"Roman Catholic Modernism: another look" (a paper read at the School of Religion, St Mary's, Bourne Street, London SW1 at 7pm on 15 May 2024)

The origins of this paper lie in a conversation I had in 2019 with Fr Andrew Norwood shortly before he left the parish for St Mary s, Paddington Green. I told him that his new parish was famous for the fact that the vicar from 1900-1912 was Alfred Leslie Lilley (1860-1948). It's worth adding that Lilley had a more local connection too because he was, from 1891 to 1900, a curate at Holy Trinity, Sloane Street. Dr Alec Vidler in his *A Variety of Catholic Modernists* (1970) gave him a place in the history of Modernism on the basis of his book, *Modernism: a Record and Review* (1909) and his extensive correspondence with those whose views were representative of Roman Catholic Modernism. His correspondents included Alfred Loisy, a French priest, George Tyrrell, a Jesuit, Baron Friedrich von Hügel and Maude Petre (of whom a little more later). Lilley eventually, in 1913, became Archdeacon of Ludlow, an office he held until 1928. Fr Andrew thought that Roman Catholic Modernism was connected with the liturgical innovations introduced by the Vatican II. However, I explained that it was a late 19th and early 20th century phenomenon (I am carefully avoiding describing it as a movement which it certainly was not) associated with such figures as Alfred Firmin Loisy (1857-1940), a French priest; George Tyrrell (1861-1909), a convert to Roman Catholicism from Dublin and a Jesuit; and Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925), philosopher, theologian and polymath who, while travelling with the Modernists, preferred to remain faithful to the Church and was never really one of them. Baron von Hügel's story is too complicated and has too many strands to be dealt with in a 30-minute paper and I have therefore confined myself to Loisy and Tyrrell. At the end of our conversation, Fr Andrew remarked, It sounds like a topic for the School of Religion" – so here we are, as it seemed to me

that Roman Catholic Modernism was worth looking at again. Fortunately, the Vicar agreed with me.

It will be helpful to start my discussion of the subject with a definition. The best working definition for our purposes is that given by the historian, Jean Rivière, in his article *Modernisme* published in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique.* Rivière writes:

> Modernism is a collective term to describe the religious crisis which marked in the church the turn of the 20th century and gave rise to the principal acts of Pius X. From the speculative point of view, modernism presented itself as a complex collection of errors, of which the papal documents created a synthesis and defined the outlines.

I must enter a note of caution here about the use of the term modernism" and modernist" as it has come to be employed by some Roman Catholics who apply (or misapply) it to those with whom they disagree – Pope Francis is one whom I have heard described as a modernist by those who find it difficult to come to terms with the fact that he appears to them very different from Benedict XVI. This ahistorical misuse was condemned by the German Roman Catholic theologian Herbert Vorgrimler in the article, *Modernismus*, in his *Neues Theologisches Wōrterbuch*. He wrote:

> Regrettably, the term modernism" has remained to this day an unfeeling, spiteful term of abuse employed by those within the Church who, in their unchallenged arrogance, fail to understand the difficulties which belief poses to those living in the modern world.

I must add that Roman Catholic Modernism had nothing to do with the ideas promoted by the Modern Churchmen's Union, founded in 1898, as the Churchmen's Union. Its aim was to uphold the comprehensiveness of the Church of England and to maintain the legitimacy of doctrinal restatement in accordance with modern

science and biblical studies. These aims are maintained by the Modern Churchmen's Union in its present iteration as Modern Church. It is against the school of thought represented by the Modern Churchmen's Union that Ronald Knox inveighed, and especially in his book published in 1913 (*Some Loose Stones: Being a Consideration of Certain Tendencies in Modern Theology Illustrated By Reference to The Book Called Foundations*) rather than against the Roman Catholic Modernists.

To conclude this section on definitions, I think it would be helpful were I to refer for brevity to Roman Catholicism Modernism simply as "Modernism". You'll know therefore that when I speak of Modernism, I am using the term in that sense.

