

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-10027-4 - A Variety of Catholic Modernists

Alec R. Vidler

Excerpt

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I

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

My excuse for this egotistic introduction is that I could think of no better way of explaining the reasons for my choice of subject; my qualifications, such as they are, for handling it; the limits within which I propose to do so; and the sources of information that have been at my disposal.

I should state at the outset that, while the term must be allowed to have many other meanings, by 'modernists' I shall mean those who were in one way or another implicated in the movement in the Roman Catholic Church that is called by that name—the movement which originated about 1890, was condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907, and was snuffed out to all intents and purposes in 1910.

My interest in the modernists dates from my undergraduate days. As a schoolboy during the first world war I had come to embrace the anglo-catholic creed and cultus. When after the war I went up to Cambridge and embarked on the study of theology, the question soon struck me how I was to combine my enthusiasm for anglo-catholicism with that historical criticism of the Bible and of Christian origins which very soon I was embracing with an equal enthusiasm. That being so, I pricked up my ears when my tutor—S. C. Carpenter¹—talked about Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell. Carpenter had been one of the group of young Cambridge divines who in November 1907 had sent a letter of gratitude and sympathy to Father Tyrrell.²

The fact that the modernists were reputed to be extreme or radical in their critical views and theological reconstructions, so far from repelling, was calculated to attract me, since I do not think that I was for long inclined to rest in the position of Charles

¹ (1877–1959) Fellow and Tutor of Selwyn College, Cambridge; afterwards Master of the Temple and Dean of Exeter; author of *A Large Room: a plea for a more inclusive Christianity* (1923), etc.

² See M. D. Petre, *Autobiography and Life of George Tyrrell* (1912), ii, 371.

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Gore (1853–1932) and the anglo-catholic establishment, with which at first I had been more or less satisfied. I find, for instance, that in April 1922, after reading a book by N. P. Williams,¹ I commented in my journal: ‘His critical views are curiously conservative.’ The writings of A. E. J. Rawlinson² and W. L. Knox³ appealed to me much more, since they appeared to be pointing in a direction that was concordant with what had been the aims of the modernists in the Roman Church.

Anyhow, during the 1920s I began to collect the works of Loisy and Tyrrell. In those days I used to keep a record of all the books I read, and I see that from 1926 onwards I was steadily reading books by the modernists—not only Loisy and Tyrrell, but Miss Petre, von Hügel, Houtin, and Buonaiuti. I remember that when Prebendary J. F. Briscoe,⁴ a leading anglo-catholic, stayed with me in Birmingham about 1930, how surprised and pleased I was to discover that he shared my zest for Loisy’s *Evangiles synoptiques*. He was attending a meeting of the Council of the Federation of Catholic Priests, a body that I supposed to be as antipathetic to modernists as to protestants.

Thus when I returned to Cambridge in October 1931 and could look forward to having more time for study and research, I was already considering the possibility of writing a book about the modernists. In fact, during my summer holiday in September 1931 I paid my first visit to M. Loisy. As I shall have a good deal to say about him in these lectures, I will give a fairly detailed account of this occasion, which will serve to introduce him. I had written the following letter to him beforehand (on 6 August 1931):

I am a young Anglican priest (aged 31). Ever since I began the study of theology at Cambridge, your name has been for me an honoured one. I have read several of your books and have been much influenced by them. I have also studied the history of Catholic modernism. It seems to me that in England—at least among the members of the younger generation who should be interested in such matters—that

¹ (1883–1943) The book in question was *The First Easter Morning* (1920).

² (1884–1960) Author of *Dogma, Fact and Experience* (1915), etc.

³ (1886–1950) Author of *The Catholic Movement in the Church of England* (1923), etc.

⁴ (1878–1939) Rector of Bagborough, Somerset.

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history is little known and its significance still less appreciated. At the same time—and perhaps in consequence of this—very poor justice is done to yourself by English students of religion. You are known to them chiefly from references in the writings of Inge and von Hügel, and in neither case is the resulting impression of your work and thought likely to be entirely fair or favourable.

