

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance

M. D. Petre

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## PART I



## CHAPTER I

*INTRODUCTION*

THIS WORK is, in the first place, a war work, by which I do not mean that it represents any form of direct war service, but that it is being written under war pressure, and can be termed a war work as children born during this period are called war children.

Secondly, it is a work of friendship, for with its subject I enjoyed years of intellectual and sympathetic intercourse, which only ended with his death in 1940.

Thirdly, it is the work of a Catholic, a member of the Church from which Alfred Loisy was excluded, but of one who believes that, in spite of the vicissitudes of his religious life, he had a message of religious significance to deliver to mankind from which Christianity, and even Catholicism, can draw profit.

Lastly, it is the work of an English writer on a distinguished Frenchman, and for this reason it has, surely, a claim on English sympathy; we have a call to do for them what they cannot do for themselves.

But the subject of these pages died before the worst had happened; he was fortunate enough not to witness the subjugation and humiliation of his country. His name was such that, in other times, his death would have been a world event, in so far as the world of religious history and science is concerned; and it is because I feel that the day will come when, once more, such a personality will rouse interest and curiosity that I, one of his few contemporaries, desire to make some record for the future of what he was and what he did.

But while giving some appreciation of his life in general, I desire, above all, to study him from the religious point of view. For it was religion that occupied him from first to last. Why did he devote all his time and learning to religious documents unless this were so? After his breach with the Church he might have turned to other subjects of research; but the Gospels held him—the Scriptures, ancient and new—and while there was, to my mind, a period of severely scientific, and almost hostile, temper to the Church and even to Christian faith, there was ever an inextinguishable attraction to all that concerned the history and process and actual condition of Christianity.

I will not deny that he gave, to many of us, moments of anguish; I will not pretend to believe that he never manifested prejudice and even one-sidedness in his advocacy of certain positions; but I maintain, notwithstanding, that he was, even in spite of himself, irresistibly bound to the cause of religion, in some form or other.

And this is why I am anxious, in this study, to discover what, in the course of his long and tireless life, he did for or against the cause of religion, for or against the cause of the Christian religion in particular, for or against the Catholic Church, to which he first belonged and which later he repudiated. I am quite aware that the ordinary Catholic, who knows anything about his history, will exclaim that he did nothing for, and much against, the Church. He was condemned and he never submitted, and, for most, that is enough. That is enough in one sense. We cannot belong to the Catholic Church and not respect her decisions. But the Church has had a long history already, and has perhaps (surely so, in the belief of Catholics, if the world goes on) a long history yet to come; and even though she never repudiates her solemn actions, and will never say that Loisy was right and she was wrong, it may be that there are points in his teaching that will eventually prove to have an apologetic value even for her.

But, above all, his figure in future Church history is of the greatest importance, as no one more clearly than he has presented the problem of a spiritual body with an historic founda-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance

M. D. Petre

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

tion. Very few of those who criticized and condemned him fully realized the magnitude of this problem, and its unavoidable influence on faith. Those for whom faith was a negligible factor in the life of mankind had no reason to concern themselves with what it might gain or suffer from its contact with history. Those for whom history could be suppressed or set aside in the interests of faith had no reason to trouble about what historians might think or say; if their discoveries ran contrary to the dictates of faith, those discoveries were false and their advocates should be silenced.

But the problem remained; and whereas a man like Loisy might easily, and perhaps did for a time, adhere to the former class, he could never finally belong to it. For the Christian faith remained a fact, and a fact of world significance, and its historical character was, in a sense, unique in the general history of religions.

I well remember a remark he made at a meeting at Pontigny, when, speaking of religious origins in general, and of the fact that the majority claimed their origin from some mythical personality, he pointed out that the Christian religion was unique in its possession of a true historical personage as its founder. And we shall see later how little patience he had with all attempts at leaving Christianity standing without the historic Christ.

In studying the successive phases of his life and thought we shall see how his conception of Christianity, as a vital factor of human life, persisted through every stage of his evolution; and how that conception seemed to grow stronger as his mind was progressively freed from the actual bitterness that resulted from the period of ecclesiastical conflict.