Modernism is a large landscape, and it will only be possible this evening to provide a sketch of the subject based on the contributions of Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell. It would have been interesting if I could have added the philosophers Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) and Edward Le Roy (1870 – 1954) to the discussion. Time is, however, against me as they would have provided more than enough material to justify their having a paper to themselves. Those whose interest is piqued by what I am going to say can explore the subject further for themselves. My method will therefore be to explain the origins of Modernism in terms of the background and then to turn to Loisy and Tyrrell and explain their roles in the crisis.

The acids of modernity

In the late 19th and early 20th century the certainties of orthodox religious belief were under attack and in danger of being eaten away by what the political commentator, Walter Lippmann, described as the 'acids of modernity'. Those 'acids'

were made up of a number of forces which included the evolutionary principles embedded in the idealist philosophy of Immanuel Kant and G.W.F. Hegel and which underlay the theories of the naturalist, Charles Darwin. The basis of religious belief was also under attack by the development of historical criticism, the insights of which were applied by biblical critics in their work on the bible. Of particular importance in this field were the writings of the German biblical critic, David Friedrich Strauss (1808-1874), who, in his *Leben Jesu* (1835-6), denied the historical foundation of all the supernatural elements in the gospel, ascribing them to the operation of an unconsciously creative legend developed between the death of Christ and the writing of the gospels which he placed in the second century AD. It's worth adding that an English translation of this book by the novelist, George Eliot, appeared in 1846. Albert Schweitzer wrote a study of the Lives of Jesus which proliferated during the 18th and 19th centuries. This book which was published in 1906 is entitled *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* but is better known under the title of the English translation, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*. In this book which first appeared in German in 1906 Schweitzer argued that no life of Jesus can be written as the gospels do not contain historical materials but were written to express Jesus' teaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God. Such views seriously undermined the teaching of the Council of Trent that the bible was written *Spiritu Sancto dictante*, that is, the scriptures are divinely inspired throughout.

The nature of the problem posed by “the acids of modernity were neatly set out by M.D. Petre in a series of questions:

> What are we to do with religious dogmas when scientific dogmas seem to give them the lie? What are we to do with religious belief when earthly knowledge either refuses its support, as in history, or seems to undermine its basis, as in science?

Maude Dominica Petre was very close to and much influenced by George Tyrrell and you'll see from her name that she was a member of a well-known recusant family. These antecedents meant that she was able to wield much influence in Roman Catholic circles.

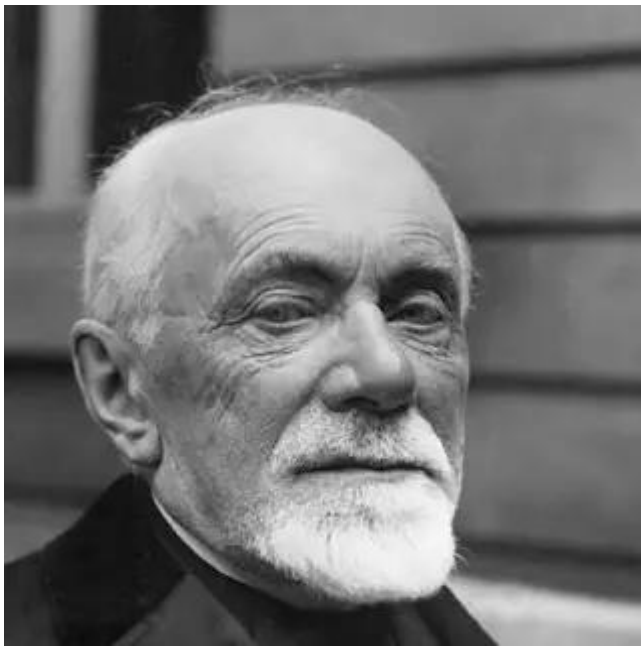
Adolf Harnack's *Das Wesen des Christentums*

