

TRANSCENDENCE IN THE MODERNIST CRISIS

I

What light can an examination of the ideas of the Modernists on transcendence shed on contemporary theological developments? Does the Modernist critique of religious knowledge give us a parallel, or a perspective? Commentators who have reflected on the two periods as a whole have by and large emphasized parallelism, if not simply continuity.

The most illuminating approach to the present crisis within the Roman Catholic body . . . is to treat it as one more, somewhat belated, frenzied and messy attempt to negotiate the hazardous perspectives opened by the Romantic movement and the new historicism on the traditional idea of dogma and history. But this particular crisis, released perhaps unintentionally by the late Pope John, is clearly the resurgence, at an apparently more propitious moment, of the Modernist controversy.¹

This opinion of an anonymous reviewer in the *Times Literary Supplement* has a certain distance which is lacking in the comment of Jacques Maritain in his memoir, *Le Paysan de la Garonne*: for the great French philosopher and theologian some post-conciliar intellectual trends make the Modernist crisis appear to be "simply a case of hay fever." So-called "intellectual" circles seem to him to be involved in "an apostasy of immanence" which they dishonestly attribute to the spirit of the Council: yet these people persist in calling themselves Christian.² Maritain is angry: perhaps confused: he is not alone. How is one to distinguish this particular historical moment, one of ferment and fertility in religious thought, from the long and complicated crisis of the 1890s and 1910s? Is the parallel exact? Are the issues the same? Are Catholic thinkers wrestling today with the same great issues which the men of the nineteenth century faced: are they still seeking to come to terms with that world of

¹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, August 26, 1966, p. 746.

² J. Maritain, *Le Paysan de la Garonne* (Paris, 1966) p. 16.

"progress, liberalism, and civilization" which Pius IX anathematized (as it had been "lately introduced"³) in 1864? Are they still flirting with the naturalism, immanentism, relativism, Kantian fideism, and agnosticism condemned by St. Pius X in 1907?

These comparative questions are more difficult than they sound. Systems may be profitably compared but neither Modernist nor contemporary thought is systematic. Even the comparative study of the ideas of individual men across time is an immensely difficult undertaking because new words are used for old concepts, and new concepts emerge under old signs. The liberation of Christian and secular historiography from the burden of historicism, the emergence of philosophies of phenomena, existence, and language to fill the field that once lay empty between the 19th century extremes of positivism and idealism, and the displacement of the Eurocentricity which had marked even the best of post-Revolutionary Christian thought are three rather significant factors impeding any simple comparison of our historical moment with that of the Modernist crisis. We must also ask: if the world has changed in these sixty years, has not the Church as well? The men of the Modernist years lived in the modern world and the Catholic Church of Vatican I: for them, theology was impacted in political Catholicism and anti-clericalism. We live in the post-modern world and the Christian Church of post-Vatican II: for us, ecumenism and secularity are the context. Our comparisons then must have at least four terms, not two: and an unlimited number of human and national variables as well. These strictures are not meant to inhibit comparative study, but to suggest that as we undertake it, we should look for perspectives rather than parallels.⁴

II

The passage of time has not only neutralized many aspects of the controversy, it has also increased the documentation available to the historian and produced one or two new studies as well. As Canon

³ Apologists for the Pope must put the emphasis on the last phrase of the document. Cf. Roger Aubert, "Religious Liberty from 'Mirari Vos' to the 'Syllabus'", *Concilium*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (September 1965) pp. 49-57.

⁴ Cf. J. Ratté, "Crisis and Comparison," *America*, Vol. 117, No. 2 (July 8, 1967) pp. 35-37.

Aubert points out in his recent survey of this literature, attention has focused mainly on French Modernism and especially on the philosophical and theological responses to the critical work of Loisy.⁵ In addition to the several volumes of correspondence published from the Blondel Archives,⁶ and a critical edition of an important memoir of the life of Loisy,⁷ there are several monographs, of which the most important is Emile Poulat's comprehensive volume, the first of two, *Histoire, Dogma, et Critique dans la Crise Moderniste*.⁸ The significance of those years and their ideas has impressed American and English students: studies of von Hügel and Blondel will soon be published in Washington,⁹ and we are fortunate in having since 1964 excellent presentations and translations of Blondel's "Letter on Apologetics" and the letter on "History and Dogma."¹⁰ The impression made by this literature is inevitably many-sided. As if to make up for the excesses of Modernist and integrist polemic these volumes are with few exceptions consistently objective and even-tempered; even interpretive works strive to locate judgments of value in the widest context.

Yet three points deserve immediate comment, since they lead us to a consideration of the major positions taken by those then known as Modernists.

⁵ Roger Aubert, "Recent Literature on the Modernist Movement," *Historical Investigations: Concilium*, Vol. 17 (New York, 1966) pp. 91-108. Aubert also surveys materials relating to the Italian movement, to Baron von Hügel, and to the anti-Modernist repression.

⁶ The most controversial of these is Rene Marle's *Au Coeur de la Crise Moderniste, le Dossier Inédit d'une Controverse* (Paris, 1960) which should be corrected by Poulat's presentation of the documents, and his discussion in the *Révue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 41 (1963), p. 1163-1166.

⁷ *Alfred Loisy, sa Vie, son Oeuvre, par A. Houlin et F. Sartiaux*, a manuscript edited . . . by Emile Poulat (Paris, 1960).

⁸ Tournai, 1962. The second volume will deal with the controversy surrounding Edouard LeRoy's *Dogme et Critique*. The first volume focuses on Loisy's *L'Évangile et l'Église* and not on LeRoy as is suggested by Aubert, *art cit*, p. 93.

⁹ J. J. Heaney, *The Modernist Crisis*, on von Hügel; J. M. Somerville, *Total Commitment*, on Blondel. [Corpus Books]

¹⁰ Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, texts presented and translated by Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (New York, 1964).

