

Who Were the Modernists?

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by Meriol Trevor

People are beginning to realize that some of the ideas put forward since the Council have roots which go back to the Modernist movement at the turn of the century. Since Modernism was condemned by Pius X's encyclical *Pascendi Gregis* in 1907, with unexampled severity, this raises some interesting questions. The history of Modernism is in for reappraisal and already the field is bristling with budding experts, mostly French and American. I am no expert and the views I express here are open to revision.

Modernism once seemed to me an interruption, almost an irrelevance, in the development of ideas in the Church. The link between the liberal Catholics of the nineteenth century and the general attitude which emerged at the recent Council is clear enough. The Council has reversed the views implicit in the famous Syllabus of Errors (1864); it has decided that 'Christendom' has gone for ever, that the Church must stop trying to govern the world and learn how to serve it. 'A free Church in a free State' has been enlarged into 'a free Church in a free World'—an updated version, surely, of views first promoted by the unfortunate Lamennais and pursued with more caution by Montalembert and Lacordaire in France, the editors of the *Rambler* (Acton, Simpson, Newman) in England, and others elsewhere.

This element in the Second Vatican Council is the one most apparent to the world, which welcomes it, and perhaps it may be called Pope John's line, for his view was pastoral: how to make the Gospel available to the modern world was his deepest concern and a favourite word was *convivenza*, which he preferred to 'co-existence'. The old man himself was (and is) the best example of the spirit he wished to prevail in the Council and in the Church: man to man, open and natural, with absolute trust in Christ but fearless of necessary change in the Church. His old-fashioned devotional language in *Journal of a Soul* has somewhat obscured, since his death, his real determination towards reform. Perhaps it will surprise some that the reason why he was put on the shelf in Bulgaria for so many years was that he was 'suspected of Modernism'. In 1925 he was removed from his new post teaching patristics at the Lateran Academy, after only one term.

It is true that when Roncalli was Pope and discovered these fatal words against his name in the files of the Holy Office, he took a pen and wrote with a flourish: 'I was never a Modernist: John XXIII,

Pope.' But the reason why he was suspected of Modernism was because of his real and deep involvement in the Catholic social democratic movement in Italy before and after the First World War. Present disillusion with the Christian Democratic *party* should not blind us to the importance of the *movement* out of which it came. Its first incarnation, as *L'Opera dei Congressi*, was strong in Bergamo and Roncalli's first years as a priest were spent as secretary to his bishop, Radini-Tedeschi, who was one of its leaders. This national movement was disbanded by Pius X and Cardinal Merry del Val in 1904 and turned into local committees of Catholic Action under episcopal control. Its adherents were branded as *social modernists*. Radini Tedeschi submitted and tried to save what he could, in Bergamo. But after the war, when Benedict XV encouraged the formation of the independent *Partito Popolare* Roncalli joined it. In 1925, when Pius XI showed preference for Mussolini over the Popolari, Roncalli was therefore suspected of social Modernism.

It was through this unexpected connexion between the Catholic social movement and the Paris-based circle of scholars known as Modernists, which first interested me in Modernism; till then it had appeared as a mere aberration. This may have been due partly to my dislike of the Edwardian period, whose plutocratic, ugly, hollow and narrowly nationalistic society was to rush headlong into the ghastly slaughter of the most pointless of all European wars in 1914; partly to the fact that as an ex-sceptic I took the over-simple view that Modernists were just people who had not the nerve to declare themselves disbelievers. There is an important distinction between trying to make Christianity *available* to modern men, and trying to make it *acceptable*. The Gospel will never be acceptable; but it must be made available. The Modernists I scorned were of the How-much-will-Jones-swallow variety, people who stopped believing in the resurrection because it seemed rather improbable or in God because there was no place above the sky for him to live in, and yet strangely continued to think of themselves as Christians. The Catholics called Modernists were suspected of such reductionism and a few, of whom Alfred Loisy was the most famous, did lose faith; but what those who remained in the Church (von Hügel, Blondel, etc.) were trying to do was to use the methods of modern scholarship to discriminate between essential and secondary matter in the tradition of the Church. And this is just what some of our post-conciliar Catholic scholars and theologians are attempting. Hence the need to find out what the so-called Modernists really thought, what it was that was justifiably condemned by the papal theologians in 1907, and what we can learn from the mistakes made then—if only so as not to make them all over again. Mistakes, I may add, made not only by 'Modernists'.

