

Dossier

«*Modernists*» *Before Modernism*

a cura di
Charles J.T. Talar

Introduction

The encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* fastened the label «Modernism» upon the several initiatives that sought intellectual and structural renewal of Catholicism during *La Belle Époque*. As such it was an externally applied term that found reluctant resonance among innovators themselves, and only then, in George Tyrrell's estimation, «to stand not for the travesty [in *Pascendi*] but for the truth of their position»¹. Despite attempts such as Tyrrell's and Alfred Loisy's² to counter the monolithic representation of Modernism by the Vatican, the encyclical largely became the standard for viewing it for the next several decades³. Here, as in so many areas, the Second Vatican Council marks a point of transition. By 1970, in the appropriately titled *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, Alec Vidler could note two avenues of approach to Roman Catholic Modernism:

«There are at least two distinct and legitimate ways of studying the modernist movement. One is to start from the papal acts which defined and condemned modernism, especially the encyclical *Pascendi*. In that case the system of ideas which the pope called "modernism" would have to be expounded and examined, and the pedigree and profession of those ideas would, as far as possible, have to be observed [...]. The other way is, without presuppositions concerning orthodoxy or heresy, to look at the various persons or some of them who were involved in the move-

¹ G. Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Cross-Roads*, Longmans, Green and Co., London 1909, p. 3. «*Modernism* is an outsider term. Though it appeared earlier, it gained currency among Italian bishops around 1905. *Pascendi* introduced it into Catholic theological discourse». W.L. Portier, *Divided Friends. Portraits of the Roman Catholic Modernist Crisis in the United States*, The Catholic University of America Press, Washington D.C. 2013, p. 19.

² A. Loisy, *Simple réflexions sur le Décret «Lamentabili sane exitu» et sur l'encyclique «Pascendi dominici gregis»*, Chez l'auteur, Ceffonds 1908.

³ See C.J.T. Talar, *Crossing Boundaries: Interpreting Roman Catholic Modernism*, in «U.S. Catholic Historian» XVII, 2(1999), pp. 17-30.

ment that provoked the papacy to define and condemn the system which it called “modernism,” with a view to ascertaining what they conceived themselves to be doing, whether individually or collectively»⁴.

Vidler acknowledged the legitimacy of the first of these approaches, but expressed his «decided preference» for the second of them. The essays assembled here continue in the track preferred by Vidler.

The figures brought together in this issue of *Modernism* represent fin-de-siècle Catholics united in a conviction that an engagement with modernity – in its scientific and political faces – was for Catholicism not a desirability but a necessity. Not all were able to persevere in their convictions; Joseph Turmel (1859-1943) lost it early on, by the latter 1880s, Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) not until the period following his two «petit livres rouges» of 1902 and 1903. Even in cases where hopes for reconciliation between Catholicism and modern scholarship persisted, their continuing to cherish such ambitions for Catholicism could fall under suspicion or some measure of censure – as exemplified in the ecclesiastical careers of Pierre Batiffol (1861-1929), Lucien Laberthonnière (1860-1932), and Henri Bremond (1865-1933). Those who figure in the pages of this issue also represent varying degrees of prominence within the narrative of the Modernist Crisis. Loisy is best known, Emile Joseph Dillon (1854-1933) the least. Turmel has remained a marginal figure in modernist scholarship, Batiffol only slightly less so. Laberthonnière has benefitted from his close association with Maurice Blondel (1861-1949), but has been significantly overshadowed by the amount of attention devoted to the latter. Lastly, their trajectories, whose beginnings and early stages are traced here, carried them to rather different positions. Adopting the typology developed by C. Théobald⁵, Loisy while he remained connected to modernist initiatives may be considered as centrist. Batiffol and Laberthonnière may be positioned

⁴ A. Vidler, *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1970, p. 15.

⁵ C. Théobald, *L'Entrée de l'histoire dans l'univers religieux et théologique au moment de la crise moderniste*, in J. Greisch - K. Neufeld - C. Théobald (eds.), *La Crise contemporaine. Du Modernisme à la crise des herméneutiques*, Beauchesne, Paris 1973, pp. 7-85.

as “progressives” and thus situated to the right of Loisy. Théobald places Turmel, in company with Albert Houtin (1867-1926) and Félix Sartiaux (1876-1944) on the rationalist left wing. As Portier suggests, Dillon is difficult to place, but presumably in some close proximity to Loisy.

