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978-0-521-17502-9 - Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context

Edited by Darrell Jodock

Excerpt

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Darrell Jodock

On 8 September 1907 Pope Pius X issued *Pascendi dominici gregis*, an encyclical in which he condemned “Modernism” as the “synthesis of all heresies.”<sup>1</sup> The Modernists, he said, “lay the axe not to the branches and shoots, but to the very root, that is, to the faith and its deepest fires . . . so that there is no part of Catholic truth from which they hold their hand, none that they do not strive to corrupt.”<sup>2</sup> In the pope’s mind the Modernists posed a threat to the church that was all the more dangerous because “the partisans of error are to be sought not only among the Church’s open enemies; they lie hid, a thing to be deeply deplored and feared, in her very bosom and heart.”<sup>3</sup> In *Pascendi* this “Modernism” was defined in such an encompassing way, those labeled “Modernists” were condemned with such vehemence, and the measures prescribed to prevent its growth were so stringent that it virtually slammed the door on any historical study of the Bible, on theological creativity, and on church reform. The door would remain closed for the next three decades. Its consequences were serious and far-reaching.

What kind of perceived threat elicited this response? Who were the Modernists and what did they advocate? And what was the origin of the anti-Modernism that reached full expression in this encyclical? These questions, and others like them, will occupy this entire volume. Its chapters will explore the various personal, social, political, ecclesiastical, and theological backgrounds that influenced the major actors in this “Modernist crisis,” as the episode has come to be called. Rather than offering exhaustive answers, the task of this introduction is more modest: first, to set the scene and give some

<sup>1</sup> One translation of *Pascendi* can be found in *The Papal Encyclicals*, vol. III: 1903–1939, ed. Claudia Carlen (Raleigh, North Carolina: McGrath Publishing Company, 1981), pp. 71–98. The phrase cited appears on p. 89, §39.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72, §3.      <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 71, §2.

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preliminary indication of the issues and persons involved and, then, to explain the purpose of the volume and the significance of the topic.

An initial observation must be made: if Modernism is defined as a coherent system of thought, no such thing existed prior to the encyclical. Alfred Loisy, Friedrich von Hügel, and George Tyrrell, all among those regularly considered to be Modernists, each objected to the accuracy of the portrait drawn by the encyclical. As Bernard Reardon points out, “Loisy, himself the most distinguished of them [the Modernists], refused to accept any description of the movement’s adherents as ‘a homogeneous and united group’” and called “the pope’s exposition of their doctrines ‘a fantasy of the theological imagination.’”<sup>4</sup> The encyclical itself admits as much (in a passage which also reveals its low opinion of the Modernists):

since the Modernists (as they are commonly and rightly called) employ a very clever artifice, namely, to present their doctrines without order and systematic arrangement into one whole, scattered and disjointed one from another, so as to appear to be in doubt and uncertainty, while they are in reality firm and steadfast, it will be of advantage . . . to bring their teachings together here into one group, and to point out the connexion between them.<sup>5</sup>

*Pascendi* proceeds to organize and define the system of thought; then its author goes on to claim that he has shown “that their system does not consist in scattered and unconnected theories, but in a perfectly organised body, all the parts of which are solidly joined so that it is *not possible to admit one without admitting all.*”<sup>6</sup> The lasting power of the encyclical resided partly in this claim, because, during the years to follow, a person who espoused any idea associated with the system it had erected was presumed to be guilty of endorsing the complete compilation of “all heresies.” That person became a target for the full opprobrium of the anti-Modernists.

*Pascendi* did not name any names or condemn any particular individuals. However, several who are identified below were among those under suspicion. These Modernists did not constitute a unified school of thought; they were not the followers of a single charismatic or intellectual leader, nor were they very numerous. A handful of people, each of whom had priorities and areas of interest somewhat

<sup>4</sup> Bernard M. G. Reardon, “Introduction” to *Roman Catholic Modernism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> *Pascendi*, p. 72, §4.      <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89, §39. Emphasis added.

