

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-65707-6 - The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins and Outcome: Being the Norrisian Prize Essay in the University of Cambridge for the Year 1933

Alec R. Vidler

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

If the encyclical *Pascendi* (September 8th, 1907)¹ were by itself a reliable introduction to the subject of this essay, we should begin our inquiry into the origins and outcome of the modernist movement with certain clear suppositions. It would lead us to suppose that there had been actively at work in the Roman Catholic Church, for at least some years previous to the date of the encyclical, a 'school' of thinkers and writers, both priests and laymen, whose object was to achieve a complete *bouleversement* of Catholicism in its traditional form. If the doctrines of this school had seemed to lack 'order and systematic arrangement', this was due to a 'clever device'. In reality, the 'modernist system' was a coherent whole; the connexion between its various parts could be clearly distinguished. The system proceeded from a philosophical foundation, viz. 'agnosticism', according to which 'human reason is confined entirely within the field of *phenomena*', to a doctrine of 'vital immanence', according to which the explanation of religion 'must certainly be found in the life of man'. From these premises the theology, the history, the criticism and the apologetics of the modernist school followed in a strict and logical sequence. 'Their historico-critical conclusions are the natural outcome of their philosophical principles.' 'Their system does not consist in scattered and unconnected theories, but, as it were, in a closely connected whole, so that it is not possible to admit one without admitting all.'²

If these suppositions were accepted as a working hypothesis, the method of our inquiry would be plainly indicated. First, we should study the works of the modernists, in order

¹ References are to the Eng. trans. of the encyclical in Paul Sabatier's *Modernism* (1908), pp. 231-346.

² *Op. cit.* pp. 288, 309.

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to test and amplify the account of their system which is contained in the encyclical. Next, we should investigate the process by which the system was developed, and the special contribution to its development of the various members of the school. Thence, we should try to trace back its central ideas and principles to their ultimate origins. As for the outcome of the movement, we should examine the effects of its condemnation within the Roman Church, and seek to discover what influence, since it was condemned there, the modernist system has had elsewhere.

If, however, we did adopt this procedure, we should quickly discover that the encyclical is not a reliable introduction to our subject, and that to accept its account of the character of the movement, even as a working hypothesis, would be extremely misleading. For it would become evident that those, who by common admission were the most prominent modernists, unite in testifying that there was no 'modernist system', that their thought had no strict or logical coherence, and in fact that there was no such thing as a 'modernist school'. Nor is there any reason to suppose that this lack of 'order and systematic arrangement' was due to a 'clever device', or that the modernists 'deliberately and advisedly' advocated doctrines, contrary one to another, so as to give a false impression of their attitude.¹ Not only does a perusal of their writings contradict the supposition that what we have to do with is the system of a school, but in particular it contradicts, what is a leading contention of the encyclical, that the historico-critical methods and conclusions of the modernists were consequent upon, and derived from, preconceived philosophical principles.

It should be observed that we have not to consider whether it is *possible* out of the writings of the modernists to construct a logically coherent system. By a sufficiently ingenious process of selection and abstraction it would be possible to

¹ *Op. cit.* p. 262.

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construct such a system out of much more disparate material. We have to ask (a) whether a system was implicit—obviously none was explicit—in their works, and (b) whether the system of the encyclical has a *prima facie* claim to be regarded as a true representation. Now the modernists themselves, if they agree about nothing else, agree that both these questions, and especially the latter, must be answered in the negative.

The so-called modernists (wrote M. Loisy in 1908) are not a homogeneous and united group, as one would suppose if one consulted the papal encyclical, but a quite limited number of persons, who share the desire to adapt the Catholic religion to the intellectual, moral, and social needs of the present time. . . .

The pope's exposition of the modernist doctrines is practically a fantasy of the theological imagination, whereas he has ignored what is the most important, one might say the only essential, question. . . . Pius X attributes to (the modernists) a system conceived after the manner of the scholastic theories, where not one of them will recognize himself, and he condemns them *en bloc* in the name of his own system. . . . The fact is that they have never formed in the Church a sect nor a party, nor even a school; that they have worked on very diverse fields. . . and that, if they have found themselves in agreement on certain points, and in the first instance on the necessity of a reform of Catholic teaching, it is because they have entered by different routes into the current of contemporary thought, and that, through varied experiences, they have reached the same conclusion. . . . This state of things is misconceived from the beginning to the end of the papal encyclical.¹

What M. Loisy said then, he has reiterated since.² Indeed he had in effect said as much as early as 1903 in the introduction to *Autour d'un petit livre*.³

Not less emphatically did Tyrrell, who of other modernists

¹ *Simple réflexions*, pp. 14f., 149–52; cp. pp. 18 ff., 117, 155, 188, 245, 269f.

