Sacred Dread

Raïssa Maritain, the Allure of Suffering, and the French Catholic Revival (1905–1944)

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Introduction

Vicarious Suffering, Its Interpretive Limits,
and Raïssa Maritain’s Work

“Can there be a mystical life without death?” Writing in 1931, the French Catholic intellectual Raïssa Maritain (1883–1960) named this the “question essentielle” in her private notebooks. She had raised this issue twenty-five years earlier, when she was baptized into the Catholic Church at the age of twenty-three. Even then, in 1906, she admired what she saw as Christianity’s provocative way of acknowledging the reality of death and contending with human finitude and vulnerability. Describing her religious conversion, Maritain claimed that it is only when we affirm the realness of human mortality and suffering that we “discover an order more powerful than all that is human.” As she saw it, the ideological alternative to Catholicism in her day, scientific positivism, no longer “believes in” suffering and death, just as its advocates “no longer believe in God.” She saw in the refusal to acknowledge death a sort of “strange blindness, a kind of madness” (un aveuglement étrange, une sorte de folie). But confronting finitude and suffering is no simple task, and Maritain would spend her entire intellectual career struggling to render them visible in the poetry, mysticism, theology, and philosophical aesthetics she authored.
Maritain was not, by any means, alone in this struggle. Upon her baptism in 1906, she entered a vast community of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French intellectuals who shared a fascination with Catholicism’s focus on mortality and suffering. As Maritain and her fellow intellectuals puzzled over anguish and held it up as an object of analysis in their writings, they reveled in it, tapping into, deepening, and occasionally transforming the long-standing alliance in Christianity between holiness and affliction. Maritain’s first mentor, Charles Péguy (1873–1914), wrote often about the power of *le suppliant* (the beggar, supplicant, imploring one) as the one “who is bent, bowed under misfortune, that absolute misfortune which marks the presence of force and of the gods.” The *suppliant*, Péguy wrote, “whoever he may be, the beggar along the roads, the miserable blind man, and the man crushed,” is the one who, despite appearances, “holds the upper hand, orders the course of the conversation, commands the situation.” Or consider one of Maritain’s dear friends, Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916), the French priest who inspired Maritain with his solitary life as a mystic, hermit, and evangelist in the Sahara Desert. He drafted a rule for a new religious community of which he was the only member. Suffering and death were built into his “community”: members must be “ready to have their heads cut off, to die of starvation and to obey him in spite of his worthlessness.” Or take, for instance, the writings of Maritain’s younger acquaintance Simone Weil (1909–43), whose intensive reflections on what she called *malheur*, or affliction, occupied nearly all of her writings. Likewise, the personalist philosopher Emmanuel Mounier (1905–50), Maritain’s friend and colleague, admired Pascal for his claim that “the divine disquiet of souls, that is the only thing that counts!” The writings of Léon Bloy (1846–1917), Catholic novelist and godfather to Maritain, offered the most riotously excessive paeans to pain: “La douleur! [Distress/sorrow/suffering!] Here is the key word! Here is the solution for every human life on earth! The springboard for all that is superior, the sieve for every merit, the infallible criterion for every moral beauty!” In Bloy’s theological vision, suffering and anguish are closely tied up with pleasure and joy: “It is commonly said,” he wrote, “that Joy and Pain [la Joie et la Douleur] are opposites, incompatible! How can you understand that in some lofty souls, they are the same thing, assimilated with ease! . . . The joy of suffering! [La joie de souffrir].”
Indeed, the suffering-centered imaginaire saturates this moment in religious history, a moment also justly considered a “watershed” in the history of the Catholic Church and the golden age of French Catholicism. In the years following France’s Act of Separation in 1905, which enshrined laicism as a French national law and ended state funding of religion, through the Second World War, Roman Catholicism enjoyed an astounding and unanticipated resurgence in France. Although the roots of the French Catholic revival can be traced to the 1880s, the early twentieth century marks the high point. It was in these years that novelists, artists, philosophers, and theologians forged the movement that became known as the renouveau catholique. The historian Stephen Schloesser, S.J., coined the phrase “Jazz Age Catholicism” to describe this period of incredible vitality in the church, which largely derived its energy from the creative output of the French Catholic laity. The French historian Frédéric Gugelot called the modern French attraction to Catholicism “an avant-garde cultural turn” that rejected the reigning positivist ideology and ended up “introducing new aesthetic and religious forms that offered an entirely new image of Catholicism.” In the revival, aesthetically powerful symbols and practices centered on deuil (mourning), souffrance (suffering), douleur (pain/sorrow), and tristesse (sadness) played a massive role in drawing these converts, atheists, and lapsed Catholics into the fold.

The central question of this book is: How did suffering and anguish achieve such a prominent presence in so many of the twentieth-century French Catholic revival works, and how can this fascination with suffering be understood? I argue that one can answer this question by focusing on one prominent intellectual in this circuit, Raïssa Maritain, and making her life and writings both the central topic and the environment for inquiry into the historical and theological meanings of souffrance that dominate this intellectual milieu. Maritain and the world she inhabited—especially the friends, theologians, artists, and philosophers who deeply influenced her work—provide a key to understanding these discourses and practices. The themes in Maritain's works are undeniably dark, and she rarely, if ever, fully turns her attention away from the suffering of the cross, the affliction of the soul, and the Virgin Mary’s sorrowful, wounded heart. In her writings, Maritain entertains an ecstatic, often vivid emphasis on death, blood, and the Crucifixion. But Maritain's life history, gender, and religious
background as a Jewish convert gave her a unique perspective on these themes. Sacred Dread tracks the story of how Maritain made her way into—and ultimately transformed—this intellectual world and the Catholic idioms of suffering and grief. Exploring why a secular Jew would be drawn into this religious world, how this world could be remade as a result, and what would become of this suffering-saturated theology as it encountered the Holocaust, Sacred Dread enables a new understanding of the appeal of a radical kind of Catholic piety that curiously extended to other Jewish-born women in this cultural circuit, such as Maritain's acquaintances Simone Weil and Edith Stein.13