The first element to be emphasized is the sense of complexity, confusion and incompleteness which both documents and interpretations force on the reader. Misunderstandings were piled upon misunderstandings as individuals hammered out their own positions and tried to alter the opinions of others in a truly massive correspondence which criss-crossed western Europe. The abbé Werhlé writes enthusiastically to his philosopher-friend Maurice Blondel, author of the incomprehensible essay *L'Action*: The troublesome exegete Loisy has produced a marvelous little book, on the gospel and the church. Blondel hears the same from Pere Laberthonnière. He reads a few chapters and likes it: the man is doing the same thing in criticism that he hopes to do in philosophy. Then doubts begin: within a short while Blondel is engaged in a long series of exchanges with Loisy with a simple theme: the latter's historicism is as dangerous to a revival of religion as is the extrinsicism of the old orthodoxy. The two men reach an impasse and the debate shifts across the channel. Von Hügel finds Blondel leaning too far towards the mystical: his "Panchristism" is as idiosyncratic as Loisy's insistence on the limitations of the knowledge of Jesus. Another impasse. Meanwhile the same abbé Werhlé and von Hügel disagree on christology. And all the while Loisy's book, the famous *L'Évangile et l'Église*, and Blondel's rejoinder, *Histoire et Dogme* are being subjected to public praise and attack, with the progressive historians of Paris and Toulouse forced to choose between a fellow-colleague whose historicism is shattering their hopes for a sane and serviceable criticism, and a philosopher whose theories of action and tradition seem to undercut the rationale of their work just as effectively. Meanwhile theology is (apparently) being left to the extremists of the far right who say: there is no modern Catholicism, no large, no practical, no social Catholicism, but only the one true faith which makes men virtuous on earth and happy forever in heaven.¹¹ The point of complexity is made even more directly when we note that the correspondence for the debate on Loisy's book and Blondel's letter, which does not include any material from the world beyond the small circle of

¹¹ Emile Poulat, *Histoire, Dogme et Critique dans la Crise Moderniste* (Tournai: 1962) p. 611.

Blondel's correspondents, and which has been intensively edited by René Marlé, covers 356 pages.

The second residue left by the literature is one of crisis. Crisis in faith, and crisis in apologetic: crisis in the failing efforts of Catholic Christianity to bring the gospel to the world, and crisis even in its ability to keep its members in the faith of their fathers—and their childhood. Maud Petre, Tyrrell's friend and autobiographer put both questions: "What are we to do with religious dogmas when scientific dogmas give them the lie? What are we to do with religious beliefs when earthly knowledge either refuses its support, as in history, or seems to undermine its basis, as in science?"¹²

The crisis looking outward meant that those who were sensitive to its reality were willing to risk a great deal to make Catholicism relevant to a scientific, if not scientific, generation; the crisis within meant that it was almost impossible to carry on detached, sustained, objective theological inquiry and discourse, since every theological question could appear as a statement of doubt or disbelief. The inquiring narrator of Marcel Hébert's *Souvenirs d'Assise* is accused of agnosticism. He replies: "I am not agnostic, because I affirm the Divine; but what is the Divine?"¹³ What is noteworthy is not only the fact that his answer makes the Christian revelation symbolic, but the fact that the attempt to make an inquiry is overshadowed by an accusation and a defense. In this connection one also notes the concern of intellectuals *for* intellectuals in the controversy. Hébert, in his own self defense noted that he was only trying to find "formulae, hypotheses" which would make sense to the intellectual cast of cultivated minds;¹⁴ Tyrrell saw his vocation as one to the "moribund Catholics" of fashionable Farm Street, and to men like the "Professor of Anthropology" to whom he addressed the letter which brought his dismissal from the Society of Jesus.¹⁵ In the novel in which Mrs. Wilfrid Ward fictionalized the issues and personalities of English

¹² Maud D. Petre, *My Way of Faith* (London) p. 209.

¹³ Marcel Hébert, *Souvenirs d'Assise* (Paris, 1899) p. 53.

¹⁴ Letter to Cardinal Richard, 17 September, 1901, in A. Houtin, *Un Prêtre Symboliste, Marcel Hébert* (Paris, 1925) pp. 142-3; cited in Jean Rivière, *Le Modernisme dans l'Église* (Paris, 1929) p. 148.

¹⁵ J. Ratté, *Three Modernists* (New York, 1967) pp. 198-203.

Modernism, a figure based on Lamennais but strongly reminiscent of von Hügel explains "the time is coming . . . when the new knowledge will no longer be the possession of the solitary student, but will come out into the busy world and be found on railway bookstalls, on the tables of the club and the messroom."¹⁶

Long before the day of the paperback and *Time* magazine announcing the death of God, the men and women of the Modernist crisis were driven by a sense of the urgency to reconcile tradition and science, transcendence and the world of modern man, before the new ideas, and even their own debates, should invade a world already politically democratic, and potentially democratic in religion as well. The mood was clearly defensive, and many besides von Hügel sensed that Catholicism "had declined as a great intellectual culture and rich mental training school . . . the culture and the school lie now, very largely, elsewhere; and I do not say to gain, but even fully to retain, such culture and such training within the Roman communion is now distinctly difficult."¹⁷ Of course this sense of cultural isolation and inferiority was nothing new for the Catholic intellectual: one thinks immediately of Acton's effort in the previous generation. But now the process of acculturation between Catholicism and modern culture was intensified by the crisis of science and belief within the Catholic intellectual world.

The third impression left by a synoptic consideration of the literature of the crisis is the strongest and I would assume most germane to the concerns of much of contemporary thought. Through the complexity and through the cultural and apologetical self-consciousness one central question obtained: how is religion, especially the Christian faith based on the revelation of the New and Old Testaments, to understand the relationship between what we would call transcendence and the world of man, and what the religious literature of that period referred to as "the natural and the supernatural realms"? All of the specific questions debated by the Modernists and their critics—the rights of criticism, the exclusively

¹⁶ Mrs. Wilfrid Ward (Josephine Mary Hope-Scott), *Three Novels Out of Due Time* (London, 1933), p. 189.