The movement—though it was hardly organized enough to merit the name—began in the first and best ten years of Leo XIII's reign,

the eighteen-eighties, when there was a mild revival of liberalism in the Church and a certain encouragement for historical and biblical studies. The *Institut Catholique* in Paris, under the enthusiastic Mgr d'Hulst, had collected a good team. Louis Duchesne's historical lectures and later Alfred Loisy's on Scripture, used modern methods in ancient studies to striking effect. Even then, however, they shocked the influential mind of M. Icard, Rector of St Sulpice, who forbade his students (a large part of the audience) to attend Duchesne's lectures in 1882 and laid Loisy's under a similar ban ten years later. In 1893 Mgr d'Hulst, without consulting Loisy, published an indiscreet article on *La Question Biblique* and in the ensuing uproar decided that Loisy must be sacrificed to save the *Institut*. He was demoted to the chair of Hebrew and started on the lonely journey of those who spend their lives trying to prove that everyone else is wrong.

Loisy, who was born in 1857 (the same generation as Sigmund Freud) lived until 1940, dying just before the fall of France. The three heavy volumes of his *Mémoires*, published in 1930, are essential reading, not least because he included passages from earlier journals and letters written to him by von Hügel and others. Loisy's final scepticism was not typical of the 'Modernists', so that one hesitates to make him the centrepiece of any assessment of the movement, yet it is almost impossible not to mention him first since the storm did in fact begin with him. It was *L'Évangile et L'Église*, written to defend Catholicism against the German Protestant scholar Adolf Harnack, and published in November 1902, which raised the whirlwind in France and eventually led to Loisy's excommunication (by name, an unusual severity) in February 1908. Loisy had not expected the storm over his book, nor had his episcopal adviser, Mgr Mignot, nor Baron von Hügel. But by 1908, Loisy was fifty-one, had lost hope and faith, and was relieved to exchange his soutane for a frockcoat and accept a post at the Collège de France, where he lectured for years in the utmost respectability. The son of peasant farmers in Marne, he retained till the end the persistence, prudence, industry, independence and lack of imagination of his race; and he was proud of his hens. In fact, the only surprising thing about him was the enthusiasm he originally put into the interpretation of Scripture.

To simplify is always partly to falsify, yet by the time these issues reach a popular level (which is now, because of extended education and television) they are inevitably simplified. Perhaps then I may be allowed to venture a sketch of the situation as it appears to the non-theological, non-scholarly person.

The crisis faced by (some) Christians at the turn of the century was the second wave of biblical criticism. The first wave, which in England broke with the publication of *Essays and Reviews* in 1861, was primarily concerned with the evaluation of the Old Testament.

It was linked not only with Darwin's theory of natural selection and the realization of the antiquity of earth and the probable animal origin of man, but with the first great archaeological discoveries in the Middle East—Nineveh and Babylon—and the consequent revolution in attitude towards the Bible, which enshrined till then all that was known of ancient Israel.

I think people nowadays do not sufficiently realize that for all Europeans until then, Abraham and the Patriarchs were *their own* ancestors. Biblical truth was timeless; Israel was *Man*. This view is still enshrined in the liturgy and in the windows of mediaeval cathedrals; in some ways we have become poorer by losing it, as we have by the loss of the unself-conscious poetry and art of the child and the primitive. But still, as St Paul says, we have to grow up. The aim should be not to grow out of things so much as to grow into them, to learn to understand better the *same* things.

In the mid-nineteenth century, out of touch with the liturgy, few Catholics were upset by the new look at the Old Testament, by the apparent diminishment of Israel into a small tribe among other tribes, the great flood into an inundation of the Euphrates, and the dissolution of the prophet Isaiah (like Homer) into several different people. It was a much greater shock to devout Anglicans and English Protestants who listened Sunday by Sunday to the great saga and felt that somehow King David was a forerunner of Queen Victoria, even if not quite so respectable. However, when the second wave broke on the New Testament, even Catholics began to feel the shaking of the foundations. The fact that the wave came out of Germany, heart of the Reformation, helped to make it look all the darker to them.