Readers have long noted this obsession with suffering in modern Catholicism’s watershed moment and often see it as the most bizarre or even pathological of the movement’s enduring legacies. For many in the English-speaking world in particular, French Catholic writers like Maritain and her colleagues are “irrational,” their theological symbols merely a “vehicle for morbid hysteria” and “incipiently fascistic,” demonstrating “sadomasochistic obsessiveness.”14 Because the roots of the revival can be traced to the late nineteenth century, we can detect alarm as early as 1872, when a writer in the Nation detected a “Roman Catholic revival in France” that exalted precisely those aspects of Christianity that disgusted Nietzsche: the author described the revival as “an eternal protest of weakness against strength. It is the deification, as it were, of the negative forces of mankind—a glorification of defeat, of suffering, of helplessness.” The purpose of this exposé was to show “what a world of illusion France is mired in.”15

This perception also reflects that of some theological interpreters closer to Maritain’s own time. Maritain’s dark preoccupations in her memoir Les grandes amitiés (published in two volumes in 1941 and 1944) prompted one reviewer, an Anglican minister, to suggest that she had offered an “unwitting exposure of the neurotic streak in French Catholicism,” in which the “converts . . . are perpetually ‘suffering’ and being ‘wounded.’” With confusion, sarcasm, and annoyance the reviewer complained that in Maritain’s work

An inordinate amount of weeping goes on, for one reason or another reaching its climax in an illustration of “Celle qui pleure” (Notre
Dame de la Salette); and there is a perpetual recurrence of such words as “sufferings,” “sadness,” “grief,” “anguish,” “tribulation,” which would evoke more sympathy if the victims were not so obviously luxuriating in their painful emotions. Possibly it was because Léon Bloy regarded the happenings at La Salette in 1846 as “the most extraordinary since the Pentecost,” that for him union with God in the present life meant the “infinite distress of his heart.” God moves in a mysterious way, and it is not for English Churchmen to sit in judgment on a piety so alien from their own; yet in the rarified atmosphere of these memoirs, perfumed with la douleur et la souffrance and watered by “the Gift of Tears,” it is a little difficult to recognize the authentic note of the New Testament: “Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice!”

This reviewer shows a certain habit of thought that is often built into an analysis of this moment in French Catholicism in general, and of Maritain in particular: the refusal to see why anyone would choose to seek out symbols and practices centered on souffrance, or even, as this reviewer points out, luxuriate in them.

Scholars have generally tended to frame the late modern French Catholic fascination with affliction within the doctrine of redemptive “vicarious suffering,” which partly contributes to the widespread scholarly unease. The excellent 1967 study by Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution: The Catholic Revival in French Literature*, has exerted a significant influence on English-language scholarship. Griffiths argues that from 1870 through the end of World War I in France, vicarious suffering “assumed an importance out of all proportion to the other doctrines of the Church.” Revitalized in modern France, vicarious suffering has long and deep roots in Christian theology and piety, beginning with the scriptural interpretations of the death of Jesus. In 1 Peter 2:24 and Romans 3:25, Jesus’s death is seen as the vicarious atonement for the sin of the entire human race. But crucially, Saint Paul says that this death is not complete: it is possible for the follower of Christ to become united with his passion—to “share in his sufferings”—and in doing so to then share in Christ’s redemption and victory over sin (Rom. 8:17). The doctrine of vicarious redemptive suffering takes this overarching theological claim...
and grounds it in Paul’s statement to the Colossians, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the Church” (Col. 1:24). The Christian, through his or her affliction and even death, can expiate the sins of others and participate in the salvation of all.20

A long-standing and orthodox part of Christian imagination, vicarious suffering moved from the margins of French Catholic piety closer to the center after the 1789 Revolution.21 The doctrine of vicarious suffering in this more modern politicized key held that an individual’s suffering could atone for the political sins of impious France that had begun with the revolution and had continued with the secularizing process of laïcité. In the nineteenth century, a range of Catholic devotional materials emphasized weeping, anguished figures framed within the doctrine vicarious redemptive suffering, also called spiritualité victimale or réparation. Here Christians were invited to suffer—spiritually, physically, mentally—on behalf of the sinners of France and to atone for their sins. One popular devotional image found in many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century pamphlets, prayers, iconography, and statuary depicted the infant Jesus (“le Petit Roi d’Amour”) carrying a tiny basket of thorns and hammers, dreaming of the suffering he would endure as an adult, and summoning devotees to join him in his agony on account of a sinful, secular modern nation.22 Other nineteenth-century devotional texts such as Antoine Blanc de Saint-Bonnet’s De la douleur and Sylvain-Marie Giraud’s De l’esprit et de la vie de sacrifice dans l’état religieux placed the doctrine of vicarious suffering even more prominently in the French Catholic mainstream.23

More recently, Richard Burton’s 2002 text Holy Tears, Holy Blood: Women, Catholicism, and the Culture of Suffering in France, 1840–1970 tracks the history and fate of the projection of vicarious suffering onto the lives of actual women in modern France. Burton identifies the doctrine’s salience among dozens of French male writers, including Jacques Maritain and Léon Bloy. He argues that men like Jacques and Bloy relied upon the notion of vicarious suffering in order to reap the rewards of salvation through the painful lives of the women with whom they were close.24 The suffering-centered theology here, according to Burton, amounted to a calculus in which an abject woman starves, weeps, bleeds, and someone else (an impious citizen, a confessor, a husband, a nation in sin) is redeemed.
Burton traces the stories of women such as Thérèse de Lisieux, Raïssa Maritain, and Simone Weil, all of whom he sees as entangled in the claustrophobic, grim fantasies of their husbands and confessors. For Burton, the theological world of co-rédemption encouraged French Catholic women to remain passive in the face of a steady onslaught of illnesses and disappointments that made up their deeply troubled lives. With this analysis, Burton implicitly exiles these women into the ranks of the pathetic and bizarre.