² *Mémoires*, I, 477, 535, II, 22, 565–70, III, 71, *et passim*.

³ Pp. xviii f.

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is acknowledged to have been the most prominent, protest that the encyclical travestied the movement. 'With all due respect to the Encyclical *Pascendi*, Modernists wear no uniform nor are they sworn to the defence of any system; still less of that which His Holiness has fabricated for them.'¹ This objection to the papal representation of the movement was raised by nearly all the other leading modernists, e.g. by von Hügel, Miss Petre, Fogazzaro, Buonaiuti, Schnitzer and Le Roy,² and also its justice has been acknowledged by many who have studied the movement with sympathy from without or in retrospect. Thus, for instance, the Anglican A. L. Lilley wrote in 1907:

This supposed Modernist *system* is but a perverse figment of the imagination of the clever and inveterately scholastic theologian to whom Pius X entrusted the drafting of the Encyclical. . . . No one who knows anything of the various movements co-ordinated by this writer . . . under the name of Modernism can fail to detect the unfairness or wilful blindness of that lust of system-mongering which has impelled him to his task.³

Moreover, an orthodox Roman Catholic may now admit the abstract and artificial character of the modernist system as

¹ *Medievalism*, p. 106. Cp. *Christianity at the cross roads*, p. 3, *Hibbert Journal* (January, 1908), pp. 247ff., and a letter from Tyrrell, which is quoted by E. Buonaiuti, *Le modernisme catholique*, p. 145.

² See von Hügel's letters to Loisy in the latter's *Mémoires*, II, 569f., cp. ii, 559; M. D. Petre, *Modernism*, pp. 114f.; T. Gallarati-Scotti, *The life of Antonio Fogazzaro*, pp. 277ff.; Buonaiuti, *Le modernisme catholique*, pp. 47ff.; J. Schnitzer, *Der katholische Modernismus*, p. 4; E. Le Roy, *Dogme et critique*, pp. 108f. Cp. *The programme of modernism*, p. 16.

³ *Modernism*, pp. 258f. Cp. G. C. Rawlinson, *Recent French tendencies* (1917), pp. 37f.; G. la Piana, 'A review of Italian modernism' in *Harvard Theological Review* (October, 1916), pp. 371, 373; Ch. Guignebert, *Modernisme et tradition catholique en France* (1908), p. 154, *Le christianisme médiéval et moderne* (1922), p. 303, and *Revue historique*, CLXIX, 104f.; R. Gout, *L'affaire Tyrrell* (1910), pp. 201f.; F. Heiler, *Der Katholizismus* (1923), p. xxxi; J. F. Bethune-Baker, *The way of modernism* (1927), p. 3; M. Goguel, *Revue d'histoire et de philosophie religieuses*, XII, 90.

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constructed in the encyclical. Perhaps at the time of its promulgation, when to applaud the encyclical was a condition of orthodoxy, and when its infallibility was being freely canvassed,¹ this admission could hardly be made by those who wished to avoid the suspicion of heresy. M. J. Rivière, however, in his *Le modernisme dans l'Église* (1929), bound as he is to defend the papal condemnation of modernism, at the same time allows that it would be a mistake to look in the encyclical for the reproduction of a doctrine which in the form stated had already existed in the Church. It was not the intention of the pope to summarize the conceptions of any particular author, but rather to disengage by abstraction a general idea from a multiplicity of individual cases. Everyone should agree, he says, with the opponents of the encyclical in recognizing the individual originality of the principal modernists. The pope wanted to present only *un modernisme schématique*, which is useful in discovering the significance and extent of its concrete manifestations.²

The modernist system of the encyclical may then be regarded as a convenient fiction, which has been repudiated by those whose conceptions it purports to synthetize. The modernists had not formulated a new system with which they proposed to replace the received system. On the contrary, if we admit their own testimony, their writings represented no more than a number of individual and, for the most part, independent attempts to adapt the received system to the exigencies of modern knowledge and culture. But it may still be asked whether these attempts did in fact have a common philosophical origin in that they proceeded from the acceptance of certain specific abstract principles

¹ Tyrrell showed himself a bad prophet when he wrote in *The Times* (October 1st, 1907): 'Not even the extreme theologians will pretend that an encyclical of this kind has the slightest claim to be considered an ecumenical and so far "infallible" document'. See *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, art. 'Modernism', and J. Rivière, *Le modernisme dans l'Église* (1929), p. 365.