To anyone undertaking such a study as lies in front of me, a particular method of treatment will suggest itself. I am not attempting a biography of Loisy; his own autobiography is ample in facts and matter.<sup>1</sup> What I shall try to do is to present the leading characteristics of his work and teaching from the religious point of view. And if some should object that this is to take a one-sided view of my subject; that Loisy is interesting

<sup>1</sup> *Mémoires*, etc.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance

M. D. Petre

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## 4

## INTRODUCTION

for the scientific and not the religious quality of his work, I still hold my own, and maintain that the main interest of his life was a religious one; and that his purely exegetical work falls into the category of other exegetical work, to which it is additional, of which it may be corrective, in which it may be permanent or merely evolutionary in character. For he was ever himself conscious that exegesis was a science, like all sciences, ever in movement, never at rest. But the bearing of science on religion was, at bottom, what really mattered in his eyes; and this is why I believe that he may eventually figure as one that upheld religious values in a time of crisis, and worked for the religious evolution of mankind.

It is my opinion, and I only put it forth as such, that he passed through phases in which personal suffering obscured the clearness of his vision. I think also that he was, from time to time, dominated by the attraction of certain theories of human philosophy. But through all ran an unbroken thread of religious faith and belief, and the Loisy who died in 1940 was nearer to the Loisy of early priesthood than to the storm-tossed Loisy of the Modernist period.

I remember a remark he made to me in response to a letter he had received from von Hügel regarding one of his more directly religious *opuscula*. The Baron had not shown himself sympathetic to these works, and seems to have suggested to him that his proper field of work was that of criticism.

‘I could do that form of work by the hour’, he said to me; ‘these other works are my own’.

And so this study will be concerned with the religious aspect of his teaching only; this is its sole interest. I am in no way competent to appraise the value of his strictly scientific work, which will find its place in the process of historical studies in general; but from the moment of his death I felt, as never before, that there was a true religious value to be extracted from his shorter works, which were, as he said, *his own*—coming, as they did, from heart as well as head. This has been my sole aim, and the first part of my book is simply a preparation for the second part.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance

M. D. Petre

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## CHAPTER II

*FAITH & ORTHODOXY*

ALFRED LOISY was born February 28th, 1857, at Ambrières (Marne), of a family of what he termed 'agricultural workers'; I think the French term 'cultivateurs' would describe the position, and I fancy they would correspond to our English yeomen. His parents cultivated their own land, as their forbears had done, from father to son, for generations. His natural destiny would have been to follow the family career, and it was only the accident of weak health that altered the course of his life and turned him eventually to the priesthood.

I cannot but think that the generations of assiduous labour, though of a very different order, which preceded him, were responsible for something in the habits of indefatigable work in which his life was passed. And, like the peasant, he was a daytime worker; early riser and early to rest. Another inherited characteristic was his love of the land; of his garden and his livestock, to which he devoted his spare hours during the years when he lived in the country. And yet another family characteristic was his love of home. 'The life of a boarder', he says of his first school, 'was particularly disagreeable to me.' He drifted homewards on every possible occasion for legitimate rest, and it is a curious fact that the criticism of his fellow-clergy, directed against this love of home, exercised an influence on his future when it became the indirect cause of his first relations with Duchesne, and his more exclusive dedication to the life of study.

He recounts the incident in the first volume of his *Mémoires*. He had been appointed to the parish of Landricourt, which was in reach of Ambrières, where his family lived. It was a little village of about 125 inhabitants—with its unfailing (in that land) touch of anti-clericalism; but where the *curé* was respected and the church fairly well attended.

The presbytery... was only two and a half kilometres from my home. There was nothing easier than to make frequent visits to my parents, without any failure of duty, nor any unfavourable criticism... I lived there very quietly, preparing my sermons and catechisms, and fulfilling the ritual which my predecessor had elaborated. All this left me plenty of free time for my modest studies, and I should have been quite content if a neighbouring *curé* had not complained to the bishop that my family was a prejudice to my ministry.

There followed an insinuation in an address by Mgr Meignan, his bishop, in which he hinted that

there used not to be difficulties in the parish of Landricourt. All the *curés* looked at me and I at them, and I began to think that it might be wiser to provide for my own future, unless I was to be passed from parish to parish until the end of my days.