Sacred Dread challenges this exile. The French Catholic fascination with suffering does raise an important set of ethical questions, which I discuss in the chapters that follow, but I argue that we need more tools to think about how these theologies and practices may have worked for people like Maritain who used them toward a range of complex ends. To be sure, the theology of vicarious suffering, a theology that insists that a disciple of Christ can suffer for and on behalf of someone else, has undoubtedly been a powerful force in modern French Catholicism. Raïssa Maritain occasionally drew on this doctrine herself. She once, for example, advised a friend devastated from the loss of her child to think of her pain as redemptive for others. She wrote to her in a letter, “God has suddenly plunged you both into the very heart of this ultimate reality: redemptive suffering [douleur rédemptrice]. And when one knows by faith the marvels he works on others with our suffering, with the substance of our crushed hearts, can one coldly refuse him?” The theology of vicarious suffering undoubtedly has some crucial explanatory power in this religious world. But I have come to see that vicarious suffering on its own is too blunt an instrument to explain the complexity and malleability of souffrance in France’s late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Souffrance and douleur were too unwieldy in the lives of those who engaged them to be channeled neatly into one abstract, cosmological doctrine. As the sole analytic framework, vicarious suffering can flatten the variegated ways in which symbols of affliction and grief functioned, how they changed as French culture and politics changed. My work demonstrates the risks of our tendency to write off these suffering-centered theologies as little more than examples of pathology. A closer, more patient look at these discourses humanizes the writers of the French Catholic revival like Maritain and, in the process, enhances our ability to understand the persistence
of symbols of suffering and death in modern religious thought and practice—a persistence that certainly extends beyond the world of French Catholicism. Although it tends to be seen as central to the “medieval” imagination, even in modern societies, whose medical and technological advances have kept suffering and death at further abeyance, religions are animated by idioms of blood, agony, pain, and death. We need richer morphologies to think about this beyond the atavistic and pathological.

HOLY SUFFERING: THE SHAPING OF A DISCOURSE

In making sense of souffrance’s prominent presence in French Catholicism, Sacred Dread exposes a whole other network of theological, literary, and political determinants, sources that are key to understanding this moment in Christian history and Maritain. Far from a uniform repetition of received wisdom, suffering was a mobile category and trope. What shaped Catholics’ idioms of affliction was less exclusively the doctrine of reparative vicarious suffering than a convergence of fin de siècle literary movements such as modernism, realism, decadence, and spiritual naturalism. These literary movements crossed currents with other forces that energized the fascination with abjection, such as the resurgence of interest in Christian mysticism in early twentieth-century France, where the annihilation of the will was understood as the surest pathway to the divine. For some writers of the renouveau catholique suffering became especially visible, and prominent in their reflections, as Europe descended into violence and chaos during the two world wars. Furthermore, late modern France’s interest in imagination, dreams, and fantasy galvanized the widespread attraction to Christianity’s most shocking, potent visual images, such as the abject Christ and weeping Virgin.

In terms of the literary fixation on souffrance, Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), for example, the founding figure of French modernism, reacted against some of the optimistic tendencies of romanticism and claimed that poets like himself “feel themselves irresistibly pulled towards whatever is weak, ruined, saddened, orphaned.”27 Realist author Émile Zola (1840–1902) used accounts of weakness, degeneracy, and suffering to rebel against what he saw as the optimistic naïveté of bourgeois moder-
nity and highlighted the shadow side of secular republicanism. Prostitutes, the insane, and the sick were all graphically depicted in realist novels as a means to shock and challenge the putative optimism of modernity. Catholic authors such as Bloy and his once-friend J.-K. Huysmans linked this realism with Christian supernaturalism, claiming that the most vivid artistic representations of suffering and anguish, in their paradoxically repulsive and attractive allure, were powerful vehicles to point beyond themselves to the eternal. One of the first Catholic figures to make this link was Jules Amédée Barbey d’Aurevilly (1808–89), whose popular novel *Les diaboliques* (1874) featured horrific acts of violence committed by women and instead of condemning them portrayed them as awe-inspiring and strangely powerful. Barbey d’Aurevilly’s decadent reversals led Bloy to his conversion, and Bloy eventually too sought to shock the literary and Catholic middle class through the embrace of the grim underside of the modern world. Catholic decadence, modernism, and realism came together in a shared antipathy toward secular republican positivism, which was seen as overly optimistic in its assumptions about progress and human flourishing.

