

ALFRED LOISY (1857-1940)

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Loisy, the outstanding figure among modernists, passed away on the eve of the French collapse last year, just before the Germans reached Ceffonds, the place of his retirement. Details of his last days are not yet available; they may never be. But we may, to some extent, agree with Miss Petre, his life-long admirer: "Well for him that he did not live to witness France's humiliation; yet one cannot but grieve when the death of great men has to pass unnoticed because a more absorbing tragedy has overshadowed such events."¹

The *Modern Churchman*, in announcing Loisy's death,² says of his life that it is "a sad story, a long story, and much of it an old story." As concerns the "old story," viz., Loisy's early conflicts with the ecclesiastical authorities, that may be read in the eleventh (1910-1911) edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. The account is from the pen of Baron von Hügel, for years Loisy's most intimate friend. The 14th (1929) edition has nothing more than a brief summary of the same article. Up to 1913 we have Loisy's autobiography in *Choses passées*, which Couchoud once called a "chef d'oeuvre de littérature intérieure, histoire sobre et dramatique d'une conscience." It appeared in New York later (1924) under the title *My Duel with the Vatican*.³ This biographical notice, however, is mostly based on Loisy's *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire religieuse de notre temps*. Its three volumes were written in 1927-1929 and published in 1930-1931, the first covering the time from 1857 to 1900, the second describing the period of the modernistic crisis (1900-1908), the third bringing his reminiscences down to 1927. Mostly his own writings of those years (letters, journals, etc.) are quoted and interpreted. He himself characterizes the *Mémoires* as "glose utile pour l'interprétation des documents d'après lesquels je les ai construits."

Alfred Firmin Loisy was born at Ambrières in French Lorraine, the descendant of a sturdy peasant family of long residence in the Champagne. "Il n'est possible d'être plus champenois que je le suis," he said afterwards, but, owing perhaps to the French Revolution, neither his father's family nor his mother's were "confits en dévotion." He made his studies at Vitry-le-François (1869), at St. Dizier (1872), and at the seminary of Châlons-sur-Marne (1874). Except for mathematics, he was always first in his class or among the first. When he entered St. Dizier, a sort of *petit séminaire*, he was still undecided about his vocation, but made up his mind

¹*Hibbert Journal*, Oct., 1940, p. 5.

²July, 1940, p. 145.

³*Mémoires*, III, 466-7.

during a retreat given by a Jesuit.⁴ During his seminary days at Châlons, he claims that he was perfectly contented, that his piety was then sincere, his devotion in prayer intense, his vocation secure. But he claims that studying theology caused him an "inquiétude insurmontable," which was increased when poring over the *Summa theologica* of St. Thomas, because he could discern no solid foundation for the daring constructions of the Scholastics. It was only through the private study of Hebrew and the Bible that he regained his composure.

In the fall of 1878 Loisy was sent to Paris to prepare for a Doctor's degree, but ill health forced him, after a few months, to return to Châlons. He was ordained to the priesthood in 1879, with a dispensation, because he was then only 22 years and 4 months old.

After acting as the parish priest of two villages in his native diocese, he went (1881) to the Institut Catholique in Paris to prepare once more for a theological degree. Mgr. Duchesne, one of the professors there, gave him Tischendorf's edition of the New Testament to study during his first vacation. Unfortunately, this study led him to the conviction that the parallel narratives of the four Gospels contained numerous contradictions, the first step, as he himself avers, toward his modernism. At the same time, he began to suspect that the traditional notion of the truth of the Bible could no longer be upheld, and that unchangeable dogmas must not be allowed to block the way for the scientific mind.⁵ Returning to Paris, he not only attended lectures at the Ecole pratique des Hautes Etudes, among them those of Ernest Renan, but also taught Hebrew and Scripture at the Institut Catholique.

Doubts soon arose about his orthodoxy, especially when he openly asserted that Isaiah 7:14, did not refer to the virgin birth of the Messiah. Nevertheless he was made doctor of theology in 1890 by the oral defense of 40 scholastic theses in Latin and by a French dissertation on the history of the canon of the Old Testament. The obligatory profession of faith was made immediately afterwards, and Loisy narrates that he was particularly moved when he came to the passage where he was to promise to interpret Scripture in accordance with the unanimous doctrine of the Fathers. He calls it a "voeu futile, et qui n'a pas de sens si on le prend à la lettre," and since, therefore, he promised nothing, he says, he felt no scruple in making the promise.