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different from the others, were engaged in what can best be described as tentative explorations. Their commonality came primarily from what they were seeking to avoid. In the face of the rigidities of neo-scholastic versions of Catholicism and its resistance to notions of historical development and change, these Catholics were seeking an alternative way of interpreting the faith. What if some of the same tools that were being used by non-Catholic theologians could be used to interpret Catholicism? What if historical criticism of the Bible could be incorporated into a Catholic understanding of Christian origins? What if doctrinal development could be understood in a positive way? What if the church could be selective, accepting some features of modernity (e.g., its democracy) while rejecting others (e.g., its individualism)?

Not only were the Modernists united by the neo-scholasticism they sought to avoid, another similarity was that each person's program issued in a call for reform.<sup>7</sup> Their approaches and priorities differed, and the specific proposals for updating the structure and theology of the church varied from one Modernist to another, but they agreed that change was needed in order for the church to respond effectively to the challenges of modernity. Yet another similarity was that their call for reform issued from a deeply held conviction that Catholicism could and should play a part in transforming European society. They were motivated by hope and by a dedication to Catholicism and its ideals (as they understood them).

## PIUS X'S VIEW OF MODERNISM

Without naming names, *Pascendi* declared persons conducting such explorations to be enemies of the church. Again and again, the encyclical called into question the motives and integrity of the Modernists. Not only do the Modernists advocate doctrines that are contrary to each other, it said, they "display a certain contempt for Catholic doctrines."<sup>8</sup> They employ "a thousand noxious arts," "disdain all authority . . . and relying upon a false conscience, they

<sup>7</sup> In this regard, the Modernists moved beyond the "liberal Catholics" of previous decades who advocated freedom of scholarly inquiry. The Modernists shared with the earlier liberal Catholics a concern about relating contemporary knowledge to Catholicism, but liberal Catholics did not call for the kind of theological and ecclesiastical reform envisioned by the Modernists.

<sup>8</sup> *Pascendi*, p. 78, §18.

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attempt to ascribe to a love of truth that which is in reality the result of pride and obstinacy.”<sup>9</sup> Their ideas stem from ignorance, unregulated curiosity, and pride. Pride “puffs them up with that vainglory which allows them to regard themselves as the sole possessors of knowledge, and . . . rouses in them the spirit of disobedience.”<sup>10</sup> They do not seem to recognize that “their system means the destruction not of the Catholic religion alone but of all religion.”<sup>11</sup> One cannot help but wonder why the pope portrayed persons who posed no organized threat as such insidious enemies and such dangerous traitors of the church. To this question various chapters in the book will return.

*Pascendi* assumes the validity of a specific philosophical/theological point of view. The encyclical operates with a distinction between nature and supernature – each in its own realm, each with its own way of being known. Closely related to this distinction is another: between reason and revelation. Unaided reason can understand nature and discern the existence of God. Revelation is supernatural, objectively given, and knowable. It was bestowed on humans via a “deposit of faith” that can be found in the Bible and in the immutable dogmas of the church. The church had been authorized to define and defend the faith. If one operates out of these assumptions, *Pascendi*’s critique of the system it calls Modernism makes sense. If one does not, its critique seems almost entirely external.

The basic philosophical errors that *Pascendi* claims to discern in Modernism are agnosticism and immanentism. Agnosticism is the teaching that “human reason is confined entirely within the field of *phenomena*, that is to say, to things that are perceptible to the senses, and in the manner in which they are perceptible; it has no right and no power to transgress these limits.” “Given these premises, all will readily perceive what becomes of *Natural Theology*, of the *motives of credibility*, of *external revelation*. The Modernists simply make away with them altogether.”<sup>12</sup> Agnosticism is thus a negative position; immanentism is its positive correlate. Because the Modernists cannot appeal to external revelation to explain religion, they seek its source instead “in man,” in “a movement of the heart” which is called a “sentiment.” “Hence the principle of *religious immanence* is formulated.”<sup>13</sup> Modernism wrongly asserts, according to *Pascendi*, that

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72, §3.<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 90–91, quotation from p. 90, §40.<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 89, §39.<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72, §6.<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 73, §7.