He confided his troubles to a friend who was living with Duchesne; the latter had well estimated the intellectual qualities of the young priest, and was eager to draw him into the work for which he believed him to be exceptionally fitted. And so the wanton criticism of a confrère was partly the occasion of his exclusive dedication to the work of his life. Without that incident he might have combined the life of parish priest with that of a student and writer, and his life would have followed other lines.

But this happened in 1880, when he was already a priest, and we have now to follow him in the first steps of his profession, and the corresponding impressions.

The notion of the priesthood came to him suddenly on one occasion when he was hearing Mass at Ambrières, but his decision was made in October 1873, during the course of a retreat.

‘Having no taste for any secular profession I determined to give myself to God’; which resolution he carried out in spite of the objections of his family. He entered the seminary of Châlons-sur-Marne, with ardour and piety, but, like many another, he found that perfection was not to be found even in an ecclesiastical seminary; that there were sharp lines of divi-

sion between opposed schools of thought; and that, above all, the demands of orthodoxy were not always consistent with what he esteemed the demands of truth.

As regards the conflicting views that he found in the seminary, he says:

I had to learn that there existed different tendencies in French Catholicism. Only four years had passed since the famous Council, and there were still witnesses of the clearance which Mgr Meignan had effected in 1871, by the substitution of a body of more moderate men for the ferocious band of Ultramontanes. He had, however, only half succeeded.<sup>1</sup>

These two schools would not have been without their influence on the more vital question of the relations of faith to orthodoxy.

*Pour vous toujours la vérité, jamais l'orthodoxie*, was the advice of Abbé Huvelin to Friedrich von Hügel. But the latter was a layman, whereas the young ecclesiastical student was brought into more direct and material contact with the demands of the orthodox school.

And now I transcribe his own words, which were, of course, written long after the seminary crisis, and which express his later and mature opinion on the subject, not the opinions and feelings of the young seminarist, to whom the question was one of conscience, with the possibility of sin.

This question of orthodoxy, its rights or wrongs, is acquiring fresh interest and importance in the present day. A recent writer in the *Hibbert Journal* speaks deprecatingly of the 'aim, of younger men especially, to galvanize into an appearance of life' the 'dogmatism of the past'. We have the Barthian movement, with its roots in the philosophy of Kierkegaard—we have such an inspiring writer as D. R. Davies in his *On to Orthodoxy*. All this gives fresh significance to a study of the experience of Loisy in his seminary days. For it was dogmatism, as enshrined in orthodoxy, that came athwart his early and enthusiastic faith; it was indeed for him definitely a contest between his sense of truth and the claims of religious belief.

<sup>1</sup> *Mém.* I, 37.

Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance  
 M. D. Petre  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

There was then an intellectual movement, on the part of Christian believers, against the dogmatic spirit; there is now an intellectual movement, on the part of a school of Christian believers, in its favour. Is it a case of downright contrariety between the two schools; or can the later one have, in part, sprung from the former? It seems to me that the question is rational and legitimate.

Orthodoxy (writes Loisy in his *Mémoires*, when treating of his seminary days) is, in a sense, the mother of heresy, and we may add that the converse is also true. For orthodoxy is a myth. There is no such thing as an unchanging doctrine. A contradicted doctrine is dissipated...or transformed. The orthodoxy of to-morrow will not be that of yesterday but a cross between that orthodoxy and the heresy of to-day...From the moment that a religion claims to teach an unvarying doctrine it goes against the law of nature and humanity...for it is impossible for human thought to be immobilized in ideas that are subject to the action of experience and reflection.<sup>1</sup>

But these are later reflections. Loisy arrived at the seminary inspired by the traditional faith of his early upbringing. To quote his own words:

During the first months of my life in the seminary I was impressed above all by the exercises of piety, the well chanted liturgy, the ceremonies of the Cathedral. I delighted in the morning meditation, to which I devoted myself with simple fervour; no least cloud of doubt yet troubled my relations with the Divine world. The chants of the Church sometimes plunged me into a kind of tender ecstasy. I remember particularly the sentiment of divine melancholy with which the hymn of *Placare, Christe, servulis*, of the vespers of All Saints, filled me. But the more intense became my spiritual and mystical ideal the more it seemed to me that the life of the secular clergy did not wholly respond to it, and that to serve God perfectly it would be necessary to enter a religious order.<sup>2</sup>

It was only the advice of his confessor that held him back from the fulfilment of this latter design; and we may note again the curious fact that, in this instance as in the later one already

<sup>1</sup> *Mém.* I, 35.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem*, I, 40-41.