Professor now, Loisy published not only his dissertation and a bi-monthly review of his own *L'enseignement biblique*, but also his current lectures on the Bible. But the liberal views expressed in all his writings soon discredited him with his ecclesiastical superiors. Seminarians were forbidden to attend his lectures (1892), his professorship was withdrawn from him

⁴*Mémoires*, I, 26-31.

⁵*Mémoires*, I, 94-107.

(1893), and, after the encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), he was also asked to discontinue his bi-monthly.

Loisy now (1894) became chaplain to a Dominican convent and girls' school at Neuilly-sur-Seine. One reads with astonishment that at that period he had already lost the naïve faith of his youth and that he only retained one article of the Apostles' Creed, *viz.*, that Jesus died under Pontius Pilate.

In 1899, when a severe hemorrhage brought him to death's door, he resigned his chaplaincy and settled at Bellevue, in the diocese of Versailles. Because of his poor health, Rome granted him the privilege of a private chapel. In 1900 he began to lecture on biblical problems in the Ecole des Hautes Etudes, a purely secular school. He also continued to write, without, however, bringing his views more into line with Catholic doctrine and the principles of the interpretation of the Bible laid down by Leo XIII. Catholics throughout the world became more and more indignant at his high-handed manner in dealing with the sacred text, so that one might fitly speak of a universal protest. But when Leo XIII, in a letter directed to the French bishops and clergy (1899), complained of the daring and dangerous stand of some Catholic writers, Loisy had only a sneer and words of open contempt.

In his book *La Religion d'Israel* (1901)⁶ Loisy not only accepted Wellhausen's theory on the composition of the Pentateuch, but also Stade's and Gunkel's principles of a perfectly natural evolution of the religion of Israel. In the first part of his *Etudes évangéliques* (1902), where he discussed the Gospel parables, he took Adolf Jülicher for his guide and master, though Jülicher had warned his own readers that his views were incompatible with Christian exegesis. Yet when Cardinal Richard, Archbishop of Paris, censured Loisy, this admirer and follower of Jülicher showed himself highly indignant.

In 1903 appeared *Le quatrième Evangile*, a stout volume of 1000 pages. Loisy's thesis, since become famous, was that "le quatrième évangile n'est pas autre chose qu'une grande allégorie théologique et mystique." Its seeming historical accuracy is only a smoke screen; its miracles are gross exaggerations; the incidents in Jesus' discourses, such as interruptions, questions, murmurings, etc., are merely literary devices for dramatizing the author's thesis. Needless to say, Loisy denied that John the Apostle was its author, and, in the second edition (1921), also abandoned the thesis of the literary unity of the fourth Gospel, which he had brilliantly defended in the first.

Loisy himself characterized his book as "un bouleversement complet des idées reçues chez les théologiens," and a brief glance through its pages would be sufficient to prove his statement. Its manifold errors were, how-

⁶2nd ed., 1908; 3rd, 1933; English tr. *The Religion of Israel* (1910).

ever, duly pointed out by C. Chauvin⁷ and M. Lepin⁸ in France itself, and by W. Sanday⁹ in England. Sanday was particularly struck by two baffling traits: one was the tendency, if not the avowed purpose to convict the author of the Gospel of writing fiction where he professes to write fact; the other was Loisy's naïve faith in his ability to bring back as dogma what his historical criticism had destroyed.

But it was the publication of two less erudite publications that brought Loisy's troubles to a head and made his name a byword from one end of Europe to the other. The first was *L'Évangile et l'Église* (1902).¹⁰ Under pretext of refuting, "au point de vue d'histoire," Harnack's famous lectures on *Das Wesen des Christentums*, Loisy denied Christ's divinity, the divine institution of the Church, the hierarchy and the sacraments, the immutability of Catholic dogma etc. Miss Petre calls the book "his first attempt at a harmony of faith and history," a good description if meant of Loisy's faith and Loisy's idea of history. He himself speaks of its publication as "le fait qui affola complètement l'autorité ecclésiastique." He was not far wrong. Since the book, apart from its evidently heretical contents, also lacked the *Imprimatur*, it was publicly condemned by the Archbishop of Paris and other bishops, and the pages of the *Revue du clergé français* were officially closed to Loisy.