A number of books appeared, apparently aimed at answering the question, "What are we to do?" One of the most widely disseminated of these responses started off as a series of lectures delivered *ex tempore* at the University of Berlin during the Winter Semester of 1899-1900. The lectures were delivered by Adolf Harnack (he was ennobled by the German Kaiser in 1914 and became *von* Harnack), professor of Church History in the University. To Harnack's surprise, they were taken down in shorthand by a member of the audience. This meant that they could be published under the title of *Das Wesen des Christentums* (*The Essence of Christianity*) in 1900. An English translation was published in 1901 under the title *What is Christianity?* Harnack believed that the dogmas, hierarchical ministry and cultus of the Catholic Church were alien accretions from Greek sources. He therefore adopted a reductionist approach arguing that the Hellenizing accretions should be stripped away rather like stripping away the husk from a fruit. This process, he argued, would leave the life-giving and nourishing kernel. That kernel was, as Harnack contended, the gospel as taught by Jesus and which amounted to ideas of God the Father, Providence, the position of people as God's children and the infinite value of the human soul. Harnack's religion is often summarized as being confined to a belief in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man.

The influence of Harnack's book upon Christian belief cannot be overestimated. It was translated into all the major languages and sold over 100,000 copies. Widely distributed by means of the European railway networks, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, was carried by train throughout Germany and beyond. Leipzig, then the centre of the German publishing industry, was a major railway hub, a factor which aided the book's distribution.

The large sales of Harnack's book, meant, as Rudolph Bultmann, the German New Testament scholar, argued in his introduction to the 1957 Harper Torchbook edition of *What is Christianity?*, that the religious beliefs of the majority of Protestants conformed to Harnack's all-nourishing kernel. There's some support for this contention in one of Rudyard Kipling's short stories, *The Interests of the Brethren*. The story is set in a Masonic Lodge just after the First World War. One of the brethren says, by way of explaining his religious position, "I haven't much religion, but all I had I learnt in Lodge…'Yes, "all veiled in all'gory and illustrated in symbols" – the Fatherhood of God, an' the Brotherhood of Man'.

Alfred Firmin Loisy



Another approach to Christian apologetic in the face of “the acids of modernity” was represented by Alfred Firmin Loisy's book published in 1902 under the title *L’Évangile at L’Église*. This book was in part a direct response to *What is Christianity?* The author was Alfred Firmin Loisy to whom I have already referred. Loisy was born the son of a small farmer in 1857 in Ambrières in the *Departement* of Marne. His unusual intelligence was detected early at school and he was sent to college. He then felt a calling to the priesthood and underwent training at the diocesan seminary at Châlons-sur-Marne. While at the seminary, his intellectual abilities as well as his piety were noticed and, as a result, he was sent to pursue further studies at the Institut Catholique, the Catholic university, in Paris. He eventually, in 1890, became a professor at the Institut in the fields of biblical and oriental studies and could have followed a purely academic career but chose a somewhat different path. It should be emphasized that together with his devotion to academic work, Loisy had a keen pastoral sense and saw his studies as a route

towards commending the faith to educated Catholics who might be put off by what he saw as the backwardness of the Church's theology.

After some difficulties with the ecclesiastical authorities over his lectures on the Bible, Loisy was, in 1893, dismissed from his chair of Holy Scripture at the Institut. Those difficulties stemmed from his teaching that, among other things, Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch and that the Old Testament consists of different strands suggesting that they have been subjected to editorial revision. He also held that the New Testament had undergone a similar process of editorial revision. After his dismissal from his professorship, Loisy was appointed chaplain of a girls' school run by Dominican nuns at Neuilly. This appointment gave him an opportunity to go more deeply into the critical questions which had got him into trouble at the Institut Catholique. Among his duties at the school was teaching the catechism to children. This was a task which he sought to approach in a way that was consistent with the conclusions he had reached as a student of Christian origins. His light duties at the school provided Loisy with ample leisure for study. Those studies included a reading of John Henry Newman's *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* sent to him at some time in 1896 by Friedrich von Hügel. This programme of reading and study equipped him, he considered, to meet the challenge of Liberal Protestantism as it manifested itself in Harnack's *What is Christianity?* It is likely that his reading also included the seminal work by Johannes Weiss*, Die Predigt Jesu vom Reich Gottes* (*Jesus' Preaching of the Kingdom of God*). In this book, published in 1892, Weiss argued that the gospel writers had shaped their materials so as to emphasise the eschatological emphasis in Jesus' teaching and that his mission had been to bring in the Kingdom of God..