¹⁷ Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *Selected Letters 1896-1924* (London, 1928) p. 302.

eschatological character of the synoptic gospels, the nature of the divine and human knowledge of Jesus, the character of the gospels as the products, and not the origins, of faith, the nature of the church and the growth of dogma, the character of the magisterium, the relationship of Christianity to other religions—should be seen as issues clustering around the central theological question: the reality of God and man's knowledge of that reality.

But I must hasten to add that the image of an atomic cluster is not accurate if one imagines that this central or nuclear question was constantly and consciously addressed even in non-definitional terms. If one is looking for original theology, or for an explicit discussion of the supernatural in Modernist literature, one is soon disappointed. Yet except for the anti-theists or a-theists of the extreme left, men like Houtin and Turmel, who found Loisy's theism as annoying as Rome found it threatening, the Modernists took the problem of transcendence very seriously indeed: so seriously that their theology, chastened by their experience of what Leslie Dewart has called "unconditional belief" was largely negative.¹⁸ A liberating conceptual agnosticism was the general goal. Von Hügel phrased it in properly personal terms when he wrote to his niece: "If I could understand religion as I understand that two and two make four, it would not be worth understanding. Religion can't be clear if it's worth having. To me, if I can see things through and through, I get uneasy—I feel it's a fake. I know I have left something out, I've made some mistake. . . . We have not got to invent God, nor to hold him. He holds us . . . I want you to hold very clearly the *otherness* of God."¹⁹

III

But it would be misleading to let any one of the thinkers of this period be spokesman for the group. Our proper procedure is to consider serially the ideas of four major figures in the crisis on the central question of the knowledge men have of the supernatural through, in, or in spite of the world, and then perhaps to attempt a summary generalization.

¹⁸ Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief* (New York, 1966) p. 209.

¹⁹ Gwendolen Greene, *Letters from Baron von Hügel to a Niece* (London, 1928) p. xviii.

The territory marked out by the Modernists was an uninhabited and largely unchartered land bordered on two sides by mountains made of different stone, but equally impregnable to the freedom of transcendence. To one side lay the range called rationalist, with its major peaks, Scientism, Positivism, and Materialism. The men who lived in those hills acknowledged no transcendence, and by and large no religion, though some of their members, camped dangerously close to the plain, around the empty tent of Renan, spoke of a religion of humanity, but only metaphorically. Into these mountains climbed some whom the encyclical condemned as 'rationalist', meaning one who, "while well aware of the incompatibility of the Catholic faith with the outcome of his critical research, attempted to conceal this divorce as long as possible so as to safeguard his ecclesiastical position."²⁰ Here historians have located the Italian Salvatore Minocchi, the historian Albert Houtin, and the critic Joseph Turmel. Near them wandered the young priest-teacher, Marcel Hébert, whose passage from "despotic Catholicism" to free thought and socialism was grounded on the apparently irrefutable scientific conclusions of Loisy's *L'Évangile et l'Église*. For Hébert and for other idealists the Christian passage to transcendence through the mountains of modern naturalism had been closed by Loisy's work, though in his case the failure of Catholic philosophy and the conviction that God was "the last idol" preventing mankind from fulfilling its destiny had preceded the critical "proof": that the "objective motifs" of the faith—"the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch, the authorship of the fourth gospel, above all, the fact of a Jesus *really* (honestly interpreted in a material, historical sense) conceived and born of a virgin, *really* resurrected, having *really* founded a church to which he *really* wished to transmit and had transmitted the supernatural powers received from God his father—" as traditionally understood "by the letter" had all evaporated.²¹

The responsibility for Hébert's crisis does not lie with Loisy alone. For Hébert had moved to the hills of free thought from the other

²⁰ Aubert, "Recent Literature," p. 103, Cf. A. Agnoletto, *Salvatore Minocchi. Vita e opere* (1869-1943) (Brescia, 1964).

²¹ Poulat, *Histoire*, p. 320.

range which Blondel called Extrinsic, with its peaks fixism, veterism, and scholasticism. From its dogmatic fortresses the Roman theologians shot arrows across the valley, and into it: no middle ground was to be admitted between those who denied the supernatural and those who possessed it through the immutable scriptures, dogmas, devotions, and authority of the Roman Catholic Church.

Before describing the attempts of those in the inbetween, two brief comments on this geographical model. The first is that it is largely based on the schematization given to the controversy by Maurice Blondel. It was he who developed it, first in his correspondence with Loisy and von Hügel,²² and subsequently elaborated it more fully in the letter on "History and Dogma," in which he strove to show how the "method of immanence" properly understood as a blend of tradition and the philosophy of will provided a middle term between the positivism of history and the positivism of what Tyrrell called "theologism." But the historian is encouraged in using this model by the fact that it was implicitly accepted by most of the men who were trying to find a way of guaranteeing both transcendence and nature, including Loisy, who of course rejected the position he was assigned in it. The second point is that the two extremes here symbolized were paralleled within the circle of the Modernists or quasi-Modernists. On the left stood Loisy: on the right Blondel. Both might be lumped together as heretics by the "watch dogs of orthodoxy," one of a rationalist, one of an immanentist cast; both might be lumped together as pathetic proofs of the impossibility of modernizing Catholicism by the liberal Protestant and/or the free thinker:²³ but within the modernist effort their views stood for the conflicting claims of critical history and philosophical theology, and hence of nature and super-nature.