Maritain and many intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were deeply immersed not only in this prevalent French literary fascination with abjection but in classic Christian mystical materials. The themes of souffrance and especially anéantissement (abasement) were, in Maritain’s work, often connected to the French school of spirituality, founded by Pierre de Bérulle (1575–1629), whose authors Maritain had long been reading in Paris even before her conversion. The French school included mystical writers like Jean-Joseph Surin and Francis de Sales and overlapped with the doctrine of vicarious suffering and the decadent literary movement in its emphasis on suffering but had little to say about physical and emotional anguish. For them, souffrance and anéantissement referred to interiorized spiritual suffering and annihilation of the will. Like the mystical tradition of the Spanish Carmelites, also beloved by many revivalists, the French school of spirituality emphasized interior debasement as a way to incorporate oneself into the inner life of the suffering Christ. Such texts encouraged readers to remake one’s own interior in the image of God and to allow God to enter and alter one’s self. From 1909 until she died in 1960, Raïssa Maritain committed herself to
the practices promoted in these materials that could engender such transformations, engaging in the daily discipline of contemplative prayer founded on total withdrawal from sensory experience, or recueillement. Throughout these decades, Maritain sporadically recorded her progress in a notebook that was published posthumously as *Journal de Raïssa* (1963). The suffering recorded in these texts is Maritain at her most vivid and graphic, where she imagines herself becoming assimilated into, internalizing, the suffering Christ on the cross. Maritain’s mystical notebooks left even her husband Jacques “bewildered” by their expression of pain, and Jacques’s friend Thomas Merton cautioned Jacques that they would be “too searing” for American audiences to read and understand. The graphic images here come from a mystical language of suffering that follows the purgation—annihilation—of the ego to make room for God in the soul. Throughout her depictions of suffering in these discourses, Maritain draws on the vivid, daring language of the literary movements she knew from her godfather but employs it metaphorically to explore her own interior processes.

Maritain’s language of suffering was shaped not only by literary movements and mystical writings but also by political and historical forces. By the time she converted in 1906, she had multiple resources from experience to draw upon in thinking about agony and its meanings—beyond just the fantasies of the men around her. Born into a Jewish family in Russia in 1883, as a child Maritain had fled with her family from the Jewish pogroms, arriving in France when she was ten years old. As a young adult, Maritain, along with the rest of France, faced the reality of death in the First World War (1914–18). Nearly one and a half million men were killed in France, and the disfigured and maimed—those known as the mutilés—reached one million. Maritain was more fortunate than many women who lost sons and husbands; Jacques was never drafted because of health issues. But by the end of the war, Maritain’s three close mentors—Humbert Clérissac, Charles Péguy, and Léon Bloy—had died. Her two-year-old godson, Pieterke van der Meer de Walcheren, whom she “loved so much,” died during the same month that Bloy did.

Two decades later, suffering and political violence came together again. In the mid-1930s Maritain’s thoughts turned, warily, toward the gathering darkness of anti-Semitism on France’s horizon. By 1939, still a
Jew under Nazi law, Maritain, with her husband and sister, left France for North America, where she remained during the war as an exile. At this moment, along with the rest of Europe, Maritain was “sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum,” in the famous words of Hannah Arendt. Several of Maritain’s friends were included in the six million massacred in the Shoah. In her wartime writings, Maritain again drew on symbols of pain, but this time to describe a “deluge of blood spread over the earth,” namely “the cataclysm [that] . . . plunged Europe into Darkness [les Ténèbres] and covered the universe” when “four million Jews—and more . . . suffered death without consolation.” This vivid evocation drew from four decades of reflection, at the levels of practice, thought, and devotion, on suffering—even at its most graphic—and its meanings. Indeed, this training had prepared Maritain to articulate the trauma of the catastrophe as it occurred—an act of honesty and courage most could not or would not muster. The French Catholic suffering-centered imaginaire must be understood against this backdrop. The bleakness of the twentieth-century European experience, especially for a Russian-Jewish Catholic woman like Maritain, had no counterpart in America. As Thomas Merton predicted, this is part of what makes modern European Catholic materials so difficult to grasp for American readers.

Yet the European descent into violence and chaos, like the doctrine of vicarious suffering, cannot entirely explain the widespread preoccupation with suffering among the French Catholics of this period. The suffering imaginaire attracted Maritain in the early twentieth century well before the wars, particularly through the decadent literary movement and the early modern mystics. It is crucial to see Maritain within the story of the first half of the twentieth century in Europe—its pathos and traumas but also its revitalized interest, at the turn of the century, in realism and mysticism.

In considering these diverse political, literary, and theological sources, I nonetheless aim to resist an exclusively determinist account of Maritain’s thinking. As important as these political and cultural forces were, we must also leave room for the ways in which her work refuses a simple notion of cultural determination. As Michel de Certeau, Joan Wallach Scott, and others have argued, human beings are not always driven by rational calculation, nor are they fully determined by the external structures of
history. Sacred Dread identifies not only the forces that shaped Maritain’s life and thought but also her own intellectual interventions, leaving room to understand the generativity of her own prayer life and writings. Like all subjects, she was a product of forces outside her control, but she also occasionally exerted creativity in ways that influenced those forces.

Furthermore, I resist an exclusive reliance on social and political historical causation because Maritain’s written reflections on souffrance were often galvanized by intense, vivid, and occasionally graphic personal religious experiences of God, experiences that do not always map neatly on the political and social currents of the day. For example, Maritain’s first direct encounter with God came in 1907 when, in the midst of an illness, she dreamed she was covered in blood and awoke to a vision of two heavenly hands presenting her with the host. The dreams, visions, locutions, and direct experiences of the divine continued, sporadically, throughout her adult life. In 1933, she recalls during prayer hearing God ask her to “accept a living death,” followed by a vision of Christ in which he told her, “I will espouse thee in blood. I am a bridegroom of blood. It is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” Maritain’s written corpus on suffering must be understood—though not exclusively—in relation to experiences of direct, immediate felt contact with the supernatural. As I explain in chapter 2, the imaginative space afforded by religious devotion cannot be fully encapsulated by the straightforward narratives of historical causation. Historical causation can elide the imaginative terrain that can exist between the forces of history and the inner life of the subject. In addition to historical analysis, categories such as fantasy and devotion are useful analytic tools to help us attend to the rich terrain of ambiguity that can exist between social forces of history and the inner life of the subject.