I have just finished reading your *Mémoires*, and from beginning to end I have found them of absorbing interest. I have also seen Miss Petre's review in the *Hibbert Journal*. I feel there is more to be said than she says; and perhaps an Anglican is more able in *some* respects to appreciate your position than a Roman Catholic. For what in my judgment differentiates Anglicanism from Roman Catholicism is the former's rejection of that papal absolutism which was the rock on which modernism inevitably foundered. It seems to me (but perhaps the wish is father to the thought) that the Anglican Church, because of its width and comprehensiveness, may be of some special importance in the evolution of that religion of the future which is so much needed in the world.

What is now called 'Anglican Modernism' does not promise much in this direction, for it is hardly distinguishable from Liberal protestantism, and it is often more protestant than liberal. English criticism of the New Testament remains for the most part incurably conservative, and this again creates a prejudice against yourself.

I am at present engaged in parochial ministry, but shall shortly be returning to Cambridge when I hope to do some research and writing. Among other things I hope further to study the history of Catholic modernism and to suggest the significance it may have for Anglicans, and also to try to give a just account of your own life and work for English readers. This sounds ambitious, and perhaps impertinent, and I do not know whether it will ever be realized. . . .

All the foregoing remarks will, I think, tell you how great an honour and privilege I should regard it to meet and converse with you, if only for a short time. And I am writing to you now because I hope to be in France on holiday from Sept 5th to 15th, and I wonder if you would be so kind as to allow me to call on you at Ceffonds on any day during that period.

On 9 August M. Loisy replied to me as follows:¹

¹ Quotations from French I shall normally translate when they come in the text, and leave untranslated in footnotes.

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I have been much interested and indeed touched by your letter which tells me nothing I did not know about my extremely restricted influence in England but which also shows me that I can find very real sympathizers in your country. If I had been able to visit England in the past, I fancy I should have more friends there now. Today, age as well as infirmity prevents me from travelling. My great annual journey is that from Ceffonds to Paris in October, and from Paris to Ceffonds in April.

If you persevere in your intention of coming to see me in September, I shall be happy to converse with you . . .

And he proceeded to tell me how to get to Ceffonds (which is in the department of Haute-Marne).

Needless to say, I did persevere in my intention, and called on M. Loisy on 9 September. Immediately afterwards I made a memorandum of what transpired which I will reproduce since it forwards the purpose of this introduction:

at 2 p.m. I called on M. Loisy. His house is at Ceffonds—only a few minutes from the station at Montier-en-Der (the two places adjoin). He had walked towards the station to meet me (supposing I was just arriving by train, but I had in fact arrived the day before) and was in his garden when I arrived. He greeted me very kindly, and took me to a room indoors where we sat and conversed for over two hours. He is short of stature: and though not robust, he looks well-preserved and in good health for his years. He wears a beard—grown white—and neatly trimmed; the top of his head is bald. His eyes are clear blue and sparkling; his manner is charming and his laugh infectious.

He allowed me freely to ask him questions, and he talked at length when given a cue. I listened, understanding most but not all of what he said. What he said was (as he put it) *'tout à fait entre nous'*.

I told him I hoped to study further the history of modernism and suggested the possibility that what failed in the Church of Rome might succeed in the Church of England. He explained how the Church of Rome was becoming more and more strictly papal—this is illustrated by the latest revision of the Canon Law—so that the bishops and clergy had no real independence left. The method of training etc. prevented the intrusion of new elements. He agreed that the Anglican modernists (so-called) are no more than liberal protestant.

He spoke much about the criticism of the N. T. and his own

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conclusions—the summary of which is ‘the more you know the less you know’. Before Irenaeus we have not history but pre-history, sacred legend. Still the origin of Christianity was a momentous event, and Christianity will continue in some form or other. He agreed that religion must have a cultus. The alienation of the people from the Church in ‘Catholic’ countries is a very serious thing from the point of view of morality; but the Church itself is chiefly responsible. Anti-clericalism is the result of clericalism. While he would say nothing definite, he seemed to favour the idea that a truly modernist movement might succeed in the Church of England.