Our point of departure for this survey of the plain should be the Irishman George Tyrrell, for Tyrrell, though powerfully worked on by the ferment of continental thought, shaped his position as much from his scholastic training, his study of Newman, and his pastoral

²² See especially Marlé, *Au Coeur de la Crise Moderniste*, pp. 70-133, and Poulat, *Histoire*, pp. 513-547.

²³ George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London, 1910) p. xviii.

experience as he did from reading Loisy and Blondel.²⁴ His thought embodied that emphasis on action and personal experience which was contemporaneously adumbrated by Blondel. Thus it is an important theological fact that Tyrrell worried all his life about the enduring images from childhood whereby the supernatural was fixed: Jesus "as an insipid, long-haired female," heaven as a real third story in the house of the universe presided over by "Mrs. Heaven . . . with a huge cap tied under her chin and a red plaid shawl folded across her capacious bosom" and "Gaud" (as distinct from the pagan "gods") as an absence symbolized by punishment: the figure of an "ugly Jane" from his moral picture book, an unfortunate little girl with her hair in a net who had been fixed permanently with her tongue stuck out as punishment by "a justly enraged heaven" for the evil habit of making "grimaces before the glass."²⁵

Seminary years and adult life extended this experience of the imprisoned transcendent: metaphysics replaced magic. He wrote that to say to the enquiring mind that "God was a spirit helped little, since for me (as, also, indeed, for most adults) a spirit was but an attenuated body, which, in spite of all assertions to the contrary, labored under the chief limitations of matter."²⁶ Organized devotionism affected his seminary experience: when he was asked why he had joined the novitiate Tyrrell began to mumble about sin and reparations: "No," said the examiner, "that's not it"—just as if it were a riddle. "Well, what is it?" said I. "The glory of God and the salvation of souls." "Oh, very well: the glory of God and the salvation of souls." "That's right," he said, and scored it down accordingly.²⁷

In his mature work beginning in 1899, Tyrrell developed a philosophy of religious knowledge which emphasized in a variety of arguments and arrangements his belief that revelation was a deposit of faith which was first a law of prayer and life, second, a law of belief. He held that dogma and theology were alike, and that both

²⁴ George Tyrrell, *The Autobiography and Life of George Tyrrell*, ed. M. D. Petre, 2 vols. (London, 1912) II, p. 92.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-9.

²⁶ Tyrrell, *Autobiography and Life*, I, p. 70.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

had to be judged by the law of prayer they were shaped to preserve, just as in natural science the hypothesis "must square with the facts." "Devotion and religion existed before theology, in the way that art existed before art criticism, reasoning before logic, and speech before grammar."²⁸ Tyrrell protested repeatedly against the "super-rationalism" whereby theologians wrongly argued that they had fixed transcendence. He was so overwhelmed by the tension between the intransigence of the magisterium in the face of all calls for change and the challenge of the consistent eschatology of Weiss and Loisy, that he rejected the hope of the liberals and progressives, like Wilfrid Ward and von Hügel, that the gradual acceptance of the results of critical scholarship, aided by the dissemination of Newman's theory of development, would save the Christian religion. Tyrrell feared that if the Church really accepted the implications of development as well as the eschatological reading of the gospel, she would be absorbed by modern rational and material culture just as she had once absorbed the Hellenic world view. In the interval he searched for a theological formulation which would preserve the gospel and the church Loisy had sundered.²⁹

There *was* a revelation: there *was* a transcendent reality and it *was* manifest in Jesus Christ: but everything the Catholic believed was "an analogue or metaphor" substituting for an original experience of the divine, given to the apostles, but now "withdrawn from view."³⁰ The evident impasse reached by making dogma, and theological consideration of dogma, equivalent as relative conceptual devices or analogies for transcendence—thus fixing an apparently unbridgeable gap between the revelation of transcendence in Jesus Christ and the faith of the believer—was overcome first by his conviction that "the spirit of Christ has lived and developed in the collective life of the faithful,"³¹ and later by his belief that the "religious sense" operated immanently in men who were open to it: the soul of every man was *naturaliter christiana*. This religious sense, or "consciousness," was universal: it was not a moral principle, but the ability to respond

²⁸ George Tyrrell, *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (London, 1907) p. 105.

²⁹ Ratté, *Three Modernists*, pp. 183-191.

³⁰ Tyrrell, *Autobiography and Life*, II, p. 216.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 215-219.

to God, and the force which linked "the life of religion with the rest of our life," proving that "the latter demands the former."³² Knowledge of God through immanence was to be seen as intimately bound up with knowledge of him through revelation: growth occurred in the former, and thus preserved life in the latter, even though it remained fixed in the apostolic era. The correlation between the two, between the revelation of immanence and that of history in Jesus Christ, was made up by the *consensus fidelium*: the "people of God," and "theoreticians" like the Modernists, not the theologians of Rome.³³ The followers of Jesus must evolve new symbols, sacraments, and institutions to express the notion of immortality—the linking beyond time of man with the transcendent—which was taught by Jesus when he preached the kingdom, and which was entirely dependent on the example of his life and death and resurrection.³⁴ Thus all dogmas, all theologies, were "symbols of the transcendent": we need hope, rather than faith; "Our best God is but an idol, a temple made with hands in which the Divine will is as little to be confined as in our Hell-Purgatory-Heaven schematization."³⁵

The Modernists believed that transcendence had been lost by the liberal Protestants in their moral gospel, abandoned by the free-thinkers, and obscured in Roman Catholicism by an official theology or ideology which had tried to comprehend, rather than apprehend, the supernatural. Tyrrell expressed an extremely personal, and person-oriented, attempt to liberate the transcendent without losing it. He located it in the gospel moment, and in every open human moment where life and action apprehended the supernatural as an inward extension of the natural. His concern for the pragmatic or "life-value" of dogma was paralleled by that of the French layman, Edouard Le Roy, who wrote in *Dogme et Critique* against the "narrowly intellectualist conception of dogma"³⁶ and argued that the whole structure of Christian teaching would lose its legitimacy unless its moral meaning was given first place. Tyrrell's search for faith

³² George Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi* (London, 1903) pp. 80-83; 86.

