservatism and the Bernanosian position is to examine the present situation, the achievement of conservative policies, and the validity of Bernanos's prophetism. The medium in which both are engaged is, of course, different. Conservatism strives to win adept, votes, legislative and government seats, while the Bernanosian right, if such a thing exists, is not a movement, but a Christian and national reformulation of sin and salvation. So, the questions should be asked again: Was Bernanos a conservative? Are conservatives right wingers? Do the two meet?

No, Bernanos was not a conservative, although he took his stand on such truths which later transformed into values, among them conservative values. As stated earlier, the term "conservative" is pejorative in all Latin countries, with its present vogue due to an imitation of American attitudes and vocabulary. In fact a Bernanos *redivivus* would be today anti-conservative; "conservative" would be his overall term for the present French "rightist" parties, but he would curse them simultaneously with the leftist parties, seeing no difference between the two positions. In his judgment, the intellectual spokesmen of both liberal-leftists and conservatives would be puny intriguants, anxious watchers of election results, ambitious for power and money. The moral state of France would be the least of their preoccupations. Where would he find like-minded people? Among the eternal diaspora of souls which miraculously survive but which cannot be recruited and organized, not even under an angel's flag.

On the other hand, whatever success conservatives achieve, it is ultimately due to the "Bernanosian" element in their words, perhaps in their thoughts. Beyond the vulgar rhetorics of political programs and their transcription by the media, ordinary people entertain in their hearts (in the Pascalian sense) the re-

mote conviction of truth and good and evil. This is why conservatives are still voted into power: people refuse to believe that they are interchangeable with their political opponents. This hard little piece of conviction, this Bernanosian innocence, cannot be completely shattered. But for all this, conservatives will not be turned into right wingers in the Bernanosian sense. Yet when they dilute his language of charity and invective, a hard core of humanity remains afloat on the turbulent waters of ordinary affairs.

There is one area of conflict not likely to be amenable to mutual concessions: technology. Conservatives, at times against their better judgment, take the technological problem in stride and argue that it is, even after all that is said about the "technological bluff" (Jacques Ellul), the indispensable manifestation of modernity; and they add, if only to reassure themselves, that the important thing is to control it before it controls them. But that's just it. The machine, and even more the machine-mind, does take control, Bernanos's robot-man comes into his own, and for Bernanos, it is Satan in all his pomp and circumstance. Obviously very few agree with him, and see his language as being not only excessive but also edging toward the irrelevant—until they realize, of course, that for Bernanos the machine is not the locomotive and the airplane, but the mental operation which one day smashes the atom, the next day manufactures or kills embryos, and the third day brings forth the DNA formula of the perfectly rational man. In short, technology takes the human being out of both his own and God's hands and entrusts him to an implacable monster. After the gulagization of man comes his instrumentalization, with even less mercy. With great luck one can climb out from behind the barbed wire, but how does one escape from the mechanical embrace?