He told me the detailed history of *l’affaire Turmel*.¹

His comment on Bethune-Baker’s review of his *Mémoires*² was that he knew Duchesne and Batiffol a great deal better than Bethune-Baker did!³ He had in fact defended Duchesne against the imputation that he was a pure sceptic and Batiffol against the imputation that he was a delator of the modernists.

Loisy said that if he had been able to travel with ‘*la bonne parole*’ the modernist affair might have had a much greater success.

I asked him whether a life of Mgr Mignot had been or would be published.⁴ He answered that although an abbé had his papers and was charged with the writing of it, it would never be allowed to appear. In his time Mgr Mignot was a bishop of unique quality in the episcopate; there is no possibility of such a bishop being appointed now.

Rivière’s book on modernism⁵ is an attempt to glorify the school of Batiffol, whose pupil Rivière was; it alters the whole perspective of the truth. Rivière is far less intelligent than Batiffol. Lagrange⁶ is not primarily a theologian: he was a lawyer before ordination and that remains.

M. Loisy said I might certainly visit him again.

This will be his last course of lectures at the Collège de France, as he will have reached the retiring age. He is uncertain as yet whether he will settle permanently at Ceffonds or in Paris; the one suits his health in summer, the other in winter.

¹ See pp. 56–62 below. ² See *Journal of Theological Studies*, July 1931, p. 443.

³ Louis Duchesne (1843–1922), the ecclesiastical historian. Pierre Batiffol (1861–1929): see J. Rivière, *Monseigneur Batiffol* (1929).

⁴ *Monseigneur Mignot* by Louis de Lacger, which is only a brief memoir, was not published till 1933.

⁵ J. Rivière, *Le modernisme dans l’Eglise* (1929).

⁶ M. J. Lagrange (1855–1938), the biblical scholar: see *Le Père Lagrange au service de la Bible: souvenirs personnels* (1967).

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I remarked that the people in the hotel still speak of him as M. l'abbé—and he said not only so, but some of them still call him M. le Curé, as 50 years ago he was curé of a village about 20 kilometres away!

I called his attention to the book *The Riddle of the New Testament*¹ which was causing a considerable *éclat* in England. He asked if Bishop Gore was still alive; Gore visited him at Neuilly years ago. Loisy remembered that Gore was Bishop of Birmingham and Oxford and was connected with the revival of religious communities in the Church of England. Loisy had never heard of Dr Barnes!²

Houtin's history of modernism³ is a correct chronicle of the facts (not more than that)—though even that with certain exceptions, e.g. the idea of a meeting at which the plot was hatched is an illusion; the supposed meeting was no more than a '*bon déjeuner*'!

Loisy said that the story of Turmel (who has written under 14 pseudonyms including Delafosse and Louis Coulange) is very sad. Turmel still says mass *chez lui*, although degraded by the Church. He is mentally abnormal.

Buonaiuti is very changeable. Loisy thinks that, although excommunicated at present, he is probably negotiating with the Vatican again—and also with Mussolini, whose ambitions are similar to those of the pope!

M. Loisy's house—by an odd coincidence—is practically opposite the house in which (according to a tablet affixed to the wall) Jacques d'Arc, Jeanne's father, was born. . .

When, shortly after this visit, I did return to Cambridge it was with a firmer intention of doing something about the modernists. I was not however in the least expecting an announcement which appeared in May 1932 that the subject for the Norrisian Prize Essay at Cambridge in 1933 was 'The origins and outcome of the modernist movement condemned by the encyclical *Pascendi gregis*.' This naturally clinched the matter. Only later did I surmise (what I believe to have been the case) that the setting of this subject was due to the then Vice-Chancellor, Mr Will Spens (1882–1962), who had always been keenly interested in the modernists and had also been one of the signatories of the letter

¹ E. C. Hoskyns and N. Davey, *The Riddle of the New Testament* (1931).

² E. W. Barnes (1874–1953), Bishop of Birmingham, at that time a prominent and controversial figure in the Church of England.

³ A. Houtin, *Histoire du modernisme catholique* (1913).

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from Cambridge to Father Tyrrell which I have already mentioned.

Accordingly I got to work and produced an essay in time which to my great satisfaction was awarded the prize and which, owing to the good offices of one of the examiners, Professor J. M. Creed, was published as it stood by the Cambridge University Press.¹ The book had a mixed reception. Roman Catholic reviewers were disposed to regret that the first history of the modernist movement to appear in English was so sympathetic to the modernists and so unappreciative of the acts of Pius X.² The *Catholic Times* opened its review with this sentence: 'About thirty years ago there ended a movement within the Church which would never have started had the chief participators not succumbed to the temptation of intellectual pride'; and ended succinctly thus: 'The encyclical "Pascendi" brought the Modernist Movement to an end. It is dead, let it lie buried. This attempt at exhumation, even on a plea of history, is not worth the attention of Catholics.'³ Other reviewers, to whose opinion I attached importance, notably A. L. Lilley,⁴ were more favourable. M. Loisy wrote approvingly about it to our mutual friend, John Collins, and said that in the chapters concerning himself he had noticed only one trivial inexactitude.

I was particularly gratified by a review by Dr Joseph Needham, the present Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, who said that my book's 'real lack of bias' became 'all the more strikingly exhibited the more carefully' it was read, and that it would 'be extremely difficult to discover the theological allegiance and the prejudices of the author, if they were not already known'.⁵ I was also told on good authority that the examiners of my Norrisian essay, who, until they decided on their award, had only a motto to signify who the author was, had been uncertain whether, when his identity was revealed, he would turn out to be a Roman Catholic, an Anglican or an infidel.

¹ *The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: its origin and outcome* (1934).

² See *Catholic Book Notes*, December 1934. Cf. *The Tablet*, 24 November 1934.

³ *Catholic Times*, 19 October 1934.

⁴ See *Theology*, November 1934, pp. 306–10.

⁵ *Cambridge Review*, 8 March 1935.

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Ever since that time I have gone on collecting literature about the modernist movement, and I had in mind that I might one day have more to say about it. Moreover, various occurrences and developments that I am now going to say something about in chronological order made it increasingly likely that I should return to the subject if an opportunity offered.

First, when I was conducting a university mission in St Mary's Church, Oxford, during the Hilary term 1938, a man came up to me one day—in the church, if I remember rightly—and said he believed that I was interested in the modernist movement. He proceeded to ask me whether I would care to have a lot of the modernists' letters and also a collection of some rare modernist pamphlets and other papers which he possessed. Naturally, I accepted his offer with warm gratitude, and I told him that, though I had no immediate prospect of doing further work on the modernists, I hoped to do so eventually.

This surprising and benevolent donor was the son of a Mr G. W. Young. I have often reproached myself that I did not at the time find out all I could about him. I should be glad to hear from anyone who remembers him or who can tell me how I can get into touch with his descendants. He was, as I have since learned, a member of the Queen's College, who matriculated in 1883 and died in 1932. He lived at 30 Holywell Street where his son was also living in 1938.

From the letters that he gave me it is evident that he held some appointment in the university but I do not know what. Though not a Roman Catholic he had been in close rapport with the modernists and had taken an ardent interest in their fortunes and misfortunes. Baron von Hügel, who in 1904 had advised Young to 'wait and make no effect to be received',¹ in 1909 described Young as 'an outsider moving in the right direction'.² Young had

¹ Von Hügel to Young, 3–4 June 1904: YP 'The very Priests who would be most ready to minimize or liberalise with and for you, whilst you were outside and to get you in, would be probably the very ones who, once you were inside, would, in all conscientiousness, worry and work at you, in the other direction . . . But you can show yourself, on occasion, to certain of our officials: it is good for them to know that such men as you exist.'

² Von Hügel to Lilley, 18 April 1909: LP.