Loisy's answer to the attitude and decisions of the ecclesiastical authorities was *Autour d'un petit livre* (1903), written in the form of open letters to various ecclesiastical dignitaries and professors. He reproached the authorities with having completely misjudged the nature of his publications, claiming that he was merely a conscientious historian and unable to do anything about the fact that the historical documents do not bear out the dogmas of the church, perhaps even contradict them.¹¹

Rome's patience with Loisy was now at an end. Five of his books were placed on the *Index* (1903). After repeated urgings, Loisy offered a half-hearted submission to the Roman decision, which satisfied neither himself nor the authorities. At that time he confided to his journal: "Il y a longtemps que je ne suis plus catholique au sens officiel du mot," and a few days later: "Crois-je encore assez pour me dire catholique, et ce que je crois est-il catholique?" Let no one imagine that these were mere rhetorical questions.

⁷Les idées de M. Loisy sur le quatrième Évangile (1906).

⁸L'origine du quatrième Évangile (1907) and La valeur historique du quatrième Évangile (2 vols., 1910).

⁹The Criticism of the Fourth Gospel (1921).

¹⁰5th ed. 1929; English tr. *The Gospel and the Church* (1904; 2nd ed. 1908).

¹¹Among the many refutations let us mention Card. Billot's *De Immutabilitate Traditionis* (3rd ed. 1922).

Loisy quit Paris in 1904 and went to live at Garnay near Dreux, some 30 miles west of Paris. Except for the rare visits of the village carpenter and for Sunday vespers, he kept to himself, busying himself with his books, a little garden and a flock of hens. Since he could not get a renewal of the privilege of a private chapel, he stopped saying Mass, Nov. 1, 1906, 27 years and 4 months from his ordination, as he himself notes. In the beginning of 1907 he retired to Ceffonds in the diocese of Langres, "to end his days near his family." As he no longer considered himself a priest, he did not notify the ordinary of the place.

But the most crucial period of his life was still ahead of him. In July, 1907, appeared the decree of the Holy Office *Lamentabili sane*, by which 65 propositions were condemned and declared to be irreconcilable with Catholic doctrine. Loisy recognized most of them as his own: "C'est moi qui a fourni la plupart des soixante-cinq propositions."¹² The decree was followed, two months later, by the encyclical *Pascendi*, in which Pius X outlined the system underlying modernism and denounced it as the new heresy, nay as the synthesis of all heresies. And again two months later, the *Motu proprio Praeantia* pronounced excommunication on those who should still cling to the opinions condemned in either document.

Loisy did not think fit to apply these papal decisions to himself. Even when urged by Cardinal Merry del Val and by his own bishop, he would not hear of a formal submission. Instead, he published, early in 1908, two more books: *Les Evangiles synoptiques* (of which more anon) and *Simplex Reflexions*. Both were promptly condemned by Mgr. Amette, the new Archbishop of Paris, and Rome proceeded to the final step. He was once more asked officially to subscribe to the encyclical *Pascendi*, and when he again refused, was excommunicated *nominatim ac personaliter*. The decree was published March 7, 1908, and notification of it was posted in the parish churches of the neighborhood of Ceffonds.

An *excommunicatus vitandus* now, Loisy laid aside his clerical garb. This action failed to find the approval of von Hügel, but Loisy notes: "Pour moi, l'abandon du costume signifiait l'abandon du catholicisme."¹³ Toward the end of March appeared *Quelques lettres*, a sort of apology, made up of letters written to him during the last five years. But the general public had by that time grown tired of his case and passed the book by.

There is little to add to Loisy's life. From 1909 till 1926, while keeping his residence at Ceffonds, he lectured on the history of religion at the Collège de France; from 1924 to 1927 he also lectured at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes. The war affected him little, externally and internally,

¹²*Mémoires*, II, 546.