GENDER AND JUDAISM: FEMINIZED SUFFERING AND SUFFERING JEWS

Whether in the context of the doctrine of vicarious suffering, fantasy, the world wars, mysticism, or literature, in the French Catholic revival the holiness of affliction was often, regardless of the source, communicated
through symbols of femininity and Judaism. The predominance of these symbols reveals, even if only implicitly, Catholicism’s capacities and limits for contending with real women and with real Jews and Judaism. Throughout her writings, Maritain engaged (sometimes resisting and at other moments contributing to) notions of feminized and/or Judaized abjection as uniquely holy and redemptive.

Many revivalists were deeply philo-Semitic, and for many of these writers, a hypostatized Jew embodied the afflicted ideal of inversion and marginalization. The symbol of the “suffering Jew” served as a powerful rejoinder to the stereotype of the wealthy Jewish capitalist, and for reasons I describe in chapters 1 and 3 it was effective in provoking a reimagining of the boundaries between Christianity and Judaism. If Nazi national socialism declared Jews to be unassimilable and unassimilating, for Maritain suffering Jews were uniquely assimilable to the agonized Catholicism she cherished. The revivalists’ passionate writings reflected not only on the symbolic representation of the people of Israel in theology but also on the historical situation of persecuted Jews in the twentieth century, particularly during the Dreyfus affair (1894–1901), in the midst of the ascendency of anti-Semitism in the 1930s and during the Shoah. Yet this symbol is one of the most obviously problematic and complicated legacies of the revival, trafficking in essentialism and stereotype, valorizing suffering instead of historicizing and analyzing it and working to eradicate it. It requires historically oppressed communities to bear the symbolic weight of human anxiety about finitude and suffering.

A similar dynamic pertained to these writers’ use of femininity in the elaboration of suffering in France. The image of the suffering holy woman has a long-standing history in Christian thought, but for reasons I describe in chapter 2 it became especially prominent in late modern French Catholicism. Léon Bloy, for example, described, in page after page, abject women and girls—prostitutes, impoverished widows, young girls accused of being insane—as sites of power and holiness. Paul Claudel’s most famous play, L’annonce faite à Marie (1912), narrates the tale of a medieval French peasant woman whose life is one long journey of self-oblation: she willfully contracts leprosy and dies the death of the martyr. One of the most famous films of this period, Carl Theodor Dreyer’s La passion de Jeanne d’Arc (1928), is a visual meditation on the last hours
of Jeanne d’Arc. The film focuses almost exclusively on Jeanne’s face, up close, tears streaming down, head shaved, during her trial, torture, and execution. The Virgin Mary was another important source of feminized suffering. When Maritain, along with her husband Jacques and sister Véra, dedicated herself to the Virgin Mary as her “slave” in 1909, she joined the likes of J.-K. Huysmans in devotion to the Marian apparition at the French village of La Salette. The Virgin had allegedly appeared there weeping, wearing a crown of thorns. To understand these powerful associations, *Sacred Dread* explores the Christian exegetical and theological traditions that align women with the suffering body and endow their suffering with holiness. This project also investigates how Maritain’s life and work both strengthen and transform these associations.

I explore the complicated political and ethical issues involved in these associations, but I also show that the powerful, widespread symbolic associations between suffering, holiness, women, and Jews worked for Maritain and through her in a range of ways. For many in her community, including her husband, godfather, confessors, and her massive network of friends and godchildren, Raïssa Maritain herself was the embodied articulation of this abject ideal. As Jacques would write as early as 1908, Raïssa served as “an earthly intermediary” between himself and God. “*Everything,*” Jacques emphasized, had come to him “through her, from her heart, from her reason, from her counsels, from her example, from her sufferings.”41 Chapters 2 and 3 explore the issue of how to read Maritain’s own reflections on Jewish and female suffering against the backdrop of Jacques’s and others’ valorizations.

Raïssa Maritain was not unreflectively entangled within the doctrine of feminized and Judaized suffering; she was an intellectual who critically analyzed the doctrines that came her way, sometimes detaching from them and modifying them, and at other times embracing and even intensifying them. In her discipline and reflection, Maritain both absorbed and challenged the various traditions she inherited. But while I cannot see her as simply a victim caught in the web of the French Catholic male imagination, I also refuse an equally seductive exaggeration of her agency (to borrow Amanda Anderson’s concept) or desire to transcend it.42 I aim to see Maritain’s attraction to and modification of feminized and Judaized suffering beyond the primary binary that tends to drive some feminist studies.
of Christian women, in which women either reproduce their own oppression or resist and subvert it. I caution against assuming any straightforward relation between the norms and symbols of a community and the simple embodiment of or blatant resistance to those norms and symbols among the community's members. Maritain's engagement with these symbols and practices was far more complex. I see her as a conscious contributor to a narrative in which suffering was holy and redemptive, but also as one who exhibited a capacity for critique, using the resources at hand.

Raïssa Maritain understood in this way, as a situated thinker—an intellectual—has scarcely been recognized. This omission is significant, considering she was one of very few women involved with the intellectual labors of the revival. The simple fact that she penetrated this exclusive club of Catholic hommes de lettres is noteworthy. Maritain had so many strikes against her: a woman in a male-dominated society, an immigrant whose native language was not French, and a convert from Judaism who lacked the religious habitus of those born into Catholicism. Her presence in that world is remarkable. Maritain's relative obscurity in the scholarly community can be explained, at least in part, by her early tendency to publish furtively and to channel, support, or reproduce the voices of others. Like many of her colleagues in this milieu, Maritain began her career translating and presenting portions of classic Christian texts in the new journals dedicated to mysticism and asceticism that proliferated in early twentieth-century France. But unlike most of her established male theological colleagues, she often did this work anonymously or under her initials “R.M.” Very early in her career, she translated and presented portions of Thomas Aquinas, John of St. Thomas, and Teresa of Ávila to a community hungry for mystical texts. Even when she was not translating others’ texts, Maritain’s voice tended to be absorbed by those of other Catholic luminaries, past and contemporary. In her early years as a scholar, for example, she researched, crafted arguments, and wrote essays that were later integrated into writings published under other names. (Her husband Jacques Maritain’s first book, *La philosophie bergsonienne* [1913], and Henri Massis’s essay “La vie d’Ernest Psichari” [1919] drew from her work and can be counted among these.) Her first theological work, *Le prince de ce monde* (1929), a major piece on the reality of the demonic in the world, also initially
appeared under “R.M.” Slightly more visibly, she published in the 1920s as a coauthor with her famous husband Jacques Maritain.