³³ George Tyrrell, *Through Scylla*, pp. 60-63.

³⁴ George Tyrrell, *Christianity at the Crossroads* (London, 1910) p. 146.

³⁵ George Tyrrell, *Autobiography*, II, p. 416.

³⁶ Edouard LeRoy, *Dogma et Critique* (Paris, 1907) p. 15.

and service within the "pagan" Church which summed up the religious experiment of mankind was motivated by the pre-occupation or obsession which another philosopher, Père Laberthonnière, in a letter to Blondel, described as a search for "*un Christ bien réel et bien humain*."³⁷ In the spirit of that search Tyrrell wrote to von Hügel: "What a relief if one could conscientiously wash one's hands of the whole concern! But then there is that strange Man upon His cross, who drives one back again and again."³⁸

The approach to transcendence through history and the world of human action, and the search for a real and human Christ were focused in the debate between Loisy and Blondel. In the 1890s Loisy had troubled the authorities in Paris and Rome by his critical articles on the Old Testament and Blondel had struggled to explain himself, first to the world of "reason and of immanence" which attacked the doctrine of "pure transcendence" the French academics thought he was putting forth in his famous thesis, *L'Action* and in his apologetic writings,³⁹ and then to the world of orthodoxy, in which he was accused of the heresy of arguing for the "necessity" of the supernatural.⁴⁰ Their confrontation involved other intellectuals, especially von Hügel, and established, in closer relationship to the contemporary state of Catholic exegesis and philosophy, the parameters of the debate on man's relation to transcendence.

In Max Weber's phrase, Alfred Loisy was religiously unmusical. Like Weber, and so many other men of his generation, he was at the same time obsessed with the social meaning of religious experience. A small, lonely, ambitious man, a pioneer in critical science and a master of a clear and controlled prose, he decided twenty years before the Modernist crisis that the Catholic Church, in order to continue its saving mission, would have to go far beyond the program presented by the progressives who asked for a translation of her

³⁷ Maurice Blondel, Lucien Laberthonnière, ed. by Claude Tresmontant. *Correspondence Philosophique* (Paris, 1961) 30 March 1903, p. 161.

³⁸ Tyrrell to von Hügel, Dec. 5, 1902.

³⁹ Frédéric Lefèvre, *L'Itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel* (Paris, 1928) p. 87. For a succinct presentation of the Catholic opposition to Blondel, and the extrication of his work from the condemnation, see James M. Somerville, "Maurice Blondel 1861-1949," *Thought*, XXXVI, 142 (1961) pp. 374-375.

⁴⁰ *Correspondence Philosophique*, p. 151.

teaching into the idiom of the 19th century. To his "ideal Church" he insisted: "It is not your formulas that you must translate for us into a language intelligible to the men of our age; it is rather your ideas themselves, your absolute affirmations, your theory of the universe, the conception you have of your own history, that you must renew, correct, and transform."⁴¹ His program was radical, his own religious position ambiguous: but if he made extreme claims for the autonomy of history, and ultimately sundered the world of God and the world of man, it was in part because there was no biblical theology with which to answer him—and for that matter, with which to deal with the much more judicious and thoughtful critical work of Lagrange and his contemporaries.⁴²

Loisy's position, obscured in *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1902), made clear in *Autour d'un Petit Livre* (1903), was in its essentials simple. The Christian gospel was the product of the faith of the first followers of Christ. Its message was exclusively messianic and eschatological. Jesus, who entered history as man, not as God, felt himself to be the messiah and died for his belief. But if he announced the kingdom, it was the church which came. The "impulse of will" or "soul of Jesus," originally expressed in the messianic teaching, was given new forms. The theological formulations of Paul, who was "compelled to explain, since he could not narrate," and of the fourth gospel, and the whole rest of the history of Christian doctrine were successive symbolical representations of the original mystery, which is itself inaccessible to the historian. "The Church can fairly say that, in order to be at all times what Jesus desired the society of his friends to be, it had to become what it has become; for it has become what it had to be, in order to save the gospel by saving itself."⁴³

The theologian and the man of faith could make larger statements: the historian could not. Jesus entered history as man, not as God: the raw materials of historical science did not reveal transcendent-

⁴¹ Alfred Loisy, *Mémoires pour Servir à l'Histoire Religieuse de Notre Temps*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1930-31) I, p. 121.

⁴² He does not deserve the treatment of the article "Loisy" in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*—"although practicing his priesthood he was a complete atheist." (Vol. 8, p. 973).

⁴³ Alfred Loisy, *The Gospel and the Church* (New York, 1912) p. 151.

ence any more than did the rest of the *natural* world. "God does not show himself at the end of the astronomer's telescope. The geologist does not find him in his samples, nor the chemist at the bottom of his test tube. God may very well exist through all the world, but he is in no way the proper object of science."⁴⁴ These public statements paralleled a personal religious stance: Loisy's historicism was apparently Christian to those of his readers who admired the emergence of a sophisticated (and polemically anti-liberal Protestant) critical mind, but for himself, the personal incarnation of God was "a philosophical myth," and not simply because human philosophy had not yet developed a more adequate notion of personality than those of the Fathers and the Councils. "More pantheist-positivist-humanitarian than Christian" in 1904,⁴⁵ he still insisted in 1936 that there was a "moral and spiritual supernatural" reality at work in human history, and he hoped for a new religion, "crown of the Christian religion and of every other," concentrated "on the perfecting of humanity in the life of the spirit, that is, in communion with God."⁴⁶

Loisy's historicism distressed Maurice Blondel, the philosopher of Aix, even more than the extrinsic, automatic, dogmatism with which he was wrestling in his attempts to develop a philosophy of will and action which would open up a passage-way to transcendence through modern thought. He saw much of value in Loisy's work: "from the position when the author stands, Catholicism has never been better extricated from Protestant anarchy and ultramontane authoritarianism."⁴⁷ Loisy was unable—or unwilling—to admit the implications of his austere historical approach for traditional christology, but on the other hand his vivid presentation of the gospel made Blondel realize that in orthodox teaching "one imagines a Christ who is a man only in appearance and from the outside, who, by a kind of fraud, speaks like a man and thinks like a God."⁴⁸

But when Loisy wrote that history—meaning historical study

⁴⁴ Alfred Loisy, *Autour d'un Petit Livre* (Paris, 1903) p. 9.