¹³*Mémoires*, III, 13.

though Ceffonds was not far from the ever-live front trenches, Verdun being only some 50 miles away. An outstanding event of his life was the Congrès d'histoire du Christianisme, which assembled in Paris during the week after Easter 1927 and was meant as a celebration in honor of his 70th birthday. The congress was international and many universities were represented, but Loisy felt particularly honored by the presence of delegates from 4 German universities. In the end, he was displeased with the two volumes of addresses which commemorated the *Jubilé Alfred Loisy*.¹⁴

His parish priest paid him a visit in 1930 shortly before the *Mémoires* were finished, but Loisy assured him that he had not changed his mind, that it was morally impossible for him to be reconciled with the Catholic Church. In 1932 all his books published till then were placed on the *Index*, and in 1938 those which had appeared after 1932. And so, as the *Modern Churchman* puts it, Loisy "died an excommunicate man with his contributions to Biblical research placed on the *Index expurgatorius*." May God have mercy on his soul.

We must now turn to Loisy's literary activity.

While at Ceffonds, Loisy published book after book, almost one a year, till his death. None of them caused a greater stir among Catholics than the two large volumes of *Les Évangiles synoptiques* already mentioned. His rationalism stood revealed in all its stark nakedness. The history of Jesus' infancy is treated as a pious fiction, Jesus Himself as a mere man, a dreamer, mistaken about the future: "Un ouvrier de village naïf et enthousiaste, qui croit à la fin prochaine du monde, à l'instauration d'un règne de justice, à l'avènement de Dieu sur la terre, et qui, fort de cette illusion, s'attribue le rôle principal dans l'organisation de l'irréalisable cité; qui se met à prophétiser, invitant tous ses compatriotes à se repentir de leurs péchés, afin de se concilier le Grand Juge dont la venue est imminente et sera subite comme celle d'un voleur." (I, 252)

Most of the miracle stories of the Gospels are declared to be anecdotes and legends, Christ's prophecies spurious, the resurrection unproved and unprovable. In particular, Loisy claimed that Christ neither willed nor foresaw the Church: "Il annonçait le royaume, et c'est l'Église qui est venue." Nevertheless, at the end of the book, he consoles the reader with the hollow phrase that Jesus' dream contained the most precious germs of human truth, the most fruitful principles of human progress. What a travesty of a sublime truth; what a substitute for the love that redeemed the world!

Jésus et la tradition évangélique (1910) is a *Life of Christ* of a sort and a restatement of Loisy's eschatological theory. John M. Robertson, who devotes to it four chapters of his *The Historical Jesus* (1916) sees in

¹⁴*Mémoires*, III, 547-8.

Loisy's innumerable self-contradictions and quarrels with other rationalists a further proof that Jesus was a myth, not an historical person. He, too, like Sanday, is baffled by Loisy's manipulation of the Gospel text: "It is sheer deliberate dissolution and reconstruction of the narrative, by way of substituting something more plausible for the incredible original, when all the while the credibility of the original is the thesis maintained." (p. 163) Robertson here seems to touch on the famous theory of "relative truth," by which Loisy and other modernists tried to reconcile two irreconcilables: errors in Scripture and the universality of inspiration.

In 1912 appeared *L'Évangile selon Marc*, which Loisy made out to be an unsuccessful attempt at a combination of the Gospel as preached by the Apostles and that of St. Paul. The book of 1916 was *L'Épître aux Galates*, in which St. Paul is accused of numerous self-contradictions and misinterpretations of the Old Testament.

Les Actes des Apôtres (1920) was another stout volume of nearly 1000 pages. *Acts* was, of course, not written by Luke, the companion of St. Paul; its date is pushed down to near 100 A.D., and the author's handling of his documents is condemned as unscrupulous and highly exasperating. Loisy's particular thesis, however, refers to the purpose of *Acts*. This, according to him, was twofold: i) to convince the Roman authorities that they should not withhold recognition from the Christian religion, since it was identical with the authentic Judaism which the Romans had long recognized; ii) to establish the preeminence of the church of Rome, this being the church of the Apostles Peter and Paul.¹⁵

Loisy's *Les livres du Nouveau Testament* (1922) is a translation of the whole New Testament with introductions to the single books as well as to groups of books. A. S. Peake¹⁶ says of it that its criticism is "more negative than any which had preceded it and controlled by novel and highly questionable principles." The next year appeared *L'Apocalypse de Jean*, and the year after *L'Évangile selon Luc*.