To the ordinary believer of any allegiance it looked as if the scholars were dividing Christ from Christianity. There were two principal versions of this, each with its own pre-history. Protestant critics drew a line between the Christ of the Gospels and the Church of history; sceptics drew it between Jesus, the man who died, and the god his followers made of him. (Of course, there were variations.) An effort was being made to get at what Jesus was really like, to quarry him out of the documents by modern critical methods. However misguided the attempt, it was inevitable that it should be made. The new methods had the same effect at first on the New Testament as on the Old—it was apparently reduced from its timeless status to the heterogeneity of history; what had seemed absolute suddenly dissolved into relativities and the God-Man became a problematical and elusive figure of the first century of our era.

If, simplifying again, we take Harnack as representing those who saw Jesus as a great religious teacher and the subsequent Church as (largely) a corruption of his teaching, we can see the importance of Loisy's retort in *L'Évangile et L'Église*. In effect he said that we cannot use Jesus to judge the Church because we only know Jesus through the

Church: through the documents written by and preserved in the earliest Church. Loisy, though he had this insight into the way in which we learn about Jesus, did not remain immune to 'the quest for the historical Jesus'. He became convinced that Jesus had expected an immediate end to this world, an opinion which Tyrrell adopted and which strongly influenced him. In following this line Loisy eventually came to doubt everything about Jesus except his existence—that he was born and died. (He defended his existence against the Christ-myth school to the end of his own life.) His later works on the origins of Christianity are a hotch-potch of guesses, a deterioration from his own earlier methods.

In using the reductionist method Loisy was un-typical of the Modernists, and perhaps we may now leave him and go over to someone nearer home: George Tyrrell, born in 1861, who was dismissed from the Society of Jesus in February 1906, forbidden the sacraments in 1907 after attacking the encyclical in *The Times*, and died in 1909 of Bright's disease, his funeral rites causing a controversy which echoed in the columns of that august newspaper for many weeks.

Dr Alec Vidler's recent edition of *Christianity at the Cross-Roads* has made the best of Tyrrell's books, posthumously published, readily available. It contains the essence of his ideas and is written with compelling conviction and clarity; in many ways it is prophetic and the ways in which it isn't are just as interesting. Catholics may find less to query in *Mediaevalism*, Tyrrell's exasperated retort at being called a leader of Modernism in a Lenten pastoral of 1908, written by Desiré Mercier, Archbishop of Malines, afterwards Cardinal. Mercier was really an unsuitable antagonist, for not only had he tried to help Tyrrell by offering him faculties in his diocese, but in the field of social justice and in pioneering ecumenism he was to show himself perhaps the greatest prelate of his time. In fact, Tyrrell was not attacking Mercier so much as the bureaucratic clericalism of the Church, over-centralized, short-sightedly authoritarian and blind to the problems of faith which the Modernists were trying, however unsuccessfully, to answer. Tyrrell exaggerated, but he hit all too many nails on the head.

Tyrrell brought most of his troubles on himself. He was not a scholar, like most of the other so-called Modernists, but a prophet and preacher with a strong Irish delight in the battle of minds. In 1879 at the age of eighteen, after a youth spent swinging between scepticism and Anglo-Catholicism (in Dublin!) he plunged at the same time into the Church and into the Society of Jesus. (He spent the year before his novitiate teaching in Jesuit houses in Cyprus and Malta.) He says himself that he took up the Church as a cause and the Jesuits because he thought them the order most committed to that cause. In the eighties the neo-Thomist movement was beginning, in reaction against the later Tridentine scholasticism, and Tyrrell

adopted this cause too, with so much enthusiasm that his superiors became alarmed. ('I was making the young men Dominicans!' he said.) They sent him to Farm Street in 1896, where he became the favourite confessor for clever Catholics with doubts, wrote on current topics for the *Month*, and collected some pieces into a book, *Nova et Vetera*, which brought him within the orbit of Baron Friedrich von Hügel.

Von Hügel was forty-four and Tyrrell thirty-five when they met, and it was von Hügel who introduced Tyrrell to German religious philosophy and to Loisy's biblical criticism. In an extraordinarily short time Tyrrell had thrown over neo-Thomism, adopted a ferociously anti-scholastic attitude and begun to chafe at the restrictions of the Society. His fellow-Jesuits in England were sympathetic; it was only with those in Rome that he came into collision. It was Tyrrell's tragedy that he identified the Church and the Society too closely. While he believed that the Church was more than its clerical organization he often acted as if he did not distinguish the two; he criticized the *Church* when he really meant the clerical ruling caste. The Church was always too much of a cause, too little of a fact for him.

This was where von Hügel differed most profoundly from Tyrrell, and why he was able to stay in the Church in spite of the failure of the movement which he did so much to further, in spite of the heresy hunt launched by *Pascendi* against all who were not fanatically scholastic in their orthodoxy. To von Hügel, with his Austrian diplomat father and Scottish mother, brought up in Florence, Belgium and Torquay (!) the Church was his true *patria*, the very medium of his human existence as well as the home of his spirit. Very early in life he married Lady Mary Herbert, daughter of Florence Nightingale's friend and colleague, Sidney Herbert, and so affiliated with that great Anglican and aristocratic English family, though she herself had followed her mother into the Catholic Church. Through her, von Hügel entered an intellectual, aristocratic ultramontane circle in London—W. G. Ward, Cardinal Manning and his successor, Cardinal Vaughan, were visitors to his Hamsstead home. (This, I think, is why he did not see the best in Newman when he, young and earnest, met the old man in Birmingham. Newman got on much better with Friedrich's Cambridge brother, Anatole, who had married one of Hurrell Froude's nieces, very dear to him.)

Nervously delicate, deaf but indefatigably fond of conversation and teaching, Friedrich von Hügel built up a fund of deep learning, based on the classics but extended into various specialized areas, and all directed by a never-failing desire to serve God and make known his wisdom. There is something endearing (maddening, too) about his Germanic style, enlivened by sudden colloquialisms. It expresses von Hügel's fundamental insight: that reality is *complicated*, that one must bear with tensions that show no signs of easy resolution

and resist the impulse to reduce living complexity to a false simplicity, while never giving up the effort to realize true unity.

Von Hügel taught himself Hebrew in the eighties, intending to devote himself to biblical criticism, to make the positive results of German Protestant scholarship available to Catholics. Because he realized at once the value of Loisy's approach to the problem of Gospel and Church it took him many years to admit (what Loisy himself kept trying to make him understand) that his admired friend had lost faith in all but the moral development of humanity in this world. One of Loisy's less attractive traits was to belittle and sneer at those of his friends who stayed in the Church. In his *Mémoires* he pokes fun at von Hügel for his mania about Transcendence, and puts his interest in mysticism down to his nervous temperament. But von Hügel had reason to fight for the transcendent God against current theories which reduced the divine to pure immanence. His study of mysticism, too, was part of his conscious entrenchment in what he believed to be the deepest part of the Church's historical heritage, the spiritual understanding and transforming power of prayer in the saints. This was why, after Tyrrell's death, he retired into his study of St Catherine of Genoa—which massive work he typically entitled *The Mystical Element in Religion*.

Space does not permit excursions among other fascinating figures, the witty Abbé Lucien Laberthonnière, for instance, who said of St Thomas: 'Saint? He's not even a Christian!' This was a protest against scholasticism, as so much of the movement was; protest against a static theology, against clericalism and against the refusal to see anything good in modern sciences and politics. Tyrrell and some of the Italians were essentially protesters, prophesying against the Pharisees and Sadducees in the Church.

Some mention, however inadequate, must be made of the French philosopher Maurice Blondel, for his contribution, like von Hügel's, was to examine the situation in depth. One of the few Catholics to enter the French national and secular system of higher education, he had a two-way struggle, with his militantly anti-religious lay superiors and with establishment-ecclesiastics who suspected any Catholic exploring non-scholastic philosophies. A married layman too, Blondel evaded the heresy hunters, partly, perhaps, because of the complexity of his thought. 'Affreux Maurice, trop compliqué!' said one of his friends. But the complications may have assisted his survival. I refer those who do not yet know it to the indispensable introduction to his life and work, *Maurice Blondel*, by Alexander Dru and Dom Illtyd Trethowan, which prints translations of two important critical essays: *A Letter on Apologetics* (1896) and *History and Dogma* (1904). The latter was Blondel's considered opinion on the quarrel between the modernism of Loisy and what Blondel aptly nicknamed the Veterism of his opponents. Although Blondel thought the crisis was the result of a rigid Veterism, resistant to all

revision, he also saw the dangers of Loisy's position; consequently his intervention was not very popular with anybody at the time. Von Hügel, then ardently defending Loisy, was disappointed, but later he came to adopt Blondel's suggestion that the study of history should be used as a *purification* of doctrine.

Two points strike me when reading the Modernists: one is the feeling of nearly all of them that Newman, for whom they felt grudging respect, could not really help them, and the other is that they were not quite heretics, in the old meaning of the term. The inability to find help in Newman is strange, considering that his ideas on the development of doctrine and on the relation between reason and faith lead on naturally to the recent Council. I hazard the guess that it was because Newman, though he expected the 'attack' on the Bible as early as 1838, and favoured the open rather than the literalist doctrine of inspiration, died before the breaking of the second wave, of New Testament criticism. Historically and philosophically his approach to Christianity was modern, but to the end of his life he was able to accept a relatively simple view of the Gospels—and it was the application of new critical methods to these which filled the horizon for the Modernist generation. There was also misunderstanding of his theory of development by those as yet unfamiliar with his later clarifications and reservations in letters and private memoranda. They thought he was justifying *all* developments. This is, however, too big a subject to go into now.

The second point, that the 'Modernists' were not 'heretics', was not of course the view of Pius X, who considered Modernism a synthesis of all the heresies. In this Maude Petre (who lived until 1942 and called herself the last of the Modernists) concurred, though she did not mean that Modernism was a conspiracy against the Church from within, as Pius X did, but that it involved a new approach to *all* aspects of the Church's life. *Pascendi* assumed that Modernists wished to *alter* the faith; Modernists believed that they were reinterpreting it. That the reinterpretations were not all equally acceptable has been shown in the passage of time, but that *none* needed to be made is in effect denied by the reinterpretations indicated in the Council documents.

Maude Petre is my favourite Modernist and I should have liked her for a grandmother. I could almost have met her, for she was helping in wartime nurseries at the poor end of Kensington, as an old lady nearly eighty, just before I was working in them myself. There was comedy as well as tragedy in her devotion to Tyrrell, a difficult character to live with, I imagine, from Jesuit and other reminiscences; but she survived him for over thirty years and wrote some shrewd observations on the movement. She was a tough and intelligent observer and a loyal friend; one of the few who continued to know Loisy; she wrote a memoir of him after his death. *My Way of Faith* (1936) is the typical title of her readable reminiscences.

I suggest that the Modernists were not what we usually call heretics because they wanted to stay in the Church; even Loisy struggled to stay inside after his book was censured and before *Pascendi*. Tyrrell died a Catholic (he had the Last Sacraments, thanks to Maude Petre's determination), even if Bishop Amigo of Southwark could not allow him to be buried as one. In fact, the Church was the centre of their concern, its nature and future. Tyrrell believed he was fighting a Vatican heresy for the sake of the real Church. Von Hügel took a less pugnacious, more mature view; he was able to do without the shot of moral indignation which attacking others seems to give to some reformers. But, like Blondel, he was a layman—the modernist priests were more vulnerable to the system they felt was strangling the best in Catholicism. Von Hügel, for all his learning, and Tyrrell with all his hatred for 'Mediaevalism' both had a deep respect for simple Catholics. For these, the old system could still bring the old spiritual benefits. What haunted them was the realization that as more and more minds were educated in modern methods of thought, so the old system would lose for them its omniscience, its inevitability, its coherence. And isn't this what is happening now?

The Modernists were not heretics in the old sense of breakaway *Christians*. Either they believed so firmly in the Church that they were able to ride out the storm without losing their principles or their self-respect, or they lost faith, not only in the Church, or in Christ as the revelation of God, but in any divine reality. Isn't this true now? Perhaps there will be no more heretics: only believers or disbelievers. Because Christ can only be found through the Church—this is not dogma but a fact of history.

To study the Modernists is to gain another clue about how development takes place in the Church. Some of them accepted too uncritically the first results of criticism, attempted too rapid an assessment of the relation between history and faith. The temptation to instant reinterpretation is still with us; I feel it myself when I can't find expert opinions on pressing subjects. But I can't help thinking that the anti-Modernist campaign launched by *Pascendi*, with its oaths and diocesan vigilance committees, and the consequent persecution of religious teachers and theologians, is the best example in recent times of how *not* to deal with a situation of intellectual crisis. The authorities seem to have imagined that if Catholic biblical critics could be silenced or driven out of the Church, the *status quo* would somehow be miraculously preserved. Alarm at some of the *conclusions* of Loisy was justifiable, but the refusal to examine the new *methods* was not. This theme could be illustrated by the trials of the faithful Lagrange, forced to provoke the laughter of non-Catholic scholars in order to get his work passed by the censors, and remain in the Church. But still, thank God he did, and others like him, preparing the ground so that when the Council was called, it did not have to rely only on the theology of the Holy Officials.