What is Christianity? was widely read in France following the appearance of a French edition in 1901. It would, however, be a mistake to think that Loisy used *What is Christianity?* simply as a peg on which to hang his defence of Catholicism because he thought that this book was inadequate as a statement of Christian belief and the development of the Church. Harnack claimed that he was dealing with his subject not as a theologian but as a historian. Its inadequacy lay, in Loisy's view, on Harnack's fastening on one aspect of Christian belief – trust in God as Father to the exclusion of everything else which he regarded as inessential. Loisy argues that a historian when assessing a phenomenon as complex as Christianity should not fasten simply on its state as it was at its outset but should rather view it as a whole in its long and complex history. Harnack, in focussing on a single aspect of Christianity, failed to show that it was a living, growing and developing movement. In a similar way, as Loisy pointed out, the oak tree is more than the acorn from which it grew yet the organic continuity remains.

In the course of *L'Évangile at L'Église*, Loisy develops his thesis that the ideas of the kingdom of God and the Messiah which were rooted in Judaism had to be transformed into those of the Catholic Church and the incarnate Logos if the gospel was to take root in the Gentile world. As Loisy wrote:

> Jesus announced the kingdom and it was the Church that came. It came enlarging the form of the gospel, which it was impossible to keep just as it was once the ministry of Jesus had been closed by the passion. There is no institution on earth nor in human history, whose legitimacy and value could not be contested, if it be laid down as a principle that nothing has a right to exist except [that which remains] in its original condition. This principle is contrary to the law of life, which is a movement and a continual effort of adaptation to perpetually changing and new conditions. Christianity could not escape this law and is not to be blamed for having submitted to it. It could not do otherwise.

It is clear how, in deploying this argument, Loisy has taken a hint and perhaps more than a hint from Newman's *Essay on Development* and in particular the passage where Newman, using the metaphor of a stream, says:

> [The stream] tries, as it were, its limbs and proves the ground under it, and feels its way … In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often.

Loisy develops his theme, saying that:

> The Church of today resembles, no more and no less, the community of the first disciples than an adult man resembles the infant which he was at first.

In the rest of *L'Évangile et L'Église*, Loisy sets out to show how the growth of the Catholic Church as an institution with its hierarchical structure and its discipline, its dogma and its cultus, was the legitimate outcome of the original gospel and the means by which it became a religion for all. It would have been difficult to see, Loisy argues, how Catholicism could have developed into a universal religion had it remained in its primitive form. He writes:

> That the Catholic Church has adapted the gospel and is adapting it still, that it adapts itself continually to the needs of new times, is by no means evidence that it forgets the gospel or slights its own tradition, but that it wants to make both prevail, that it realizes they are flexible and always perfectible.

As far as Harnack's charge of hellenization was concerned, Loisy contended that far from being a corruption of the original gospel, that process had been necessary if Christianity was not to remain a Jewish sect. The thought of the Greek fathers had been essential if Christian ideas were to commend themselves to the Greek world. This importation of Greek thought into Christianity was highly beneficial even though it did not always lead to a logically consistent philosophical system. Despite that

inconsistency, the Church did not hesitate to hold together in creative tension doctrines such as the incarnation and grace even though they appeared contradictory.

Loisy's novel form of apologetic was well received in some quarters although some, even those who supported this new style of apologetic, such Cuthbert Butler, later Abbott of Downside, predicted trouble. Those predictions were all too accurate and the book was vigorously attacked by publications stemming from the ultramontane wing of the Church, notably *L'Univers* and *La Vérité Française*. Formal condemnation of *L'Évangile et L'Église* came in January 1903 from the rigidly conservative Archbishop of Paris, Cardinal Richard. He was joined in his condemnation by seven of the French bishops. Rome for the time being remained silent.