At the Congrès already mentioned, Loisy was greeted as one of the fathers of Form Criticism, which was just then getting into its stride. He replied that he did not know whether he was father or son, but that, in any case, he was devoted to the idea. Certainly, one of his last books, *Les origines du Nouveau Testament* (1936), contains the fundamental idea of Form Criticism, *viz.*, that our four Gospels are in no sense historical documents as far as the earthly life of Jesus goes, but precipitates of the

¹⁵Cf. Jacquier, *Les Actes des Apôtres*, p. xxxvii-xlii. A thorough refutation of Loisy's hypothesis on the purpose of *Acts* may be read in *The Beginnings of Christianity* (V, 4-7) by Kirsopp Lake.

¹⁶*Recollections and Appreciations*, p. 174.

cult of the early Christian communities. "To put it briefly, he judged the Gospels to be, not so much early histories, as early catechisms or moral exhortations, although not without an historical background. . . . Their purpose was didactic and not historical; they were not composed to save and preserve the facts and words of Christ, but to express His message" (Petre). Loisy prided himself on having the Gospels thereby raised above the objections of history. Also Loisy's conclusions differ little from those of R. H. Lightfoot, the most radical of the adherents of Form Criticism. Both agree that the Gospels yield us only a faint echo of Jesus' voice.

Meanwhile Loisy had turned his attention to the more general problem of religion and the origin of Christianity. *A propos d'histoire des religions* (1911) was followed by *La Religion* (1917), in which Humanity takes the place of God as the central object of religion. *Les mystères païens et le mystère chrétien* (1919),¹⁷ a defense of Paulinism in one of its many forms, was already in print when the war broke out, but was held up for five years. Of *La naissance du Christianisme* (1933) one may say that it represents a convenient summary of Loisy's final positions, not only on the origin of Christianity, but also on the authenticity of the New Testament and the early Christian writers.¹⁸

Le Mandéisme et les origines chrétiennes (1934) is a convincing refutation of such modern scholars as Reitzenstein, Bousset, Bultmann etc., who would trace the origin of Christianity to the religion of the Mandeans, an obscure sect of Shatt-el-Arab. The book gives us an inkling of the services Loisy could have rendered true scholarship and the Catholic Church if he had not had his "tête montée sur certaines idées," as Pius X once expressed it.

The book of 1937, *La crise morale du temps présent et l'éducation humaine*, was intended as a farewell message to the general public. W. R. Inge, reviewing it in the *Hibbert Journal*, writes: "The tone of weariness and disappointment in his last book is pathetic, and all must wish that he may not end his days with the feeling that he has not received justice from his contemporaries."

It was, however, not Loisy's last book. The next year he came out with a vigorous attack on Couchoud's mythical theory in *Histoire et mythe à propos de Jésus-Christ*. To Loisy's credit be it said that, to the end of his days, he maintained Jesus' historical existence against all mythmakers. His last publication seems to have been *Un mythe apologétique* (1939), a reply to attacks made on him by a Jean Guitton, professor at the Montpellier University, under the pseudonym *Serapion*.

Looking back now on Loisy's literary career, we must say that though

¹⁷2nd ed. 1930.

¹⁸L. P. Jacks, editor of the *Hibbert Journal*, devoted two extensive articles to the book (*Hibbert Journal*, April and July, 1934).

his activity was prodigious, his success was nothing phenomenal. Few of his books went into a third edition, fewer still were translated. W. R. Inge is probably right when he says: "His books never had a very large sale in France, where the Catholics are not allowed to read them, and the free-thinkers are not much interested in Christian origins. In Germany there is a prejudice against anything French, and German Protestantism, as represented by Harnack and his school, regarded Loisy, not without reason, as a formidable opponent. In England he has been widely read, but our New Testament critics now take but little notice of him."