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religion arises out of the human subconscious and that faith has no basis outside this internal religious sentiment. Modernism falls into fideism; that is, it bases everything on a willed faith for which no reasons can be given. For the Modernists, revelation is likewise to be found within the religious experience of humans. It is “at the same time *of* God and *from* God.” From this “springs that ridiculous proposition of the Modernists, that every religion, according to the different aspect under which it is viewed, must be considered as both natural and supernatural. Hence it is that they make consciousness and revelation synonymous.”<sup>14</sup>

*Pascendi* accuses the Modernists of reserving no special place for the truth of Catholic Christianity, because all religions spring from this religious sense: “Nor is the Catholic religion an exception; it is quite on a level with the rest; for it was engendered, by the process of *vital immanence*.”<sup>15</sup> Having denied the distinctiveness of Catholic revelation, the Modernists, *Pascendi* charges, go on to deny the immutability of dogma. For them the human intellect uses words merely to give expression to the faith that arises from the experience of immanence. On the basis of religious sentiment, the intellect creates formulas, and from these come dogma.

Consequently, the formulae too, which we call dogma, must be subject to these vicissitudes, and are, therefore, liable to change. Thus the way is open to the intrinsic *evolution* of dogma. An immense collection of sophisms this, that ruins and destroys all religion. Dogma is not only able, but ought to evolve and to be changed.<sup>16</sup>

This then is one of the specific things to which *Pascendi* stands opposed – any notion that dogma may have evolved or that it may need to change again.

*Pascendi* also objects to the historical criticism of the Bible. Over against those Modernists who claimed that historical investigations of the Bible were objective and independent undertakings, it asserts that the Modernists’ “history and their criticism are saturated with their philosophy, and that their historico-critical conclusions are the natural fruit of their philosophical principles.”<sup>17</sup> Their judgments regarding what is/is not historical are made on the basis of *subjective* standards. The Modernists often adopt the view that the books of the Bible evolved and were not written by the persons whose names

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74, §8.<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74, §10.<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 75, §13.<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84, §30.

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they bear. Hence “it is quite clear that the criticism We [Pius X] are concerned with is an *agnostic, immanentist, and evolutionist* criticism. Hence anybody who embraces it and employs it, makes profession thereby of the errors contained in it and places himself in opposition to Catholic faith.”<sup>18</sup>

*Pascendi* acknowledges that the Modernists affirm the reality of the divine, but it rejects what it claims to be their basis for that affirmation – namely, “the *experience of the individual*.”<sup>19</sup> Other theological notions to which it objects are Modernist views of faith and science, of dogma and the sacraments, of the inspiration of Scripture, of the church, and of church–state relations. On the path to “the annihilation of all religion” the first step “was taken by Protestantism; the second is made by Modernism; the next will plunge headlong into atheism.”<sup>20</sup> For *Pascendi*, Modernism is clearly on the wrong road; it attempts to travel on a “slippery slope” that can only end in atheism.

As we have already indicated, one of the several reasons for the long-term impact of *Pascendi* was the anti-Modernist measures that it established. More specifically, it

(1) ordained (that is, reaffirmed what Leo XIII had already ordained) “that scholastic philosophy be made the basis of the sacred sciences”;

(2) mandated that anyone “imbued with Modernism” be “excluded without compunction” from becoming or remaining a director or a professor of a seminary or a Catholic university;

(3) required bishops to “prevent writings infected with Modernism or favourable to it from being read when they have been published, and to hinder their publication when they have not”;

(4) insisted that bishops “use the utmost severity in granting permission to print”; they must maintain a strict process for granting the *Imprimatur* and the *Nihil obstat*;

(5) prohibited congresses of priests except on very rare occasions and even then only “on condition that matters appertaining to the Bishops or the Apostolic See be not treated in them, and that no motions or postulates be allowed that would imply a usurpation of sacred authority, and that no mention be made in them of Modernism, presbyterianism, or laicism”;

(6) established “Councils of Vigilance” in each diocese to “watch

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86, §34.<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76, §14.<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90, §39.