In his contribution on Loisy, Jeffrey Morrow limits his exposition of early publications to the period through the year 1893. Loisy was such a prolific author, however, that this still yields a considerable body of work to comment on. Even in this very early period of his scholarship Loisy avowedly judged it prudent to proceed cautiously, beginning with historically oriented topics such as the history of the biblical canon, and various texts and versions of the Bible. These early publications were consciously designed as vehicles for insinuating critical conclusions into Catholic biblical scholarship, and for acclimating Catholic consciousness to a less defensive posture toward modern exegesis. Loisy followed these initial studies with forays into Wisdom literature as less volatile texts with which engage source criticism and questions of authorship. Loisy’s competence in Assyriology enabled him to combine a more literary historical critical approach with a comparative historical one. By 1893 Loisy found it difficult to avoid engaging theological ramifications of critical methods, notably regarding the question of biblical inspiration. The «biblical question» had repercussions for Loisy personally and for the church more broadly. Collectively, these early writings by Loisy reveal the state of Catholic exegesis at the outset of Loisy’s career and the seeds of his reformist agenda that went beyond exegesis to encompass theology and Catholicism more generally.

William Portier expands upon Alec Vidler’s brief but intriguing portrait of Emile Joseph Dillon that graced the pages of *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*. A highly gifted linguist, an international journalist, a «friend of sovereigns and statesmen», Dillon also had competence in critical biblical studies. In the 1890s he joined progressive Catholics in their hopes that a reform of Catholicism could come about through an engagement with modern learning, especially scientific biblical criticism. The year 1893 is also significant for Dillon, as it marks the initiation of his correspondence with Loisy, whom he regarded as an exemplar of the type of scholarship conducive to Catholic renewal.

It is noteworthy that Dillon also gravitated toward Wisdom literature. In his case it was signally a matter of leveraging Qoheleth and Job to conduct his own critique of the speculative theology that dominated Roman Catholic theology of the period. It also reveals a state of mind that, in the mid-1890s exuded a strong confidence in the «assured results of historical criticism». Portier shows how, coupled with his substantive correspondence with Loisy, Dillon's «anonymous efforts at reform were carried on with close but always concealed cooperation with Loisy».

From Dillon's solidarity with Loisy's exegesis we turn to the contested relationship between Loisy and Pierre Batiffol. Although remembered more for his work in the early history of Christianity, Batiffol also had competence in biblical studies. Closely allied with the Dominican biblical scholar, Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855-1938), Batiffol held for a number of years the position of secretary of the «Revue biblique». He followed the trajectory of biblical scholarship within and beyond Catholicism, seeking to legitimize the use of historical critical method in the church by retaining a close connection with theology, in contrast to the stance taken by Loisy and Dillon.

Luc Brogly mines published and especially unpublished sources to trace the increasingly fractious relationship between Loisy and Batiffol. While not always externally apparent even to informed scholars like Louis Venard (1874-1945), Brogly shows increasing antipathy between the two, each seen in the eyes of the other as representative of a party antagonistic to the other. The article's conclusions are insightful. They help clarify what Batiffol held to be at stake, thus what he advocated as a workable strategy for the use of critical exegesis, and what factored into his responses, both published and private, to Loisy's perceived approach.

While Batiffol manifests the contribution made by exegesis to a progressive stance on ecclesial reform, Lucien Laberthonnière represents the influence of philosophy. Against the backdrop of the «apologetic crisis» Giacomo Losito traces the affinities and connections between Blondel and Laberthonnière, as well as the «subtle but substantial differences of orientation on the intellectual level» and other factors that distanced them and ultimately disrupted their relationship. Uniting them in common cause was an underlying perception of the inadequacy of neo-scholastic theology to ef-

fectively deal with the relation between nature and grace, the natural and the supernatural, and the need to present a common front in crafting an alternative. Laberthonnière's writing in defense of Blondel's 1896 «letter» on apologetical method is significant for its treatment of the one of the neuralgic questions of the Modernist Crisis, the nature of faith. From defense of Blondel the Oratorian proceeded to develop his ideas in a more original vein in *Le Dogmatisme moral* (1898) and in subsequent articles clarifying and defending positions put forward there. From this survey of Laberthonnière and his critics, Losito is able to find the source of multiple epithets leveled against the Oratorian – accusations of «naturalisme», «kantisme», «voluntarisme subjectiviste», or «fidéisme».