It wasn’t until 1931, in her late forties—twenty-five years after her conversion to Catholicism—that she published her first poem under the name “Raïssa Maritain.” This elegiac lamentation poem (entitled “La couronne d’épines” [The Crown of Thorns]) was broadly appreciated, and Maritain’s reputation as a writer grew in her own right. After this point, she became less intellectually deferential, which helped her become a widely praised writer and lecturer. Her productivity was also key to her reach: she published several books of poetry and multiple theological texts on contemplative prayer, intellectual life, mysticism, and aesthetics. As a Jewish convert, she wrote on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity. She lectured widely on aesthetics and religious experience in France and Latin America. Such successes invited backlash. Maritain was the object of Étienne Gilson’s sardonic critiques; he described her as “l’ange courroucé” (the irate angel) and worried that she had driven a wedge between Jacques and his fellow Thomists with her theory of aesthetics.  

Maritain gained her greatest recognition, however, through the publication of a memoir entitled Les grandes amitiés. Published in two volumes in 1941 and 1944, this text returned to the early impulses of Maritain’s scholarly career. As the title Les grandes amitiés suggests, it was not Maritain’s name that immediately rose to the top but the names and voices of others. Yet the approach here was not necessarily one of deference; she chose the great friendships of her life as the vehicle for its retelling. Maritain’s grandes amitiés were the leading figures of the renaissance catholique. As in her earlier turn to medieval and early modern mystics and doctors of the church, Maritain was engaging in a new kind of ressourcement, relying on friends and mentors of a more proximate but no less forsaken community in the past as a way to retrieve resources for the present. The relationships are the story, but she is the hub.

An analysis of Maritain’s intellectual interventions complicates interpretations that would see her as a passive victim. Sacred Dread also aims to push back against the readings of her as the apolitical, silent partner of Jacques Maritain. Perhaps Jacques’s fame makes it too easy to portray Raïssa as his opposite: if Jacques was public and philosophical, she was private, mystical, suffering, and isolated from history and politics. A typical assessment captures this tendency: “Jacques Maritain lived a vital, active

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life. Within this whirl of activity, Raïssa became a contemplative cloistered within her home, devoting long hours to prayer, meditation and her journal.” Widespread claims that she was a “saint,” “wholly supernatural,” “suffering and cloistered,” and “holy” illustrate a hagiographic impulse accompanying this caricature. Raïssa, one commentator insisted, could not be “a model to emulate” because “she never involved herself with Jacques’ extensive political work, nor addressed, at least in conventional terms, social problems.”

Although Raïssa’s writings tend to be more mystical, more poetic, and certainly darker than those of Jacques, her works do not evade the political but access it from another angle, both responding to and shaping it. Jacques’s political work tended to focus on the juridical realm of state and international politics, a realm Raïssa only very rarely reflected upon as explicitly as Jacques. But her relation to politics must include the racialized state violence she experienced as a child with her family in Russia, and later as an adult in Europe in the late 1930s and through the war. Maritain’s writings on questions about grief, imagination, and memory, though not juridical, can be usefully understood in relation to the political. Her wartime poems, such as “Deus excelsus terribilis” (1944) and “Aux morts désespérés” (1939), are among the very few powerful Catholic theological voices of lamentation during the Holocaust. Moreover, since all forms of politics require a particular kind of subject, one who is formed through a range of discourses and practices, we have to take a close look at Maritain’s own lifelong disciplinary work centered on self-formation. For decades, her prayer life and religious practices centered on embodying Christ’s suffering, praying, and inhabiting the norms of the revival community, what the anthropologist Charles Hirschkind has called the “formation of a sensorium.” These practices of formation should count as part of an expanded political imaginary that attends to the issues of subjectivity in the political sphere.

**PLAN OF THIS BOOK**

In the first chapter, I ask the simple question: How did Raïssa Maritain move from committed atheism on the left to a conversion to Catholicism in 1906? I investigate Maritain’s journey from an enthusiasm for atheistic
positivism then prevalent at the Sorbonne to a desire she shared with many of her generation to find an alternative. In looking for new horizons, Maritain joined many in Paris who immersed themselves in Christian mystical texts of the medieval and early modern periods. These became widely available in early twentieth-century France, thanks in part to the members of religious orders who edited, translated, and published them in order to breathe life into a highly rationalized neoscholastic theology. Her initial attraction to souffrance was linked in complex ways to a fascination with the premodern Christianity—an important marker of Catholic intellectual creativity in modern France. In her first encounter with the work of her would-be godfather Léon Bloy, Maritain read of a lionized “Middle Ages” as “the great Christian period of mourning [deuil].” Maritain's encounter with Bloy also provides an opportunity to explore Bloy's notions of the Jewishness of Christianity. His unusual but vivid claim that suffering and holiness come together around the figure of the Jew was crucial in fostering Maritain's conversion to Catholicism.