Cambridge University Press  
 978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance  
 M. D. Petre  
 Excerpt  
[More information](#)

## FAITH AND ORTHODOXY

9

quoted, it was from members of the clergy that came the check to the fulfilment of a life that might have run on very different lines from those which it eventually followed.

Those early criticisms are not uncommon in youth which is over-earnest; and, as he tells us, Loisy came later to a juster estimate of his fellow-students.

But, after this moral shock, there came a disturbance of his happy religious optimism arising, not from dogmatic intransigence, but from the divisions of opinion between his teachers in regard to the burning question of papal infallibility as recently defined.

For now another veil, that of the Temple itself, was rent, and I saw that there were differences even between the Princes of the Church. A solemn dogma had just been defined, though the majority of French bishops was opposed to its promulgation; was it thus that truth was to be established in the Roman Church? And that was not all. The most sympathetic personalities of contemporary Catholicism, an Ozanam, Catholic apologist and founder of the Conferences of St Vincent of Paul; a Lacordaire, eloquent ascetic, whose pulpit . . . had been an intellectual centre; a Montalembert, champion of religion and its rights, were all denounced as suspects by people who claimed the authority of the Pope and were not disowned by him. Even my master, confessor and friend, the Abbé Ludot . . . was classed with these suspects. . . .

My inexperience and complete ignorance of the world and of history prevented me from understanding the true meaning of these disputes, which, nevertheless, disconcerted me.<sup>1</sup>

I do not know whether the present generation is capable of suffering as did that of Loisy—and my own—from the discovery of imperfection in what they had deemed perfect. The critical spirit awakes earlier in our day; or is it that there is less tendency to idealization? Anyhow we may take it that the perception of these differences, between men whom he had conceived as wholly united in truth and charity, was no light trial to the young and ardent seminarist. It was the first step to a conception of the graver problem that was next to face

<sup>1</sup> *Mém.* I, 44.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-69318-0- Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance

M. D. Petre

Excerpt

[More information](#)

him, that of the apparent opposition of the orthodox and strictly dogmatic expression of religious truth to its mystical and spiritual meaning—and, later on, to the liberty of scientific thought.

And let it be noted that the struggle which we are to witness in the mind of our subject is only conceivable because he was earnestly religious. Amongst what we may describe as orthodox believers more than one type may be distinguished. To name two or three of these types, there is the reasoning and rationally convinced orthodox believer; there is the unreasoning, simple earnest believer, who has no doubts because he is wholly certain that what the Church says is true; there is the indifferent orthodox believer, who never troubles his head on the subject and takes the whole teaching of the Church in his stride, because his stride is in quite other directions. I have met with minds of this third category who are contemptuous of any criticism in religious questions, simply because they regard the official element of the Church as analogous to a business company, entitled to settle its own affairs without interference; quite overlooking the fact that every member of the Church has a life and death interest in her teaching and truth; whereas a business concern has a restricted commercial interest for those who take part in it. The employés of a financial company can live without it, can turn their attention elsewhere, the children of the Church do not think they can live without her; hence, in the case of thinking Catholics, the trouble of mind when orthodox pronouncements seem either to lessen the spiritual presentation of religious truth or to run counter to human knowledge. It is not so much what orthodox statements *contain* that troubles the mind of the religious questioner, as what they *exclude* or repress; when they repress the spontaneous spiritual movement of the soul, or when they exclude, or seem to exclude, plain scientific truths. If we turn to Loisy's history of his seminary days we shall see how these two points emerge from his personal experience.

From the time that he commenced his theological studies he tells us that his troubles began: