

THE MODERNIST DEBACLE

The Modernist crisis erupted in the Church with great suddenness. Like the debate over liberal Catholicism, the main issue was the quest for a new *modus vivendi* with the secular liberal culture. But the Modernists took a much more radical line and were even ready to call into question the very meaning of dogma and the traditional understanding of the Church's authority.

To understand the violence of the polemics and the bitterness aroused as well as the extreme measures taken against the Modernist dissenters by the authorities, it is well to keep in mind the general state of intellectual affairs in the Church at the end of the nineteenth century. As we have seen, Pius IX succeeded in putting down the liberal Catholic movement, and the First Vatican Council ratified his general policy of hostility to modern culture. At his death in 1878 the Church resembled a well-organized fortress prepared for a fight to the finish with the main cultural and political movements of the day.

During the pontificate of his successor, Leo XIII (1878-1903), it became evident how formidable were the intellectual challenges confronting Christian doctrine by reason of nineteenth-century scientific developments, in particular, those dealing with the historical study of the Bible and the origins of Christianity and the evolutionary view of man's origins associated with Darwin. Moreover, a philosophy of materialism-powerfully reinforced by Marxism and Darwinism-was also spreading and striking deep roots in men's minds. And although a large majority of Europeans still professed some form of Christianity, a significant minority repudiated it, and a large number were drifting away.

Pope Leo, who was a well-traveled curial diplomat before being made bishop of Perugia, was conscious of the crisis and unlike the reactionary Pius IX was anxious to reconcile the Church with modern life and culture as far as possible.

But Leo was definitely not a liberal Catholic. His views on religious liberty and the restoration of the Papal States were much closer to those of Pius IX than to those of the liberal Catholics. He was conservative and medieval in his outlook toward purely

intellectual and theological issues. With his help the Neo-Scholastic movement triumphed completely, and he issued an encyclical, *Aeterni Patris*, which exalted St. Thomas and proposed his teachings as the very touchstone of Catholic orthodoxy. Thomism interpreted in the most narrow and unhistorical way took possession of all the chairs and schools of Rome and from there conquered the rest of Catholic academia.

But as Leo's pontificate wore on, a small but growing number of Catholic scholars began to feel that the restoration of medieval Scholasticism was not the answer; the Neo-Thomist synthesis, as marvelous as it was for its own times, was simply not broad enough to deal with the manifold problems raised for the Catholic faith by the developments of modern culture. They were especially concerned with the general ignorance of historical method manifested by the leading Neo Thomists. Following in the footsteps of Doellinger and Acton, they broke out of the narrow mold of Scholasticism and searched for ways of expressing their Catholic faith that would make sense to the modern mind. They professed fidelity to the spirit of Thomas rather than the letter. They were all later to be lumped under the pejorative epithet "Modernist," but they were actually never anything but a loose coalition of scholars linked together only by their somewhat vague aspiration of narrowing the gap between Catholicism and modern culture.

In spite of Leo's own narrow Thomism, they were encouraged by the general impression he gave of openness to modern culture and by a number of moves he made: making Newman a cardinal, opening the Vatican archives to historians, issuing progressive encyclicals on social reform, and calling on French Catholics to accept the republic.

Their leaders were a relatively small group of brilliant scholars active in many fields: the French priests Duchesne, Loisy, and Laberthonniere in Church history, biblical exegesis, and philosophy, respectively; the Italian priests Genocchi, Minocchi, and Semeria in biblical exegesis; the English Jesuit Tyrrell and the French Layman Blondel, both in philosophy; the Italian novelist

Fogazzaro, and the English layman Von Hugel—who was a kind of jack of all trades. The only two members of the hierarchy prominently identified with them were Archbishop Mignot of Albi and Bishop Lacroix of Tarentaise.

In spite of their wide diversity of interests and occupations, they all shared certain things in common: a deep commitment to historical and critical methods, which they felt could rejuvenate theology and contribute to a general renewal of religious life in the Church; an aversion to Scholasticism and Thomism; an extreme sensitivity to authoritarianism, especially the papal brand and to any infringement on the freedom and independence of their respective sciences. On the negative side, they were no doubt excessively influenced by the prevailing positivism and were inclined to ascribe certitude too hastily to the untested conclusions of research. Nor did they reckon realistically enough with the profound conservatism of their fellow Catholics as regards traditional religious forms.

The mentality of their opponents offered a striking contrast. They were Scholastics—generally ignorant of the historical and critical methods of research, medievalists who put no faith in the conclusions of modern science, seeing in them only the work of a destructive and skeptical rationalism. The idea of a personal conquest of the truth—so dear to the Modernists—was to them mere pride and folly. One's only salvation, they held, lay in absolute obedience to the Church. Even some of their best representatives, such as the outstanding professors Louis Billot, Orazio Mazzella, and Salvatore Talamo, were hindered by grave limitations in their methods, by arid formalism, abuse of the argument from authority, an inadequate knowledge of modern philosophy, and almost complete lack of historical sense.

It was the conflict of these two viewpoints that provoked the Modernist crisis. Though the issues ranged far and wide, the real focus of the controversy was in the field of biblical studies. It was there that the discrepancy between Catholic dogma and modern science seemed most critical from the Modernist standpoint. To understand this we must realize what tremendous strides were 'made by the critico-historical study of the Bible during the second half of

the nineteenth century, whereas in other fields of historical research, German scholars led the way. One of the most notable was Julius Wellhausen, who definitively proved that Moses did not write the Pentateuch, as tradition claimed. Studies like this brought into focus the human and relative side of the Scriptures, showing the discrepancies between biblical assertions and proven historical and scientific fact-thus challenging the traditional Christian concept of biblical infallibility.

This challenge was keenly felt by a number of Catholic biblical scholars, including even the octogenarian Newman. Anxious to reconcile the idea of error in the Bible with the dogma of its divine inspiration, they came up with a number of novel hypotheses. The most daring appeared to be those of a French priest, Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), whose lectures at the newly founded Institute Catholique in Paris were profoundly disturbing to tradition-minded Catholics. As he said in a summary of his ideas at the time:

The Pentateuch, in its present form cannot be the work of Moses. The first chapters of Genesis do not contain an exact and reliable account of the beginnings of mankind. . . • • All the historical books of the Bible, including those of the New Testament were composed in a looser manner than modern historical writing, and a certain freedom of interpretation follows. • . . We have to concede a real development in the religious doctrine contained in Scripture,

The Pope was himself gravely disturbed by what he saw as a dangerous penchant for novelties among Catholic scholars, and he decided to call a halt. This came in his encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893)-a sore blow to the progressives, for they felt it reflected little understanding of the really crucial problems facing Catholic scholarship. It ruled out any possibility of error in the Bible and urged Catholic scholars to take as their unerring guides the ancient Fathers, the Scholastic theologians, and above all St. Thomas.

Nevertheless, Leo did not close all doors. His Secretary of State, Cardinal Rampolla, was liberal in tendency and was able to maintain a certain spirit of tolerance in the Curia toward critical scholarship.

So when Leo announced the creation of a pontifical biblical commission in 1902, the Modernists regarded it as a good omen. But their hopes were dashed when its membership was revealed: The forty names included an overwhelming preponderance of Scholastic, non-critical scholars. "A victory for the other side," Von Hugel groaned.

Nevertheless, Loisy went ahead with his studies, and in 1903 he published his *L'Evangile et L'Eglise* (The Gospel and the Church), a book that quickly achieved fame or infamy as the chief manifesto of Modernism. It was composed during the leisure imposed on him by Church authorities, who removed him from his post at the Institut Catholique. It was ostensibly a refutation of the German historian Adolf Harnack (d. 1930), whose book *The Essence of Christianity* presented Jesus as a kind of nineteenth-century liberal reformer preaching a nondogmatic religion based on the brotherhood of man and the fatherhood of God. But in fact, Loisy's actual intention was to use Harnack merely as a springboard to present a full-scale reinterpretation of the Catholic faith—one that involved major modifications of its traditional dogmas. Loisy argued that critical historical science demanded that the Chalcedonian Christ who was God and man must be discarded and replaced by a Jesus who was only a prophet with a unique consciousness of being God's Messiah to announce the imminent end of the world; the founder of the Church and its sacraments would have to be replaced by a historical figure who died with no thought of a Church succeeding him and certainly with no intention of providing it with sacraments. The Church itself therefore only originated when the kingdom predicted by Jesus failed to arrive; its hierarchical structure centered on the Roman primacy did not come from Jesus but was invented under the pressure of historical circumstance. In sum, its dogmas must be regarded not as fixed, unchangeable truths but as attempts to summarize its experience. As to how such enormous changes could be reconciled with the need for continuity so essential to the Catholic self-understanding, Loisy offered only some rather vague and confusing answers. From the very beginning, he argued, the church did not preach an

unchanging absolute doctrine but a message of hope embodied first in the symbol of God's kingdom and subsequently in the visible society, the Church. Moreover, he insisted that the identity of the religious object or fact is unchanging and so provides a principle of continuity: nor will the historical facts, once accurately established, be modified. Another of his favorite concepts was "vitality": The necessities of life dictated the true forms of true religion, and so the developments of Catholicism were true since they were caused by these vital necessities. He also made use of concepts like "the Christian conscience" as a means of affirming "continuity between Roman structures and dogmas and their shadowy antecedents in Jesus and the gospels. "Much to Loisy's surprise, the book stirred up a tremendous storm, especially in France, where it was condemned by the archbishop of Paris and together with several other of his works was put on the Index.

At the same time, other Catholic scholars of Modernist bent were busy postulating novel theories in other fields, which at first view seemed at variance with Catholic tradition. There was, for example, the French philosopher Maurice Blondel (d. 1949), who was busy trying to find an audience for his non-Scholastic philosophy of immanence, which took as its starting point not the objective supernatural revealed order but the subjective religious needs of man in order hopefully to lead the modern unbeliever to recognize that his very nature required the supernatural. His friend Lucien Laberthonniere (d. 1932), an Oratorian priest, elaborated a novel view of dogmas, which he saw not as mysterious enigmatic formulas devised by God to humble man but rather as truths whose validity was proven by their value for the moral life. He regarded Thomas Aquinas as almost a total disaster for the Church and was almost fanatically hostile to the whole Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition. In his view its attempt to combine Greek idealism and Christian thought was foredoomed-the two being absolutely incompatible since Greek idealism was abstract, static, impersonal, and individualistic, while Christian realism was concrete, dynamic, personal, and social. Another French priest, Louis Duchesne (d. 1922), a Church historian, was busy

renovating his field by a peculiarly sharp and critical attitude toward ecclesiastical legends. Other lesser lights were also engaged in the same enterprise of intellectual renewal in the Church, particularly in England, France, and Italy.

Outstanding for various reasons was English Jesuit George Tyrrell (d. 1909), journalist, preacher, spiritual director, and scintillating stylist. Converted to the Church in his early youth, he entered the Society of Jesus and was eventually appointed to teach Scholastic philosophy at Stonyhurst. But a study of Newman and a friendship with Blondel caused him to break with Scholastic categories of thought, which he felt had turned Catholicism into an abstract, dry intellectual system.

For Tyrrell revelation could not be identified with a series of propositions but was primarily an experience of the divine grounded in the absolute imperatives of the conscience. The God whom men experience in this way had his supreme manifestation in Jesus Christ. The dogmatic formulas of the Church were merely attempts to conceptualize and formulate the actual revealed truth in the thought patterns of the time. Hence a dogmatic formula of one age might even contradict the dogmatic formula of another time—at least verbally.

Like many Modernists, Tyrrell saw the authoritarian methods of Pius X as a terrible abuse of Church authority; he wanted a democratic Church whose officials were to be only the spokesmen of the evolving community consensus. His idea of infallibility anticipated the one held currently by many liberal Catholics: "It really means that the Church is infallibly moving through tortuous paths to the right end, even when her back is turned to the goal." Tyrrell's daring speculations touching the very nerve center of Catholic dogma were bound to alarm authorities, and he soon found his position as a Jesuit untenable.

In time the hierarchy reacted with increasing vigor. To understand their predicament, one has to keep in mind the importance and number of the problems being raised; the haste, lack of wisdom, and imprudence of many Modernists; the mere urge to destroy on the part of some; and the fear the bishops felt of the impact of all

of this, especially on the more impressionable younger clergy. After the condemnation of Loisy, other condemnations followed.

Laberthomiere, Fogazzaro, and Tyrrell all felt the sting of the lash. A decree of the biblical commission of 1906 affirmed that Catholics must hold that Moses was the author of the entire Pentateuch-a decision that Von Hugel interpreted as another victory for the "neo-Scholastic utterly on-historical, uncritical minds" in Rome.

Finally, by the spring of 1907, observers felt it would be only a matter of time before Rome issued a general condemnation of the new ideas. This happened when the decree *Lamentabili* of the Holy Office appeared on July 3, 1907, condemning a list of sixty-five errors-at least half of them drawn from Loisy's writings and the others from a wide assortment of Catholic theologians, Tyrrell in particular. It was followed shortly afterward, on September 8, 1907, by the encyclical *Pascendi*.

Among the errors condemned in *Lamentabili* were: that the Jesus of history was much inferior to the Christ of faith; that his knowledge was limited; that he did not always have consciousness of his Messianic dignity; that he could have been in error; that he did not institute the Church and the sacraments; that his resurrection was not a fact of the historical order; and that the Roman primacy was not of divine origin. Perhaps the heart of the whole decree was the last error, No. 65: that modern Catholicism cannot be reconciled with true science unless it is transformed into some kind of non-dogmatic Christianity. It was the main reason for Rome's objection to the whole movement. *Pascendi* represents a debatable attempt to systematize the inherently unsystematic thought of the Modernists. It found their unity in certain false philosophical premises that they supposedly held in common: immanentism-which asserts that man's religious experience begins with awareness of an interior religious need; agnosticism-or the denial that we can know anything beyond changing phenomena; symbolism whereby dogmas and sacraments of the Church are true only insofar as they spring from, foster, and nourish one's religious sense, or, in other words, insofar as they are merely an objectification of the individual's subjective religious

needs; evolutionism-denoted as "practically their principal doctrine" and defined to mean that everything-dogma, Church, worship, sacred books, even faith itself-is liable to substantial change.

The composite picture given here of Modernism is no doubt artificial, but even Loisy and Tyrrell grudgingly admitted that it did spotlight their main ideas. But much about the circumstances of the encyclical and its wording does seem regrettable. It presumes bad faith and imputes evil motives to zealous Catholic scholars who were at least asking the right questions, and it presents a sad spectacle of the highest authority in the Church resorting to sarcasm and invective in what was supposed to be a magisterial judgment; it abounds in such harsh phrases as "poisonous doctrines most pernicious of all the adversaries of the Church the root of their folly and error boundless effrontery"

To extirpate Modernism, the Pope called for measures that smacked of the worst features of the medieval Inquisition. Vigilance committees were to be set up in every diocese to detect any sign of Modernist doctrines. In addition, each diocese was to have a body of censors who were to watch over all literature in any way connected with the Church. These agencies were to observe strict secrecy in all their proceedings. Seminarians were to be indoctrinated in the Scholastic system-in its Thornist form-as the basis of all sacred studies.

And finally, all priests and teachers were required to take an oath against Modernism. A coin struck on June .29, 1908, to commemorate the fifth anniversary of Pius X's pontificate bore a fitting emblem-it showed him in the act of slaying the Modernist dragon. And slay it he did. Under pressure of the measures he applied, the Modernist movement simply collapsed. A few sporadic efforts were made to rally its spokesmen to lead a resistance movement within the Church, but their number was not significant, nor could it be-since those attached to Modernist ideas never formed more than a small minority. Tyrrell denounced Pascendi in the columns of the London Times and was excommunicated; he died the following year without formal

reconciliation. Leisy suffered a like fate, but unlike Tyrrell regarded it as a blessing and died peacefully thirty years later outside the Church. A few of the other leaders left the church to the accompaniment of crashing cymbals and flashing fireworks, but the rest submitted with more or less grace. The thrust of the encyclical was so vague and broad that almost anyone could be accused of Modernism except authors of Scholastic textbooks. This, coupled with its violent tone and the extreme measures of repression it called for brought on a Varitable reign of terror in the Church by self-appointed inquisitors. Most notorious of these integralists-as they called themselves-was Monsignor Umberto Benigni a prelate working under Cardinal Merry del Val in the Secretariat of State. With the latter's aid and support and with the blessing of Pius X himself, he set up a society (the Sodalitumpianum). It eventually included a network of spies who had important connections in leading Catholic dioceses and who kept their activities covert by the use of a fantastic secret code. They regularly engaged in personal attacks, via the columns of Catholic journals, on suspect Modernists whose names, in consequence, were often placed on blacklists drawn up by their enemies and sent to Rome. Any Catholic who showed Luke warmness toward Scholasticism or favored such initiatives as Christian democracy or ecumenism might suddenly find himself the target of their venom. No one however high his rank in the Church, was safe if he aroused their suspicions.

Cardinal Mercier himself was on their blacklist. And many personal tragedies occurred when their victims were driven from their offices and teaching posts and even from the priesthood itself. The excesses of Benigni and his ilk were only brought to an end when Benedict XV became Pope in 1914.

Modernism was indeed successfully stamped out, but at a tremendous price; the Catholic intelligence was inoculated against error, but the dosage was almost fatal. The liberal Catholic movement suffered another grave setback, and social Catholicism lost a decade of valuable time. Many of the Church's most brilliant thinkers were silenced or driven out of theology and into a kind of

spiritual schizophrenia. Catholic seminaries remained medieval ghettos until the middle of the twentieth century, and future priests were taught a biblical fundamentalism embroidered with theories like the one that proved that Jonah could have lived inside the whale since a French scholar had found toads that lived inside stones for thousands of years.

As one familiar with history knows, a crisis not resolved is a crisis postponed and destined to erupt again with greater violence. One wonders if a less hysterical and more historical approach to Modernist errors might not have proven wiser in the long run. What was of value in liberal thought might then have been sifted out in leisurely fashion and assimilated and the Church spared the trauma it now suffers with the sudden reappearance of the questions first raised by the Modernists.

On the other hand, one might justify the severity of the hierarchy by admitting that their primary responsibility was not to history but to millions of souls who knew nothing about Wellhausen and whose faith would have been gravely disturbed if the speculations of a Tyrrell or a Loisy became common currency in its pulpits. And, it must be added, some of the Modernists engaged in systematic deceit by using pseudonyms and ambiguous formulas to cloak their radical rejection of the traditional faith in order to stay in the Church and subvert it from within.

But whoever deserves the most blame, the Modernist crisis was a catastrophe for the Church. It led to an intellectual sterility that still weighs heavily on its life and caused a cultural lag that was most apparent in Italy itself, where the long arm of the Curia made the repression most severe. The Italian clergy were completely isolated from the university life in their country, and even at Rome ecclesiastical standards of scholarship fell very low. Rome in the twentieth century became a byword for intellectual sterility.