Peter Gorday explores a relatively neglected side of Modernism – its engagement with pastoral practice and spirituality. Henri Bremond was exceptional among Modernists in that he had several years' experience teaching humanities to secondary school students in Catholic institutions. Gorday argues that Bremond recognized that, just as intellectual disciplines of philosophy and theology had to adapt to a world in the midst of rapid and dynamic change, so too did a practical discipline like pedagogy (an interest Bremond shared with Laberthonnière). The focal issue is moral formation and Bremond's approach provides a window into what may be called «the anthropology of Catholic Modernism»⁶. Connections are suggested between Bremond's early work on the moral formation of children and his later studies on spirituality.

The final author to be included, Joseph Turmel, like many of those later identified with Modernism began by wanting to acquire mastery of critical methods in order to defend the Catholic faith. The theology he received in the course of his seminary training and an additional year of graduate study was not equal to bearing the weight of the critical conclusions he discovered. By 1886 he had lost his faith and from that point onward ceased to

⁶ J.R. Sommerfeldt begins his study of the spirituality of Bernard of Clairvaux with the observation, «Over the past several years I have become more and more convinced that the key to understanding the spirituality [...] of any person or age, is anthropology». J. Sommerfeldt, *The Spiritual Teachings of Bernard of Clairvaux*, Cistercian Publications, Kalamazoo 1991, p. 3. The prominence of spirituality in Bremond's corpus makes this a natural connection, but one that Gorday broadens beyond Bremond.

work for Catholic renewal. Accordingly there has been some debate over whether Turmel should be considered a Modernist. The increasingly radical nature of his positions and his consequent resort to pseudonymous publications contributed toward shaping Vatican perceptions of what it eventually labeled and condemned as «Modernism».

Here Turmel is writing under his own name on original sin. This book-length series of articles shows methods their author employed in his subversive agenda of delegitimizing dogma. He sought to accomplish this by challenging fundamental assumptions of the reigning theology, such as the unanimous consent of the Church Fathers on matters of dogma, and that theology's construal of doctrinal development as entailing substantial identity while admitting linguistic clarification and logical explication. Turmel's disruption of these positions is evident in his treatment of original sin.

While Turmel's methodology of subversion is of historical relevance to Modernism, his writings on original sin have had ongoing substantive impact. They are not only of antiquarian interest.

Returning to Vidler's advocacy of an approach to Roman Catholic Modernism taking account of the perspectives of «Modernists» themselves, what can we learn from this sampling of those who became involved in the work of Catholic renewal?

The range of modernist interest is already well represented in the 1890s – exegesis, philosophy, history of doctrine, spirituality, the relation of church and politics all figure in these pages. Their cumulative effect will become evident in *Pascendi dominici gregis*, in that encyclical's portrayal of the modernist menace as a hydra-headed assault on Christianity itself.

In contrast to the encyclical's monolithic representation of Modernism, internal fault lines and developing differences, indeed eventual opposition can be seen in the essays on Batiffol and Laberthonnière.

Pascendi correctly diagnosed a strain of antipathy toward the reigning neo-scholasticism within Modernism. Dillon's use of Wisdom literature and Turmel's excursions into the history of doctrine show different approaches toward challenging an overly speculative and conceptual theology. Loisy's use of Wisdom literature for a different purpose may also be noted.

The intellectual capacity and competence of these figures also comes across strongly. The linguistic range of a Dillon or a Loisy, the historical grasp of a Turmel, the philosophical immersion of a Laberthonnière, the literary skills of a Bremond have, in this decade plus before the “Modernist Crisis” reached impressive levels.

The essay on Bremond serves as a reminder that spirituality was more than a marginal interest for Modernists and that surprising connections may emerge between it and other areas of competence. Modernism had its pastoral side, also notably prominent in Bremond’s close friend and fellow Jesuit, George Tyrrell (1861-1909).

Collectively, these contributions show men who were deeply impressed by the necessity, indeed the urgency, of Catholicism’s entering into a constructive engagement with modernity, in the main hopeful for positive effects on both.