⁴⁵ Loisy, *Mémoires*, II, p. 397.

⁴⁶ Alfred Loisy, *The Origins of the New Testament* (London, 1950) p. 32. Cf. p. 329, p. 9.

⁴⁷ *Correspondences Philosophiques*, p. 155.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

"knows only phenomena, with their sequence and their connection; it perceives the manifestation of ideas and their evolution; it does not reach to the heart of the matter" he revealed the uselessness of his apologetic for a re-discovery of transcendence.⁴⁹ Blondel believed that in his historical positivism Loisy was if anything more "scholastic" than the orthodox of the mountains on the other side.⁵⁰ Loisy might be right in establishing the primacy, in the gospel, of the messianic and eschatological message: but he was wrong in failing to see that that teaching was not only normative for its symbolic adumbration, but controlled it. The heart of transcendence in the Christian revelation could be recovered by a new theology in which historical criticism was provided with a philosophical "prolegomena for all future exegesis . . . a critical reflexion on the conditions of a science of revelation and of all sacred literature." Blondel believed that the building blocks of that introduction lay in the concepts of tradition, and the philosophy of action which he had sketched. A single sentence from a letter to von Hügel fixed the issue: to distinguish his ideas from those of Loisy he commented: "*evolution* is the result of external pressures; *development* is continuous creation starting from a germ which transubstantiates its nourishment."⁵¹ Loisy's evolution made mankind the norm and vessel of transcendence. But since Loisy lacked an epistemology, whatever mystery lay in the religion of humanity was inaccessible. Loisy might argue that he was only doing history, but in fact when he was done, theology was left "with an empty chair."⁵²

Blondel set the task for a new apologetic clearly in the essay *History and Dogma*: a new theology of "integral realism" must grow up to resolve the pseudo-dilemma which had put facts and formulations in tension: "As against those who offer us a Christianity so divine that there is nothing human, living, or moving about it, and those who involve it deeply in historical contingencies and make it

⁴⁹ Loisy, *Petit Livre*, p. 10 Blondel was upset by other comments. Cf. Marle, *Au Coeur de la Crise Moderniste* (Paris, 1960) p. 52 and pp. 71-113 *passim*.

⁵⁰ *Correspondence Philosophique*, p. 159.

⁵¹ Marle, *Au Coeur*, p. 129.

⁵² *Correspondence Philosophique*, p. 158. (19 February 1903).

so dependent upon natural factors that it retains nothing but a diffused sort of divinity, one must show it to be both more concrete and more universal, more divine and more human, than words can express."⁵³ The philosopher could not answer the question, is there or is there not a supernatural realm:⁵⁴ but he could point to the logical as well as the historical necessity for a radical openness to the question. The Christian, acting within the context of the living tradition of the Church, could. The elements of the integral realism—rejected by Loisy, though also misunderstood—⁵⁵ were individual and social. The individual element was the philosophy of will which destined man to constant over-coming. "At every stage the temptation arises to halt, to be satisfied with ourselves, to dig ourselves in at the point which we have reached. At every stage we are, not constrained, but sincerely obliged, to pass beyond."⁵⁶ The social element was provided by the tradition of the Church—understood as something more than "a simple substitute for written teaching" but essentially like it. Rather, it is "an explanatory principle and a source of movement which accounts for the double coming and going—the movement from the historical data to a faith which goes beyond what these provide for an ordinary witness—and the movement from faith to really objective affirmations and to realities which constitute Sacred History, inserted into the heart of ordinary, everyday history, and incarnating the ideas in the facts." In moments of crisis in faith, tradition "presents the conscious mind with elements previously held back in the depths of faith and practiced, rather than expressed, systematized, or reflected upon . . . turned lovingly towards the past where its treasure lies, it moves towards the future, where it conquers and illuminates. . . . It frees us from the very Scriptures on which it

⁵³ Blondel, *History and Dogma* (Dru) p. 286. Cf. also p. 229 for a succinct statement of the extrinsic position on history.

⁵⁴ "To establish that it is impossible validly to deny it, is not to maintain that 'it is' (faith being, by hypothesis, a gratuitous gift), but that 'it is possible', since it is not possible to prove its impossibility." Maurice Blondel, *L'Action* (Paris, 1893) p. 390. The translation is Fr. Somerville's, *art. cit.*, p. 388.

⁵⁵ Alfred Loisy, *Simplex Réflexions sur le décret . . .* (Ceffonds, 1908) p. 209.