² *Op. cit.* pp. 366 f.

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which, since they constituted a denial of the fundamental postulates of Catholic orthodoxy, vitiated in advance all their conclusions.¹ Here, again, the modernists themselves declare that their proposed reforms of Catholic teaching did not have their point of origin in the adoption of any philosophical presuppositions, but in a determination to face and accept the general development of modern scientific knowledge, and, in particular, the results of biblical and historical criticism.² It was this determination that forced them to realize that much of the commonly accepted system of traditional orthodoxy, as taught in the theological schools, required modification and restatement. And it was from this approach that they proceeded, in so far as they proceeded at all, to broach wider philosophical and theological questions. The statement of the encyclical that 'their historico-critical conclusions were the natural outcome of their philosophical principles' was therefore an inversion of the facts. The extent to which, and the manner in which, they proposed philosophical or theological restatements of the orthodox position depended for the most part on the particular nature of their respective individual intellectual interests. But, even in the case of those whose interests were predominantly philosophical, their attitude to history and criticism was the factor by which their heterodoxy was measured.³

¹ See, for instance, van Loo, *Kantisme et modernisme* (1917), pp. 148 f.: 'Parti du double principe kantien de l'agnosticisme (subjectivisme théorique) et de l'autonomie (subjectivisme méthodique), bâtissant son système doctrinal sur le sable mouvant de la spéculation personnelle, il était nécessaire que le moderniste, pour défendre et protéger ses élucubrations, s'appuyât sur l'*a priori* le plus exclusif. Or tout *a priori* étant d'ordre émotionnel ne peut que troubler profondément l'évolution de la pensée scientifique et la conduire à l'abîme des erreurs les plus absurdes'. Cp. *ibid.* p. 170.

² The orthodox L. de Grandmaison agreed that modernism originated in this way, see *Études* (September 20th, 1923), pp. 647 f.

³ *E.g.* see pp. 187 f. below.

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Alfred Fawkes was repeating what Loisy, Tyrrell and others had asserted from the beginning, when in 1927 he said:

In the encyclical *Pascendi* . . . an attempt . . . is made to transfer the question with which it deals—that of Modernism—from the ground of fact to that of speculation. It represents the issues as philosophical. . . . The question between Modernism and the Church is primarily historical; one of knowing, or not knowing, certain facts. These facts are concerned with various subject matter—with Christian origins, with Scripture, with comparative religion, with the science of the mind. If we have a turn for speculation, our knowledge will no doubt arrange itself under certain categories and dispose us to certain generalizations. But to account for Modernism in this way, or to associate it with any particular generalizations or speculative principles, is to put the cart before the horse. It is the premises which lead to the conclusion, not the conclusion to the premises.¹

Our object is to apprehend the modernist movement as it actually was in its concrete reality; we must refuse to be dominated by any abstract theory about it or to admit the presuppositions of those who have an interest in looking at it from only one angle and in taking only a partial view of it. If we may believe the modernists themselves, their movement was not comparable with, for example, the Tractarian movement in the Church of England; they were not a body of men in close fellowship with one another who set themselves to

¹ *The Modern Churchman*, xvii, 330. Cp. A. Loisy, *Simple réflexions*, pp. 30 f., *Mémoires*, II, 390, III, 215; G. Tyrrell, *Medievalism*, pp. 93, 108 f., 127, *The Church and the future*, p. 15; *The programme of modernism*, pp. 15 ff.; Miss Petre, in the *Hibbert Journal* (October, 1925), writes: 'Catholic Modernism was an effort to combine the latest claims of science and history and democracy with the spiritual teaching of the Church, and to obtain right of citizenship for the scholar, whose sole aim *qua* scholar was scientific and historic truth, in the Church to which he submitted his religious life and conduct' (p. 83). For a recognition of this by an outside observer see H. R. Mackintosh in the *London Quarterly Review* (April, 1915), p. 232: 'The Modernist point of departure is not found, as might be supposed, in the realm of theology proper, but in that of history and Biblical criticism'.