In the second chapter I move forward chronologically, continuing to explore the relationship between Bloy and Maritain but foregrounding issues of gender and feminized suffering. I begin with a broader historical analysis of the “feminization of Catholicism” in France. I give special attention to the theme of suffering femininity in Bloy’s literary aesthetics and to Jacques’s spiritualization of his wife’s illnesses. Through an analysis of her Journal, correspondence, and early publications such as De la vie d’oraison (1924), I trace Maritain’s investment in these gendered models of suffering and analyze her uses and modifications of them. I see her as partially critiquing the association between women and suffering from an embedded perspective, aided most notably by her appropriation of Thomas Aquinas.

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, I extend my analysis of Maritain’s use of souffrance to include the social and political context of early to mid-twentieth-century France. Throughout the book I show how Maritain’s multifaceted work emerged from a whole network of discourses and determinants, including political ones, but these three chapters provide a particular opportunity to see Maritain as a political thinker, engaging in the European catastrophes related to the rise of fascism, the escalation of anti-Semitism, and eventually the Shoah. I show in chapter 3 that Maritain was a leader...
in the interwar ecumenical efforts to forge a unity between Catholics and Jews. For Maritain this unity was rooted in the hope for a kind of internationalist, cosmopolitan Catholicism, in which conversions from Judaism into the Catholic Church would be celebrated as an inauguration of the “ecumenical dimensions” of a “new Christendom.” I show the multivalence of these interwar philo-Semitic projects, which entailed both outspokenly condemning anti-Semitism and, simultaneously, promoting and praying for Jewish conversions. Maritain’s thinking on Judaism and suffering illustrates the tensions and constraints at the heart of French Christian thinking on this issue. By paying close attention to her wartime poetry and a theological essay on Jewish-Christian relations entitled *Histoire d’Abraham* (1935, revised in 1942), I show Maritain both inheriting and transforming classic multivalent features of modern French Catholic philo-Semitism.

The fourth chapter extends the analysis of Maritain’s politically inflected writings on suffering but explores the connections she and other Catholic revivalists had begun to make between politics, aesthetic theory, and poetry. I pay close attention to her essays “Le poète et son temps” (1936), “Du recueillement poétique” (1937), “Message aux poètes qui sont à la guerre” (1939), and “La poésie comme expérience spirituelle” (1942) to show the revival’s transformations of suffering. Viewed alongside the gathering storm clouds of anti-Semitism and fascism in France, the *peine* that predominates in her poetry and theory of aesthetics was not merely a theological concept that could fit into a narrative of another’s redemption. It gave voice to her experiences of personal betrayal and devastation as a Jewish Catholic in the context of escalating violence.

In the fifth and final chapter, I explore Maritain’s wartime corpus—a small set of lamentation poems and her memoir *Les grandes amitiés*—written in New York, where she was an exile learning the news of the Holocaust as it came over from Europe, including the names of many friends who had died in the gas chambers. As Maritain’s world crumbled around her with the collapse of the Catholic ideals of universalism and philo-Semitism during the Second World War, her wartime works were characterized by stunned disbelief. She took up the symbols of *souffrance* in radically new ways. For most of Maritain’s life, suffering had been bound up with the promise of redemption and had pointed to the inti-
macy between mortal humanity and the God who suffered on the cross. Yet during the Holocaust her previous thinking on the redemptive power of anguish came to a halt. In the face of genocide the romance and allure of the Christian narrative of redemptive suffering faltered, even for its staunchest advocates and most creative theorizers. Yet I argue in this chapter that Maritain would not leave this defining concept behind altogether. In the midst of the war, suffering became a project of memory—a way of redeeming the past and her own life story as a sign of opposition to the tragedy of the war. It was the project of writing her memoirs that gave Maritain the chance to preserve redemptive suffering, if only by projecting it into the past. In these famous documents, Maritain told the stories of her own life and those of her friends just as the culture that had sustained them was disintegrating. Her memorial writings in 1940–44 are colored by the strange triumph and joy of the agonized existence she once called “sacred dread” (crainte sacrée). Understanding Maritain’s turn to the past in the midst of present human cataclysm opens a view onto the complications faced by those who valorize suffering. This combination suggests a need to think more carefully about the relationships between the faculty of memory, the religious imagination, and grief.

These chapters together rest on the conviction that it is worth the effort to think through the *renouveau catholique*’s fascination with suffering with greater analytic precision for several reasons, beyond merely humanizing the strange. One reason is that the *renouveau catholique*, particularly the main protagonists I treat in *Sacred Dread*, laid the groundwork for some of the most richly creative thinking in late modern Catholicism. It was Charles Péguy who, in a 1904 essay, coined the term *ressourcement*, which would come to symbolize the hermeneutical principle for the changes inaugurated at the Second Vatican Council. Many theologians associated with the movement known as *la nouvelle théologie*, among them Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, specifically cite Péguy and other revivalists as crucial influences. With regard to Raïssa Maritain’s influence more specifically—and this is something I unpack more fully in the chapters that follow—the conciliar document *Nostra Aetate* draws directly from Jacques and Raïssa’s rethinking of the relationship between Jews and Judaism that took place at least three decades before the Second Vatican Council. Moreover, Raïssa Maritain was a godmother, mentor, and direct influence to count-
less unexpected figures—the American poet Emily Snow, the literary critic Alan Tate, the Polish theater critic Jan Kott, and the Russian painter Marc Chagall, to name only a few. The most radical, even outrageous, of these thinkers, such as Léon Bloy, left a profound mark on the most enduring figures of twentieth-century Catholicism. In addition to Jacques and Raïssa Maritain, Julien Green, Thomas Merton, Flannery O’Connor, Graham Greene, Dorothy Day, and Georges Bernanos have all cited Bloy’s ferocity as a source of inspiration for their own work. It pays to seek a fuller, richer way to make sense of the dominant preoccupation of these writers.