Loisy did not help himself by the publication in 1903 of a book entitled *Autour d'un petit livre* in which he reviewed, in not very diplomatic language, the controversy surrounding the publication of *L'Évangile et L'Église.* The appearance of this book together with his commentary on the Fourth Gospel compelled Rome to act and Loisy's books were placed on the Index of books which pious Catholics were forbidden to read.

In 1906, Loisy ceased to exercise any priestly functions and the promulgation of the papal acts of 1907 (*Pascendi dominici gregis* and *Lamentabili sane exitu*) by which Pope Pius X condemned Modernism. Those encyclicals meant that Loisy's work as a Modernist was finished. He was excommunicated in 1908.

Loisy accepted the church’s condemnation of his views. With his excommunication, he ceased to be a Catholic and, by definition, a Catholic Modernist. He continued, however, to work on Christian origins and from 1909 to 1930 he was professor of the history of religions as the Collège de France.

George Tyrrell

Although Loisy accepted the Church’s verdict upon him and, as I have said, ceased to be a Catholic Modernist, others maintained the Modernist position, notwithstanding the Church’s rejection both of them and their theology. One of those who held on to his Modernist principles was George Tyrrell whom I mentioned in my introduction. He was born in Dublin and moved to London where he encountered Anglo-Catholicism, worshipping at such churches as St Paul's, Lorrimore Square in Southwark and St Alban the Martyr, Holborn. He also looked up all the Roman Catholic churches in London "...with a sort of morbid curiosity, like that which draws a moth to a candle”. Failing to find what he was looking for in Anglo-Catholicism, Tyrrell was received into the Roman Catholic Church in 1879. Highly influential in his

reaching this decision was the Mass he attended on Palm Sunday at St Etheldreda's, Ely Place. There he perceived that "… here was the old business, being carried on by the old firm, in the old ways; here was continuity, that took one back to the catacombs". In 1880, Tyrrell entered the Jesuit noviciate and was ordained priest in 1891 and became a lecturer in moral theology at Stonyhurst. In 1896, he was transferred to Farm Street where he came to be much in demand as a confessor and made a name by publishing two books of meditations, *Nova et Vetera* and *Hard Sayings*. In addition to his knowledge of mysticism, Tyrrell was a well-qualified scholastic theologian who refused to use the manuals of scholastic philosophy then in favour as teaching aids but taught from the writings of St Thomas themselves. Baron von Hügel had discussed the limitations of scholasticism with Tyrrell and introduced him to the study of Christian origins (an area in which he never attained to the expertise possessed by Loisy) but his *forte* was as a writer on the spiritual life.

Tyrrell had a restless cast of mind and was always searching to see how the sorts of questions which Maude Tyrrell had raised and which I earlier quoted affected Catholic teaching and belief. The religious sense was important to him such that his Modernist convictions were not snuffed out but rather intensified by Rome's rejection of them. This meant that he remained a Modernist even though Modernism had itself been condemned by the Church and he maintained his Modernist position even after he was excommunication in 1907.

Christianity at the Crossroads, which was published posthumously in 1910, was the most ambitious expression of Tyrrell's version of the Modernist project. He had written other books but none of them sets out so clearly and comprehensively the

programme he had in mind. The book contains some memorable sentences, among them, “If Rome dies, other churches may order their coffins”.

Shortly before writing his book, Tyrrell read Schweitzer’s *Von Reimarus zu Wrede* (the English translation had not then appeared) and was struck both by its objections to Liberal Protestantism as well as to the difficulties of relating the teaching about the coming of Christ’s Kingdom (he saw in other words, the problems posed by traditional eschatology or teaching about the end time) to Catholicism.

Tyrrell has an ironical way with Liberal Protestantism and its reductionist account of Christian belief:

> No sooner was the Light of the World kindled than it was put under a bushel. The Pearl of Great price fell into the dust-heap of Catholicism, not without the wise permission of Providence, desirous to preserve it till the day when Germany should rediscover it and separate it from its useful but deplorable accretions.

