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Comment: *Leaving the EU*

The European Union, from which the United Kingdom is due to secede in March, originated in the determination of a small group of mostly Catholic politicians to create supranational institutions to neutralize Germany and prevent anything like the 1914 and 1939 Wars ever breaking out again. Established in 1951, the European Coal and Steel Community, proposed by the French statesman Robert Schuman (1886-1963), bound into an international legal and commercial framework the two industries regarded as necessary for preparing to make war. In 1956 this became the European Economic Community, morphing in 1993 into the European Union.

It was 1961 before the Conservative Prime Minister Harold Macmillan, to cries of 'shame' as well as cheers, from both sides in the House of Commons, announced that his government would be making formal application to join the 'Common Market', as we called it. In 1963, President De Gaulle brought increasingly rancorous negotiations to an end, on the grounds that admitting Britain to the EEC would lead to an Atlantic community, dominated by the United States.

De Gaulle retired in 1969. The UK joined the EEC in 1973, under the leadership of Edward Heath, another Conservative Prime Minister. In 1975, in a referendum called by the Labour Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, the UK electorate voted to remain in the EEC (by 67% to 33% on a national turnout of 64%), thus silencing Labour colleagues who regarded the Common Market as a neoliberal capitalist conspiracy.

Many factors affected Robert Schuman's thinking. The drive in the diocese of Metz to have him considered for beatification ran into resistance in the Vatican by the mid 2000s. His life long commitment to the study of Thomistic philosophy should not be underestimated, however, nor the importance of his friendship with the Thomist thinker Jacques Maritain (1882-1973) — not that these would count as indications of his sanctity!

Since Pope Leo XIII's encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) took effect, the generation of devout young Catholics to which Schuman and Maritain belonged was immersed in the natural law ethics of St Thomas Aquinas.

Maritain exercised immense influence on university educated Catholics in the thirties, forties and fifties (as this journal's archive

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would confirm). Stranded in the United States on a lecture tour when France fell, he remained there until 1960, save for three years as French ambassador to the Vatican. No doubt through De Gaulle's influence, he had a hand in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in Paris in 1948, the epoch making text that sets out fundamental human rights to be universally protected.

More generally, Maritain taught Catholics that you needn't be an atheist to be a liberal, and persuaded liberals that Thomist natural law ethics could provide an alternative foundation for liberalism to that of the Age of Enlightenment liberal thinkers, such as John Locke (1632-1704). For Maritain, human rights spring from natural law.

These days, however, liberalism in the UK owes less to Locke than to the philosopher and social reformer Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832), founder of the utilitarianism that pervades the common sense thinking of most of our fellow citizens, whether they know it or have ever heard of Bentham.

For Bentham the 'fundamental axiom' of morality in the public sphere as in domestic life is the principle that 'it is the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong'. Few would quarrel with that. True, he passionately wanted the separation of church and state, which matters little in the UK today (much more in some EU nations). But freedom of expression, equal rights for women, the right to divorce, and the decriminalizing of homosexual acts were all on Bentham's agenda. He called for the abolition of slavery, of the death penalty, and of corporal punishment, including that of children. Though strongly in favour of extending individual legal rights, however, his dismissal of natural rights as 'nonsense on stilts' was explicitly on the grounds that they were supposedly 'God given'. In the end, for Maritain, as for any student of Thomas Aquinas, there are limits to the human rights of the individual set by the natural law.

As for keeping peace in Europe: no more 1914 or 1939 for sure; yet in July 1995, at Srebrenica in easternmost Bosnia-Herzegovina, 8000 Muslim men were executed by Serb troops (Orthodox Christians, nominally). That is just over twenty years ago.

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