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propagate certain clearly defined principles. They did not form a school like the Ritschlians, where a number of disciples extended and developed the thought of an acknowledged master. Nor were they organized like the present-day Anglican Modern Churchmen; they had no society corresponding to the 'Churchmen's Union', they held no annual conferences, they published no official periodical. They were a number of individual Roman Catholics, who in one way or another came to realize that the received teaching of their Church was out of harmony with contemporary thought, and who decided to do what they could to promote a reform of the Church's teaching.¹ Broadly speaking, they opined that it had remained stationary, or at least static, since the middle ages, and that it failed to take account of the immense advance in human knowledge which had taken place since then. But they were never agreed on any one program of reform, and their proposed restatements of Catholic teaching differed substantially from one another. Whether, if the movement had been tolerated by the ecclesiastical authorities, it would have grown into a 'school', an organization, a party, it is impossible to say, and it is idle to speculate. It was in fact condemned and ruthlessly suppressed before it had even approximated to such a stage of growth. The fugitive attempts to organize groups of modernists, which were made after 1907, all proved abortive.

Its lack of cohesion, its incongruous and almost spasmodic character, make every generalization about Catholic modernism hazardous. The very term 'modernism' in itself invites misapprehension; it implies a classification of what can be classified only with severe qualifications. *Il y a autant de*

¹ 'L'objet essentiel du mouvement...était, tout en restant sur le terrain catholique et sans porter atteinte à l'unité de l'Église, de rompre l'absolutisme de la croyance théologique, de refondre surtout le régime intellectuel de l'Église et son enseignement' (Loisy, *L'Église et la France* (1925), p. 101).

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modernismes que de modernistes is a saying that occurs more than once in French writings on the subject;¹ it is a saying which ought to be constantly borne in mind.

Our method of inquiry into the origins and outcome of the movement will be different from what it would have been if we were able to regard the apparent implications of the encyclical *Pascendi* as justified. The movement cannot be rightly understood unless it is seen as a result of the discord between modern knowledge and traditional Roman Catholic orthodoxy. It consisted of various efforts to remove this discord on the part of convinced Roman Catholics who wanted to combine the culture of their time with the profession of their religion. It has been truly observed² that the distinction between a modernist and an innovator, pure and simple, is that the former wanted to maintain a continuity, at least apparent and verbal, an institutional continuity, between the new and the traditional positions. The clash between modern culture and traditional orthodoxy³ became increasingly evident during the course of the nineteenth century, and several attempts were made to remove it by those who were designated 'liberal Catholics'. The modernist movement was, from this point of view, the last and most thoroughgoing of a series of similar movements,⁴ and a survey of those that preceded it will both disclose the historical situation out of which it arose and also serve as a

¹ See A. Houtin, *Le Père Hyacinthe* (1924), III, 117; Loisy, *Mémoires*, III, 212; S. Leblanc, *Un clerc qui n'a pas trahi* (1931), p. 83.

² By L. de Grandmaison, *Études* (September 20th, 1923), pp. 644 f.

³ Dr H. L. Stewart, in his *Modernism, past and present* (1932), studies this subject in a much wider context than we need to do here. His book is only incidentally concerned with modernism in the sense in which we are using the term; its real subject is the relation between conservative and progressive tendencies throughout the history of Christianity.

⁴ Thus G. Weill, in his *Histoire du catholicisme libéral en France 1828-1908* (1909), treats the modernist movement as the third phase of liberal Catholicism.

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background against which its own distinctive characteristics can be more clearly seen. The modernists were the successors of the nineteenth-century liberal Catholics, but they were more than that.

Part I of this essay is therefore intended to portray those aspects of the history of the Roman Church in the nineteenth century which are specially relevant to the origins of the modernist movement. We must, however, be on our guard against supposing that any apparent anticipations of modernism which we may meet contributed directly to the origins of the movement. In 1913 a Protestant professor published a book¹ in which he affected to demonstrate that modernism was a continuation of the work of the Catholic school of Tübingen of which Möhler was the outstanding figure. As a matter of fact, neither Loisy, nor Tyrrell, nor even the Germanic von Hügel, was influenced by Möhler and his school, however similar may be some of the ideas they put forward. In his review of the book, to which reference has just been made, M. Loisy wrote:

The modernism which we knew was not the following up of another movement; it did not continue a school; it was born chiefly of a situation; and if the solutions which it proposed resemble more or less those of Möhler and the other members of the Tübingen school, that is because the present situation of Catholicism resembles still in many respects that of 1815–40.²

Part I purports to convey an accurate impression of what this situation was.

Parts II and III are devoted to a comprehensive study of the careers of the two chief modernists, Loisy and Tyrrell, whose personal history, intellectual interests, and religious temperament were anything but identical. Part IV contains a slighter

¹ E. Vermeil, *Jean-Adam Möhler et l'école catholique de Tubingue (1815–1840), étude sur la théologie romantique en Wurtemberg et les origines germaniques du modernisme*.

² See *Mémoires*, III, 268 f.