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978-1-107-65707-6 - The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins and
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for the Year 1933

Alec R. Vidler

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IN THE ROMAN CHURCH
ITS ORIGINS & OUTCOME

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BEING THE NORRISIAN PRIZE ESSAY
IN THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
FOR THE YEAR 1933

by

ALEC R. VIDLER, M.A.

*Priest of the Oratory of the Good Shepherd
Formerly Exhibitioner of Selwyn College*

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To

W. L. K.

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PREFACE

The words 'modernism' and 'modernist' are used throughout this essay with exclusive reference to the movement which is its subject, *i.e.* to the movement in the Roman Catholic Church which began about 1890, was condemned in the encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907, and lasted till about 1910. This usage is determined by considerations of convenience, and it is not intended to deny the propriety of giving to these words that much wider application which is now current especially in England and America. They were indeed originally applied¹ to the movement with which we are here concerned, and it is permissible to regret their application to other movements and to other groups of persons, which, however similar in some respects, have in view a different, and even a directly opposite, aim. Such regrets have been expressed by more than one English writer.² They are however idle. The wider and more comprehensive usage is now securely established among us; both its existence and its legitimacy were in fact acknowledged by Tyrrell as early as 1909.³ Nevertheless, since I need here some single term to denote the particular movement and group of persons which form the subject of my essay, I restrict myself to the original, narrower usage, which still retains its ascendancy in France.

¹ This statement requires qualification if the occasional use of the words by earlier writers is taken into account; see Appendix I, p. 270 below.

² *E.g.* by A. Fawkes in a letter to *The Times*, February 19th, 1914 (quoted by M. D. Petre, *Modernism*, p. 101), by W. R. Matthews, *Studies in Christian philosophy*, p. 16, and by J. N. Figgis, *The fellowship of the mystery*, p. 265. Cp. C. W. Emmet, *Journal of Religion* (November, 1922), p. 562; S. C. Carpenter, *Church and people 1789-1889* (1933), pp. 143, 578; J. S. Bezzant, *Theology* (August, 1933), p. 100; *The Times Literary Supplement* (October 12th, 1933), p. 680.

³ *Christianity at the cross roads*, p. 3; cp. *Medievalism*, pp. 143 ff.

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Perhaps a yet further restriction ought also to be mentioned. Modernism in the Roman Catholic Church was not a single, unified movement, but a complex of movements. They fall into two main divisions, for doctrinal modernism was largely separate, and is in any case easily separable, from sociological modernism.¹ The 'Christian democrat' movements in France and Italy, whose course was more or less contemporaneous with that of doctrinal modernism, were not condemned by the pope in the encyclical *Pascendi*, but on other occasions. This in itself explains their exclusion from the scope of this essay; if they enter into it at all, they do so only indirectly.

Its prescribed subject was 'The origins and outcome of the modernist movement condemned by the encyclical *Pascendi gregis*'. The greater part of my essay consists of an investigation of the course of the movement itself, rather than specifically of its origins and outcome. The reasons for this method of treating the subject are readily explained. It is impossible to take for granted any definition or description of what the movement was, or of what were its principles or doctrines. The whole subject is one about which widely different opinions are held. It would be futile to try to trace the ancestry of, and the influences which moulded, a character in history, or the outcome of his activity, unless his identity and the distinguishing features of his life were evident. *A fortiori* this applies to a movement in which many different persons were engaged, and of which the characteristics were anything but simple and coherent. It is therefore necessary to investigate and to understand the character of the movement itself in order to appreciate in what sense, and to what extent, it had, or could be expected to have, any specific origins and outcome. Moreover, to follow the course of the movement, and in particular the careers of the two most prominent figures who took part in it, is to go a

¹ Cp. E. Buonaiuti, *Le modernisme catholique*, pp. 98f.

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long way towards discovering the nature of its origins and outcome.

I do not know of any book that covers the same ground or that is constructed on the same plan as the present essay. In the bibliography (see pp. 274–9 below) I have marked with an asterisk those books to which I am consciously most indebted. In the text or in the notes I have tried to acknowledge as fully as possible the sources from which I have derived particular pieces of information, and also to make clear where I have depended at all closely on the work of others.

While in connexion with each part of the essay I have carried my investigations and verifications as far as time and opportunity permitted, the subject is so vast and so varied that I cannot claim to have produced more than a general introduction to it. There does not exist such an introduction in English. The books of Archdeacon Lilley and Miss Petre, both of which bear the title *Modernism*, valuable as they are, are more restricted in their scope. The two best studies of the movement as a whole, those in French by Houtin and Rivière, are written on plans which have not suited my purpose, within limits which I have had to exceed, and from points of view neither of which is my own.

A. R. V.

The Oratory House

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