It was from this that Tyrrell coined his famous satirical comment on Harnack:

> The Christ that Harnack sees, looking back through nineteen centuries of Catholic darkness, is only the reflection of a Liberal Protestant face, seen at the bottom of a deep well.

In other words, Harnack had created Christ in his own image. Tyrrell’s project on the other hand was to show that the ‘idea’ of the Christ of eschatology whose “work on earth was to prepare and hasten the Kingdom” was embodied and developed in Catholicism such that there was no chasm or discontinuity between the Gospel and the Church.

Later in the book, Tyrrell contended that Catholicism is true to the Gospel of Christ because it has preserved the transcendental other – worldly perspective revealed in the eschatological framework of the original gospel. In other words, Tyrrell connects

Catholicism with the original gospel more definitely and confidently than Loisy had done.

There is a shorter second section of *Christianity at the Crossroads* in which Tyrrell asks whether there is any prospect of a universal religion and, if there is, whether a transformed Catholicism could assume that role. This is an enquiry he pursues having considered the question in the light of the study of religions and the psychology of religion. When he speaks of a transformed Catholicism, he means a Catholicism that has freed itself from the trammels of Roman (that is Vatican – centred) bureaucracy and argues that Catholicism offers greater promise of becoming a universal religion because it:

> …is more nearly a microcosm of the world of religions than any other known form; we find [there] nearly every form of religious expression, from the lowest to the highest, pressed together and straining towards unification and coherence.

Tyrrell's defence of the Christian religion in its Catholic expression is more radical than Loisy's and, it can be argued, springs from a more fervent belief. Loisy's comment in his *Mémoires* about the differences of approach adopted in *L'Évangile et L'Église* and *Christianity at the Crossroads* is very much to the point:

> Between [Tyrrell's} modernism and that of *L'Évangile et L'Église* there is the distance which separates a very ardent mysticism from the simple examination of a given belief, of a given situation. Of *L'Évangile et L'Église* it has been said that it was quite Catholic, but hardly Christian in the Protestant sense of the word. Tyrrell's book, on the other hand, is thoroughly Christian but hardly Catholic.

Conclusion

You may wonder why I have chosen as my subject a theological tendency which effectively came to an end in 1910, the year in which Pius X, in his *motu proprio*, *Sacrorum antistitum*, imposed upon all clergy the taking of what came to be known

as the anti-modernist oath. The requirement was lifted by Pope Paul VI in 1967 to be replaced by a Profession of Faith.

I chose it in part because its history is important to those who would understand the Catholic tradition as it exists and develops today. Harvey Hill, the editor and co-author of *By Those Who Knew Them: French Modernists Left, Right and Centre*, a book published in 2008 to mark the centenary of the condemnation of Modernism, writes in his introduction that centenaries can become mere occasions for looking back. However, as Hill argues, looking back at Modernism and its condemnation does more than mark an interval. Emile Poulat, the distinguished French church historian whose work has focussed principally on Modernism during the period 1890-1910, contends that the watershed moment for Catholicism in the 20th century was not Vatican II but Modernism. "The fundamental issue of the Modernist crisis is, in the end, the status of truth and above all that of religious truth … in contemporary thought." And I think I would want to add to that, the status of ecclesiastical authority in relation to religious truth.

Germane to this is the observation by the Jesuit theologian, Walter Burghardt, that a lack of a sense of one's history can result in a lack of a sense of one's identity (or, to express it more directly: if you don't know where you come from you don't know who you are). For those Roman Catholics born after Vatican II that council seems like ancient history and some may wonder how it impinges on their lives. An understanding of Modernism, which includes an understanding of the historical process and pluralism – issues not without vitality during the 20th century – is essential to any informed appreciation of Vatican II. Without that understanding it is difficult to understand what the council set out to do either with respect to its creative reforms or in those moments when it sought to maintain continuity with the past.

Those considerations remain important to all of us who stand in the Catholic tradition.

Roger Turner