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acted as the unofficial representative or liaison officer in Oxford of the modernists. Von Hügel, who, as I shall later have occasion to observe, was the principal organizer of the movement, kept Young well-informed about what was going on behind the scenes. He also got him to make arrangements for continental modernists when they were visiting Oxford. For example, in June 1904 he wrote to Young—in characteristic style:

I heard some 4 days ago from Mgr Mignot, Archbishop of Albi, Abbé Loisy's courageous and most cultured supporter, that he will come and stay with us, in this our house, *from July 15th or 16th to the 23rd, possibly 26th*. Now *you* will be one of people [*sic*] I shall want him to see. But I am also anxious, if at all possible, to secure, say, 2 or 3 Oxford scholars to be in Oxford during a couple of those days. . . who wd be able and willing to help me show him the University. He is a thorough and keen Biblical scholar, and has read all the best English work of that kind; but he does not speak English, and understands it most imperfectly when spoken.¹

Young also acted as a kind of agent for the dissemination in Oxford of modernist publications. For instance, von Hügel, when writing to A. L. Lilley in 1905 about securing subscribers for the new modernist periodical *Demain*, said: 'That little brick of a Young has gone and got 15 first-rate ones at Oxford: Caird, Cheyne, Bigg, Sanday, Strong, Rashdall, Allen, etc.—really an impressive list.'² During these lectures I shall make further use of the letters that Young's son gave me.

In the Easter vacation that followed the university mission at Oxford I had already arranged to pay a second visit to M. Loisy at Ceffonds, this time in company with John Collins who knew him better than I did and had previously visited him more than once. In his autobiography Collins explains how he conceives himself to have been influenced by Loisy.³ My recollection is that we called on him on two successive afternoons and had long conversations with him. I am fairly confident that I made my own

¹ Von Hügel to Young, 21 June 1904: YP.

² Von Hügel to Lilley, 27 January 1905: LP.

³ See L. J. Collins, *Faith under Fire* (1966), pp. 51–7.

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record of these conversations, but if so it has disappeared or been mislaid, to my acute vexation. One point I remember perfectly clearly and vividly. I had asked M. Loisy to comment on the allegations that were constantly made by von Hügel that he did not believe in the transcendent or that he was a pure immanentist. M. Loisy raised his arms and declared, with great deliberation and solemnity, that of course he believed in 'le Grand Mystère'. This was for me a numinous moment which conveyed to me a sense of the ineffability of the Divine as few other moments have. It should be noted that this was in 1938, that is, in the last period of his life when Loisy affirmed the theistic and even Christian character of his faith in a way that he had not done during his middle period when von Hügel had been so worried about him.¹

Collins and I realized that Loisy, who was now over 81 and had never been robust, was not likely to live much longer, and we made a pact that we would go together to his funeral whenever it should take place. However, this proved to be impossible, for he died on 1 June 1940 at the time of the fall of France.

I have a letter about Loisy's last days from which I will quote a passage at this point. It was written to Miss Maude Petre on 19 June 1940 by Madame Bounot who had been nursing him:

Forgive me for not sending you sooner than this details about the last moments of our dear M. Loisy whom we miss so much. We were kept so busy caring for him; night and day we looked after him for six weeks. You will believe that we were very tired. At last he went without too much suffering, as tranquil as he always was.² He was unconscious during the last two days, but some days before he had given us all his instructions and had made us promise not to leave him till his last breath. His death was very distressing for us, since for seven years we had been greatly attached to him. In the end we sadly took him back to Ambrières [his birthplace] with Mlle Royer, his niece.

¹ See Loisy, *Un mythe apologétique* (1939), *passim*; R. de Boyer de Sainte Suzanne, *Alfred Loisy* (1968), pp. 145–9; Houtin and Sartiaux, *Vie de Loisy* (1960), pp. 252 f.

² J. Bonsirven, in his article on Loisy in *Supplément au Dictionnaire de la Bible* (1957), v. 543, writes: 'On assure que peu avant sa fin (1^{er} juin 1940) il disait: "Je meurs en paix avec Dieu"', but he cites no authority for this statement.