But independently of literary success or failure, Loisy is of little importance in the history of rationalism. He blazed no new trails. His criticism was almost exclusively negative and destructive. He was a living weather-vane, the type of rationalism, if not of rationalists. As Prat once put it: "Quand on cite une thèse de Loisy, on ne sait jamais s'il y croit encore."¹⁹ Lagrange, too, one of Loisy's pet adversaries, finally came to the conclusion that Loisy's positions are dated and best forgotten. And he justifies his retaining long discussions of them in the 4th edition of his commentary on Mark (1929) by expressing the hope that they may prove of historical interest to Scripture scholars. Albert Schweitzer²⁰ does not rate Loisy very highly, though one might have expected the opposite, since, like Schweitzer, Loisy is a thoroughgoing eschatologist. Dr. L. P. Jacks more than once deplored the fact that British scholars paid little heed to him; but Vincent Taylor showed conclusively²¹ that scholarship does not lose much by passing Loisy by.

All in all then, the *Modern Churchman* is right calling Loisy's "a sad story." But can we say that he was treated unfairly by the ecclesiastical authorities and that thus they brought about his failure? Can we call him a "martyr for the truth of Christianity," as does the same *Modern Churchman*? And can we allow its contention that "suppression and excommunication are not the right methods for a truth-loving community to take in the case of an able student and teacher?"²²

In his *Mémoires* (I 80) Loisy tells us that during his first pastorate at Broussy-le-Grand he conceived the plan of "un exposé de la doctrine catholique en rapport avec les nécessités des temps nouveaux." The plan was certainly praiseworthy. But that does not say that it may be carried

¹⁹*Jésus-Christ*, II, 152.

²⁰*The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.

²¹*Hibbert Journal*, Oct., 1934.

²²In the October (1940) number of the *Modern Churchman*, a correspondent, who styles himself "a French scholar and a theological student," pens this eulogy: "I see Loisy as the very embodiment of the scientific temper, in his pure and calm devotion to truth, the steadfast refusal to be distracted by the clash of worldly interest or the pettiness of ecclesiastical intrigue."

out in any manner whatever. Others had had the same ambition and were eventually disowned by the Catholic Church. Loisy sought to remove all future quarrels between faith and science by denying any community of interest between them. Theology, according to him was one thing, history something wholly unconnected with it. It is the rationalistic distinction between the "Jesus of faith" and the "Jesus of history." To the end of his days, Loisy never realized that such a separation would be the death of Catholic faith as well as of Catholic theology. For the Catholic Church is founded on definite historical facts; if they were not facts, the Catholic Church with its faith and theology is a living lie; and if she were not sure of these same facts, her voice would become as uncertain as that of the Commission of Christian Doctrine presented to the Anglican Archbishops in 1938.

Both the French episcopate and Rome were certainly right in judging Loisy's doctrines to be diametrically opposed to the true Catholic doctrine. Loisy himself more than once admitted it, though only half-heartedly, and an analysis of his literary output confirms it abundantly. Non-Catholics, too, agree that the Catholic Church could not tolerate his views in any of her sons. As early as 1904, Jean Réville remarked that Loisy, whether he liked it or not, was really a liberal Protestant, a Catholic only in name. Ten years later, John M. Robertson said of him: "Loisy stands today where Strauss stood 80 years ago." Dr. Heiler,²³ too, calls Loisy's views more radical than those of most Protestant scholars. A. S. Peake, a man certainly not prejudiced in favor of the Catholic Church, said that the views expressed in Loisy's commentaries on the Gospels and in his *The Gospel and the Church* were "of such a character as the Roman Communion could hardly be expected to tolerate." Finally, Miss Petre, referring to the authorship, historical value etc., of the various books of the New Testament, says: "His criticism in these matters was sufficiently devastating to drive him out of the Catholic Church under whose shade he had hoped to work."

What other course, then, was open to the ecclesiastical authorities than the one they took? Loisy may have been "an able student and teacher," but he was not Christ's official appointee for teaching His Gospel or for interpreting Scripture or for integrating history with dogma. The agent of that work was and is and ever will be the *magisterium* of the Catholic Church living through the centuries.

Loisy's is "a sad story" because, though a Catholic priest and teacher, he had never grasped this fundamental truth, or if he had, had forgotten it by the time he came to teach and write. To call him "more Catholic than the Catholic Church," may mean something to the *Modern Churchman* and to Sabatier, who first coined the phrase in 1908; to Catholics it would be laughable if it were not so offensive.

²³*Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, s.v. *Reformkatholizismus*.