In fact, the “Catholic” preoccupation with affliction that we see in the renouveau catholique figures has also exerted a real influence even on secular continental thought. Figures as diverse as Walter Benjamin and Emmanuel Levinas drew inspiration from Léon Bloy. Moreover, from Georges Bataille’s fascination with suffering-centered mysticism to Julia Kristeva’s most recent work, The Severed Head (2012), French theory remains fundamentally preoccupied with abjection. The “Catholic” discourse on suffering explored in Sacred Dread intersects with themes in continental secular thought in ways that are not always fully acknowledged.

Furthermore, the story of Sacred Dread helps fill out the ongoing scholarly conversation about Catholicism and modernity. Scholars have now revised the old narrative that sees religion in modern European history as a gradual process of disenchantment that began in the Protestant Reformation, accelerated during the Enlightenment, and then predictably faded until religion nearly disappeared. The old teleological narrative promoted the classic stereotype of modern Catholicism as a waning institution on the defensive, gasping for its last breath until the Second Vatican Council. Scholars instead now highlight a revised story of modern Europeans, popular and elite, who do not align easily along the old reiterated battle lines in which enlightened moderns are pitched against archaic believers, the church against the republican state, the supernaturalists against the positivists, and the Right against the Left. Similarly, the community I have come to know were not the last hostile relics of a dying world or right-wing defenders of the monarch but a group of thinkers—among them lapsed Catholics, Jews, atheists, émigrés—who actively sought out Catholic theologies and practices centered on suffering, in a range of ways,
because they saw there something that was missing from the world of atheistic positivism.\textsuperscript{65}

Their immersion in suffering before the two world wars enabled these artists and intellectuals to encounter and describe the suffering and tragedies of the twentieth century in a way they insisted others could not do or refused to do. Like many of her revivalist colleagues, Raïssa Maritain sought in her writings richer morphologies of affliction to describe what it meant to be human, how one could alter one’s interior world and make room for God, and how to face the tragedies of history in new ways. By 1944, Maritain and many of her surviving colleagues had experienced unimaginable personal loss—the death of sons, friends, and godparents and, in many cases, the forced abandonment of their homes and communities. The Catholic imaginaire, so fixated on suffering, spoke to these experiences. These anguished symbols did not necessarily make the violence of the twentieth century “meaningful” (Maritain assigned the Holocaust to the anomalous category of “Ce qui ne peut se dire / Ce que l’esprit se refuse à porter” (What cannot be told / What the mind refuses to bear).\textsuperscript{66} This imaginary enabled its advocates to describe suffering in the most vivid, graphic, almost unbearable detail. In many cases this work deepened rather than simply made meaningful the experience of anguish and affliction. Many found something oddly alluring about this.

Yet these symbols of souffrance did more than move French Catholic writers through the dreadfulness of war and exile. Part of what I found in \textit{Sacred Dread} is that before the wars the “old story”—the utter antagonism between Catholicism and republicanism currently under revision by scholars, for good reason—\textit{was}, on some level, true.\textsuperscript{67} In a strange way this mutual hostility even partially enabled the revival. French laïcité is animated by a long-standing tradition in French social and political thought that identifies secular humanism as the only viable source of human unity and progress.\textsuperscript{68} As Maritain came to see it, as early as 1906 the philosophy of secular positivism in France refused to believe in either death or God, in what was for her a sort of bizarre refusal to see reality. Because of this refusal, many rejected republican ideals as bourgeois and tepid and fled to republicanism’s “other”: What could be more “countercultural” to the laïcité than picking up the broken pieces of a tradition scorned and demonized by the mainstream, embracing its symbols of grief, crucifixion,
and tears? Particularly in the early part of the revival, as writers tapped into Catholicism, they tapped into the Catholic Church’s scorn for modern republicanism and, like most European Catholics, veered uneasily between the Right and the Left, holding within their community all positions on the political spectrum.

This kind of ambivalence is at the heart of the fascination with suffering in French Catholic revival. For this generation, the allure of Catholicism’s suffering-centered imaginaire was a turn away from the liberal idea that suffering could and must be overcome, toward Catholic symbolism that channeled emotions of grief, mourning, and loss to acknowledge, consecrate, and deepen the reality of suffering and pain, and that did so in ambiguous ways that highlighted the suffering of women and Jews. This raises important ethical and political questions about the potentially problematic valorization of the suffering of those who are historically oppressed and the legacy of this mode of thinking for today. It places before us perennial issues: Can graphic accounts of affliction ever act as a vehicle for social reform and transformation? Or do such accounts merely naturalize, sanctify, or otherwise further entrench historical suffering in their intense reiterations and re-elaborations? In light of the French Catholic revival’s central preoccupations, what to make of Theodor Adorno’s formidable criticism that representations of suffering and pain always contain, “however remotely, the power to elicit enjoyment out of it”? Does the possibility of pleasure in reading about others’ pain prevent other affective responses, such as compassion, empathy, or outrage?

A term often used by Maritain that captures the multivalence of this legacy is one made famous by Pascal: l’abîme (the abyss). She claimed that Catholic theologies of suffering enabled her to “lean over the abyss,” to face death, suffering, and the tragedies of history in new ways. Yet proximity to the abyss, however conceived, is risky, always presenting a range of temptations at its edge—in this case, the temptations of sentimentality, the romanticizing or fetishizing of suffering that could otherwise be analyzed and eradicated, the view of suffering as the inevitable destiny of women and Jews, and the relinquishment of liberal modernity in its totality. Sacred Dread is an invitation to consider the risks and rewards of such a perilous posture, and to do so in the company of the forgotten presence of Raïssa Maritain.