⁵⁶ Blondel, *L'Action* (1937), p. 131. Cited in Henri Bouillard, *Blondel et la Christianisme* (Paris, 1961) pp. 238-9; Dru and Trethowan, p. 85.

never ceases to rely with devout respect: it helps us to reach the real Christ whom no literary portrait could exhaust or replace, without being confined to the texts. . . ."⁵⁷

Blondel is very quotable, and he is no where more eloquent as an apologist than in this essay. But his *via media* was not at the time satisfying to very many. Loisy protested logically and forcefully against Blondel's "Panchristism": "the Christian supernatural," he wrote, "does not depend on the historical knowledge of the gospel; but the historical knowledge of the gospel reacts on the concept one has of the Christian supernatural."⁵⁸ Loisy's last word on Blondel's notion of tradition came in his memoirs 25 years later: "If faith posits facts whose attestation is essentially fictive, so much the worse for faith. That is not a method, that is the reversal of reason in the interests of a visionary mysticism." Loisy felt that it was not a method that would work for the modern world: what is needed to save religion is "positive knowledge and philosophy of history, and of man in history." If a non-historical incommensurable was needed, then one would do well to build on "the mystery of the spirit of humanity."⁵⁹

To his apologists Blondel proposed action in philosophy, tradition in Catholicism, as ways of freeing the modern world for the experience of transcendence, and of liberating the sense of God's power and presence in Christian life.⁶⁰ In the Loisy-Blondel debate we see not only the confrontation of critical and philosophical approaches to history and dogma, but also a clash of historicist and orthodox theological positions on the accessibility of the transcendence of God in Jesus Christ.⁶¹ Theology and Christology were not his topics, Loisy said repeatedly. Technically speaking they were not Blondel's, either. Baron von Hügel, the fourth figure who attracts our attention was moved by Blondel's ideas into an exchange of memoirs: he then wrote an article defending Loisy's critical position, whose implications he did not yet fully grasp. Pointing out that Loisy was of an utterly

⁵⁷ Blondel, *History and Dogma*, pp. 267, 268.

⁵⁸ Marlé, *Au Coeur*, p. 96.

⁵⁹ Loisy, *Memoires II*, pp. 230-1.

⁶⁰ Marlé, *Au Coeur*, pp. 344-356.

⁶¹ Poulat, *Histoire*, pp. 532-533.

different spiritual temperament from men like Blondel and himself—and Tyrrell and Laberthonnière and Eucken—in that he did not suffer, as they did, from “the hunger and thirst for the absolute,” von Hügel insisted all the same that Blondel had gone too far in pressing the claims even of a revived metaphysic. “Without metaphysics, no history worthfully human and significant: yes. But also, without contact with historical facts, without conviction that historical evidence, even for and even in the act of believing . . . eliminates the possibility of certain interpretations, and helps to fix the choice among those which remain—without that, no metaphysics which is not more or less hollow, more or less out of touch with reality.”⁶² Blondel was right in pointing to the presence in the synoptics of the Christ of glory, the “ultimate Christ”: but his metaphysical predilections prevented him from seeing that Jesus *became* that figure in the gospels as well. Von Hügel stood with Loisy and against the “old orthodoxy” in holding that the consciousness of Jesus was fully that of a man. Moreover, far from resolving the conflict between history and dogma, he insisted that one must always have a certain tension between the psychological self and the metaphysical self, between phenomena and divine noumena. If Loisy was putting too much transcendence into natural reality by insisting on the purely human consciousness of Jesus, then Blondel was putting too much nature into the supernatural, by insisting that Jesus possessed an entire time-transcending consciousness.⁶³ Panchristism was no answer to historicism.

Von Hügel's concern for the relationship of transcendence to history extended far beyond the confines of the controversies of 1902-1904. Von Hügel insisted on having both the God-man and the Man-God; he also insisted on avoiding the either/or mentality in every situation in which man was asked to reject some potential opening to God. His ecumenical approach was reflected in his comment on the London Times notice of him as “the greatest living apologist for the Roman Church.” Von Hügel noted in a letter next day that having

⁶² *Correspondence Philosophique*, p. 162; Marlé, *Au Coeur*, p. 126.

⁶³ Marlé, *Au Coeur* pp. 60-61; Blondel, *Histoire et Dogma* in *Premier Ecrits*, (Paris, 1956), p. 225; Poulat, *Histoire*, 576-578.

hoped to do well in the dog class he was much disconcerted at being given a first prize among cats.

The Baron not only wished to avoid choosing between Catholicism and Christianity, but between Christianity and the rest of man's religious experience. "Not even Jesus Christ and his redemption exhaust God" he wrote in 1921, and he complimented Fenelon for his devotion to Christ that was "free of all Christocentrism." In the Modernist crisis von Hügel is omnipresent through his letters, encouraging, balancing a variety of positions, always searching for a synthesis but willing to sustain a tension, ever hopeful that the intellectual revival which had been delayed for 600 years might come about. Maud Petre considered him a trimmer: his most recent biographer has praised him for playing the role which the editors of the Blondel Archives assign to the philosopher of Aix: beating a path to the future for Catholic Christianity.⁶⁴

In holding that the "central conviction and doctrine of Christianity" was the "prevenience and condescension of the real God . . . the penetration of spirit into sense, of the spaceless into space, of the eternal into time, of God into man,"⁶⁵ von Hügel also argued that modern man needed a theory of religious knowledge, which would enable him to approach transcendence anew. He never fully formulated the "critical realism" which he believed was needed to steer a course between positivism, an approach which limited the mind to direct sense perception, and idealism, which he understood as a method limited to radical immanence and subjectivism; but he suggested that it would be a cognitive process linking in a unity three elements: "indubitable sensation, clear thought, warm faith in and through action."⁶⁶ Von Hügel also wanted a common sense philosophy of trust in human reason and human instincts: comments on the limitations of critical reason to demonstrate "objective reality" are repeatedly matched by a down-to-earth recognition that the mixed

⁶⁴ Friedrich von Hügel, *Essays and Addresses, Second Series* (London, 1921) p. 218.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁶⁶ Friedrich von Hügel, *The Mystical Element in Religion* (London, 1908) I, p. 57. Cited in L. V. Lester-Garland, *The Religious Philosophy of Baron F. von Hügel*, (London, 1933).