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most carefully for every trace and sign of Modernism both in publications and in teaching.” In order to preserve “the clergy and the young” from Modernism, these Councils of Vigilance “shall take all prudent, prompt and efficacious measures”;

(7) required that bishops and generals of religious orders report to the Vatican every third year concerning the things mandated by the encyclical.<sup>21</sup>

In 1910 Pius X took an additional step. He required that all clerics and other officeholders take an oath against Modernism. That oath included a pledge to “reject the heretical theory of the evolution of dogmas” and to hold as certain “that faith is not a blind religious sense welling up from the recesses of the *subconscious* under the impulse of the heart and at the begging of a morally-informed will, but a genuine assent of the intellect to a truth received extrinsically by hearing, by an assent, namely, based on the authority of an all-truthful God.”<sup>22</sup> The person taking the oath likewise promised to “submit and adhere whole-heartedly to the condemnations, declarations, and all the prescriptions which are contained in the encyclical letter ‘Pascendi’ and in the decree ‘Lamentabili’ [which in 1907 had condemned 65 propositions considered to be Modernist errors] especially those which bear on what is called history of dogma.” The oath goes on to repudiate any view that a person can hold historical conclusions independent of belief so long as they do not deny it directly, to repudiate any interpreting of the Bible that discounts the church’s tradition in favor of rationalistic procedures, to reject any view that “the teacher or writer in the field of historical theology must from the start set aside all preconceived ideas, whether about the supernatural origin of Catholic tradition, or about the promise of divine help in the enduring preservation of each revealed truth,” and to condemn any view that the church fathers can be examined with the same “freedom of enquiry with which any profane document is normally examined.” Finally, the oath required an expression of “vehement opposition to the error of the *modernists* who hold that there is nothing of divine character to be found in sacred tradition” and required an affirmation of the faith of the fathers as preserved by episcopal succession, “so that not what might seem better suited to the culture of each age should be held, [but] rather

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., pp. 92–97, §§44–56.

<sup>22</sup> The oath appears in appendix 2 of Daly, *Transcendence*, pp. 235–236. Subsequent quotations are from p. 236.

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that the absolute and immutable truth first preached by the Apostles *should never be believed or understood in a different manner.*” Because the contents of this oath were considered to be part of church teaching, it proved to be an effective tool for transmitting anti-Modernism to subsequent generations of priests and officeholders.

These stringent measures not only stifled Modernism but also placed the full weight of the institution against historical investigations of church doctrine and the Scriptures, to say nothing of any suggestion of theological reform that was not recognizably neo-Thomist.

#### THE MODERNISTS

We return to the question, “Who were the Modernists?” In retrospect, it seems clear that there was no easily identifiable (to say nothing of an organized) group who could be so designated. Only a handful of scholars are usually included (although a relatively small number of priests and young Catholic intellectuals may also have been sympathetic to their ideas). Among these scholars some were concerned primarily with the freedom to pursue the historical study of the Bible and to take seriously its implications for theology; others focused primarily on developing a philosophical outlook that provided an alternative to neo-scholasticism. Some were critical of authoritarian uses of papal authority and resisted openly; others trimmed their sails to avoid confrontation. Some were pragmatists, others mystics. Some were saintly, others cantankerous. The Modernists often were openly critical of each other; they formed no uniform group.

Several individual Modernists will be identified in “Introduction II: the Modernists and the anti-Modernists.”