elements of religion—the institutional and historical, the mystical or intuitive, and the intellectual and rational—are never in a stable relationship: now one, now another dominates. The end of the temporary dominance of one element did not mean the permanent dominance of another: this sense of balance and complexity—for which Tyrrell in his apocalyptic last years criticized his friend—is symbolized by the fact that the last chapter of the work in which he argued that man's existence in transcendence began in this world, the essay *Eternal Life* (1912), is devoted to "Institutional Religion." Following the advice of his spiritual adviser, von Hügel, perhaps alone of the men considered here, avoided, at the time of the crisis, the either/or mentality which its intensity thrust equally onto those who were seeking to enlarge Catholic thought, and those who resisted all change.⁶⁷

These remarks hardly encompass even referentially all the materials for an analytical history of the notions of transcendence developed by the thinkers involved in the Modernist crisis. It is impossible to convey in brief compass the richness of the context in which these debates and these books took shape. Dru suggests that Blondel wanted to mysticize French Catholicism in the way that German Catholic thought had been transformed: the remark vibrates deeply, reminding us of the choice which had been made long before in France for Bossuet over Fenelon, for political catholicism over a cultural renewal.⁶⁸ But the frame of reference was not only the Catholic tradition. Protestant and non-Christian thought did much to shape the ideas sketched above, and the web of influence and parallelism is dense and many-layered. Furthermore, we have not given proper attention to the contribution towards a liberation of Catholic thought of other thinkers whose books played a major role in the crisis, especially those of Laberthonnière and LeRoy, nor the indirect contribution of Henri Bremond's literary studies. The work of von Hügel, who alone of these men dealt directly and at great

⁶⁷ von Hügel, *Selected Letters*, p. 61.

⁶⁸ Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics* . . . p. 50. See also Alexander Dru's stimulating comparative discussion of the post-Revolutionary development of French and German Catholicism, *The Contribution of German Catholicism* (New York, 1963) pp. 7-16.

length with the concept of the supernatural in the context of the psychology of mystical experience, has only been touched upon by allusion. And the thought of Blondel has been severely restricted to the polemics of the crisis itself.

Karl Mannheim commented in 1937 on the "modern trend of thought in which the absolute, which was once a means of entering into communion with the divine, has now become an instrument used by those who profit from it, to distort . . . and conceal the meaning of the present."⁶⁹ The Modernists wanted to know the meaning of the present, secure the revelation of the past, and set a course for the future. If by 'absolute' in Mannheim's phrase we understand not the reality of transcendence, but the rigid theological orthodoxy of the late 19th century, then the Modernists should be located at the beginning of the long trend of liberation and diversification of theological inquiry which continues and grows today. But if one looks beyond the world of the Church, one must note that the trend has been away from the *divine* as well as from absolutism in the culturally conditioned structures of religious belief and practice. Thus the Modernists were working simultaneously against two pressures. They challenged the authority of orthodoxy, and appeared to many in the Church to be either releasing transcendence from history (Blondel) or burying it deep within the individual consciousness (Tyrrell) or else merging it so completely with the destinies of mankind that the universe was emptied of all meaning other than that which men could give it by their thought, their work, and their strivings for moral perfection (Loisy). Yet at the same time they were eager to speak about God and man to the 19th century world of atheism and materialism in its own language. Their double apologetic effort—and the second must be seen as subsidiary to the first—was made more complex by the fact that European intellectual life outside the Church was going through a deep and complicated sea change, as poets, physicists, psychologists and philosophers joined (with as little planning as did the Modernists in their effort) in a revolt against the positivism and historicism of their fathers. On this second secular thrust, comparison with the present also seems in order for if con-

⁶⁹ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (1937) p. 87.

temporary progressive thought in the Church continues the effort to liberate Catholicism from an exclusively scholastic approach to reality, strives for a more phenomenological approach to religious experience, turns once more to the "quest for the historical Jesus", and adumbrates new theologies of belief and action,—all in an ecumenical context unthinkable to the Modernists—, it assumes as well the task of addressing the tragic and hopeful human world of social upheaval, Marxism, cybernetics, and psychedelic search and/or cop out.

These comparisons are very rough indeed. We do not yet know enough about the Modernist period to make anything but the most tentative generalizations about its thought: and I do not know enough about contemporary theological developments to make even specific comparisons. However it does appear that the plain on which this small handful once wandered, seeking a secure place on which to stand and build, is now filled with an immense multitude, most of them with tents, no longer inclined to build—either churches or systems. A recent definition of transcendence reminds us that the word implies at one and the same time "an aspect of discontinuity, hiatus, or break" between the two realities of God and man, and "the means of passing from the one to the other . . . either in reality or knowledge." The historian of the ferment of the years before World War I can only assume that contemporary thought must locate itself in tension between these two elements, away from the notion of religion "as a purely intrahuman phenomena, for which no evidence is to be found beyond the aspirations of humanity" and closer to the concept of religion as having "a basis in evidence and metaphysics; as the effect on us of something greater than ourselves—of something greater than any purely human facts and desires."⁷⁰

Finally, I might add that if we congratulate ourselves on the achievement of Blondel—"The first great Catholic philosopher of the present age"⁷¹—who dared to insist that Catholicism is not the closed circle of Bossuet, but a circle which expands with society and history, and see in von Hügel "a forerunner of Vatican II"⁷² we must

⁷⁰ von Hügel, *Selected Letters*, pp. 333-334.

⁷¹ Blondel, *Letter*, p. 116.

⁷² *The Tablet*, Nov. 20, 1965 pp. 1291-1293.

also bear in mind, if only as a corrective to the tendencies which seem to polarize progressive and integrist thought in every age, the "intellectual suicide" forced upon many men, perhaps never to be "reconstructed," who, like Loisy, wrote what they saw through the new lens of criticism, or like Laberthonnière, and Tyrrell and LeRoy called for a creative agnosticism as they announced to the Church that it was in the midst of a crisis of belief far greater than any it had known before: a crisis which endures.

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