#### THE ANTI-MODERNISTS

Historians have also asked, “Why were the Modernists regarded to be such a threat as to elicit the heavy-handed response found in *Pascendi*?” In order to answer that question, attention has turned to the anti-Modernists. The anti-Modernists measured every theological proposal according to the paired standards of neo-scholastic teachings and of unquestioning submission to papal authority. According to neo-scholasticism, a “perennial philosophy” existed



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that had been expressed most adequately by the thirteenth-century scholastics, among whom Thomas Aquinas was the leading authority. This philosophy assumed that the world was essentially static, not dynamic or developing. Historical changes did not affect the essential nature of persons or institutions, and consequently historical investigations, which detailed those unimportant changes, held little authority. Students normally encountered neo-scholasticism in manuals of theology whose formulations retained none of the vigor of healthy theological thinking, whether of the sort found in the thirteenth century or the late nineteenth. These manuals organized and disseminated conclusions rather than promoting theological inquiry.

Already by the 1850s the neo-Thomists had decided that the modern theologies of the first half of the nineteenth century were all “intrinsically unsatisfactory.” According to Gerald McCool, “The adverb was all important. For, if the systems were *intrinsically* unsatisfactory, they could not be corrected from within, they would have to be replaced.”<sup>23</sup> Their deficiency stemmed from their theory of knowledge. Only by abandoning their epistemological assumptions and adopting those of St. Thomas could a scientific theology be constructed. What is interesting to note, of course, is that *Pascendi* applied to Modernism the same criticism that the neo-Thomists of fifty years earlier had used against their opponents: the Modernists had a defective theory of knowledge. Anti-Modernism was following a well-known script, employing familiar ideas found in the teaching already ascendant in the seminaries.

Neo-scholasticism held that there are two realms of knowledge: the natural and the supernatural. The former can be known by unaided natural reason. Included in it was knowledge of the existence of God. The supernatural is known only when God chooses to reveal it. This realm contains information beyond the grasp of natural reason but, once given by God, it can be largely, although never completely, understood by reason. Access comes through the assent of faith. This faith, however, involves no “blind leap”; its assent can be aided and encouraged by rational arguments, including those drawing evidence from the “supernatural facts” of prophecy and miracle. It was very important, the neo-scholastics argued, to distinguish nature from supernature, the truths of reason

<sup>23</sup> McCool, *Catholic*, p. 138.

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from the truths of revelation, and philosophy from theology, but this did not mean that they could be in conflict, because the God who was the author of nature and what could be known by reason was also the author of revelation and what could be known by faith.

As already indicated, the world-view employed by the neo-scholastics was static. Historical study was unimportant because it did not deal with the essence of the matter; it only traced the incidental changes experienced by humans and other temporal beings. The “nature” that the neo-scholastics claimed could be known by reason was a metaphysical reality not subject to the vicissitudes of temporal change. Moreover, the source of the supernatural was beyond history. It disclosed eternal truths that likewise were not subject to change. These truths could be found in the Bible, which the neo-scholastics interpreted as a handbook of theological axioms, and in tradition. On the inerrancy of biblical and doctrinal statements the whole theological system was built. The authority of the Bible was simply assumed; the neo-scholastics put their energy into building and refining the theological edifice rather than examining its historical foundations. More attention was given to explaining and defending the philosophical and theological system than to the historical study of the Bible. The definitive interpretation of the Bible and tradition was a task that had been bestowed on the church, particularly as embodied in the supremacy and infallibility of the papacy. The church’s magisterium was to protect the faith from unwarranted changes brought about by new cultural pressures. For the anti-Modernists a neo-scholastic formulation of the faith and the faith itself were so identified that they could hardly be separated; to reject the formulation was to reject the faith itself.

In response to his own question why church authorities bothered with the Modernists, Lester Kurtz has observed:

In part, it may have been because the authorities were not cognizant of the consequences of their actions. More importantly, however, the existence of the modernist movement was not only a threat but a source of strength as well. The modernists were a symbolic focus for the hierarchy’s attack on subversive forces, which it held responsible for the church’s many problems.<sup>24</sup>

The Modernists enabled the anti-Modernists to redefine the boundaries of belief. Excluded from those boundaries were not only the

<sup>24</sup> Kurtz, *Politics*, p. 17.