

LOISY'S *L'ÉVANGILE ET L'ÉGLISE* IN LIGHT OF THE "ESSAIS"

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In his epochal work, L'Évangile et l'Église, Alfred Loisy claimed to offer a purely historical refutation of Adolf von Harnack's Das Wesen des Christentums (1900). Harvey Hill demonstrates that Loisy drew L'Évangile et l'Église from a larger unpublished work, "Essais," that combined history, apologetics, and a reform agenda, and shows that, Loisy's claims to the contrary, his book did the same. Comparing and contrasting L'Évangile et l'Église with its source, and taking into consideration Loisy's professional circumstances at the time of its composition, Hill clarifies this otherwise confusing combination of disciplines.

NOVEMBER 2002 marked the 100th anniversary of the publication of Alfred Loisy's *L'Évangile et l'Église*, the book that, more than any other single work, raised the issues of the Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism. Although the immediate reaction to the book was largely positive, negative voices soon dominated the response. Among other criticisms, Loisy's antagonists complained that his meaning was often unclear and that radically skeptical views seemed to lurk beneath an apparently innocuous surface. Contemporary scholars are less inclined to accuse Loisy of intentional deception than were some of his early reviewers, but they too have commented on the difficulty of interpreting *L'Évangile et l'Église*.¹

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¹ See, for example, Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1980) 55–58; Émile Poulat, *Histoire, dogme, et critique dans la crise moderniste* (Paris: Casterman, 1962) 90–92; Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1984) 137–38;

Was it a historical response to Adolf Harnack's recently published *Das Wesen des Christentums*, as Loisy claimed? Was it a defense of the Catholic Church against the theological attacks of liberal Protestantism? Or was it itself a veiled attack on conservative Catholicism with an implicit reform agenda? Although scholars have answered these questions in different ways, most agree that the book was a mixture of all three, and that this complex agenda contributes to the difficulty of interpreting it.

The circumstances of the book's composition can help to tease apart these different threads. As my first section shows, Loisy drew the substance of *L'Évangile et l'Église* from a much longer, unpublished work entitled the "La crise de la foi dans le temps présent: Essais d'histoire et de critique religieuses" (the "Essais") that he composed in the final years of the 19th century. Attention to the way he edited, omitted, and supplemented sections of the "Essais" in *L'Évangile et l'Église* clarifies the development of his historical, apologetic, and reforming positions. By the time he wrote *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy distinguished history from theology with greater consistency than he had three years earlier (my second section), and drew increasingly radical historical conclusions (section three). But he also assumed that historical criticism could serve as a powerful defense of Catholicism (section four) and as an agent of theological reform, particularly in the Church's manner of conceiving and exercising religious authority (section five). And he may well have failed to see the inconsistency in so sharply separating historical scholarship from theology while at the same time joining them in a reform project.

COMPOSING THE "ESSAIS" AND *L'ÉVANGILE ET L'ÉGLISE*

The "Essais" marked a departure from Loisy's early publications. Following a failed attempt to write a more overtly theological work that could win approval in the Church, Loisy had, in 1884, confined himself to "works of detail" on the historical interpretation of the Bible.² His published scholarship of the next decade reflected this decision. It took the form of technical studies on the history of the canon and on textual criticism. Despite

C. J. T. Talar, "A Reading of the Gospel (and the Church) According to Alfred Loisy," *Thought* 67 (1992) 302–16.

² Loisy, Notes, June 1884, quoted in *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire de notre temps*, 3 vols. (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1930–1931) 1:136. These notes were Loisy's journal and informal written reflections. Here and elsewhere I will cite them by date and either published source or volume in the Loisy papers, Bibliothèque nationale de Paris (hereafter BN, Fonds Loisy). The more overtly theological work was his Latin thesis on biblical inspiration. Mgr. d'Hulst, the rector of the Institut Catholique de Paris, did not accept this thesis. See *Mémoires* 1:30–33. Hereafter, to avoid tedious repetition, references to Loisy's works will be by short title only.

this prudence, Loisy encountered opposition that led to his forced resignation in 1893 from the Institut Catholique de Paris where he was teaching. He was then assigned as chaplain to a Dominican convent at Neuilly, where he served from 1893 until 1899. During this time, he turned his attention back to the larger theological issues raised by his historical scholarship. In 1896, he asked his friend Baron Friedrich von Hügel to send him any works of John Henry Newman that would be useful to him from "the theological—apologetical—polemical—pastoral point of view where I place myself."³ Over the next three years, Loisy produced the "Essais." He finished an initial draft at the end of 1897, but pronounced it "very insufficient" and quickly began work on a second draft. Even as he rewrote the "Essais," Loisy acknowledged that he might not be able to publish it during his lifetime. Nonetheless, he persevered "for the security of my conscience," and finished his revision in August 1898.⁴

An enormous work (over 1100 typed pages) drawing on numerous disciplines within the study of religion, the "Essais" defies easy categorization. Still, a single issue dominated the whole: as Loisy wrote in the preface, "a science of religion is formed outside of Catholicism and against it. To neutralize the dangerous influence of this science, . . . it is necessary that the science of religion be also constituted *in* the Church and *for* it."⁵ The italicized prepositions reveal his dual agenda. On the one hand, he sought to make a contribution to a nonsectarian science of religion by offering an account of the origin and development of the religion of Israel and the Christian Church, and to do so as part of the Catholic Church. On the other hand, he sought to use this nonsectarian scholarship for the benefit of the Church, for the purpose, that is, of advancing a particular theological position. To this end, Loisy described how historical scholarship could help the Church fulfill its mission in the modern world, in part by mandating much-needed reforms.

The structure of the "Essais" reflected this dual agenda: historical and theological / reforming. The opening two chapters assessed competing "General Theories of Religion" and the question of "Religion and Revelation." The next five chapters were more strictly historical. Chapter 3 explored "The Religion of Israel," and chapters 4 through 7 (the primary sources for *L'Évangile et l'Église*) took up the person of Jesus, the Church,

³ Loisy to von Hügel, September 15, 1896, quoted in *Mémoires* 110.

⁴ Loisy to von Hügel, August 8, 1897, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:444. See more generally *Mémoires* 1:442–44. Both handwritten drafts are preserved in BN, Fonds Loisy, mss. 15634, 15635). In this article, I use a version of the second draft from the same collection (mss. 15636–15638) typed by Louis Canet, the literary executor of Loisy's will.

⁵ "Essais," BN, Fonds Loisy, mss. 15636–15638, 3 vols., 3:6, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:445, my emphasis.

Catholic doctrine, and Catholic worship. Chapter 8, “The Intellectual Regime of the Church,” served as a “transition between the historical chapters and [subsequent] chapters of theoretical discussion where reforming views decidedly outweighed apologetic considerations.”⁶ The remaining chapters addressed the particular issues of “Dogma and Science,” “Reason and Faith,” and “Religion and Life,” before concluding with a chapter on “The Past and the Future,” which both defended the Church and anticipated reforms in it.⁷

By December 1898, Loisy had changed his mind on the question of publishing the “Essais” because he began to release sections from the first chapters as a series of articles in the *Revue du clergé français* under the pseudonym A. Firmin (Firmin was his middle name). The first five Firmin articles came from chapters 1 and 2 of the “Essais,” and included the substance of the chapters with the exception of long sections criticizing the rationalism of Ernest Renan and what Loisy called the “postulates” of conservative Catholic theology. The sixth Firmin article, “La religion de Israël,” the first of three projected articles drawn from chapter 3 of the “Essais,” received ecclesiastical censure. This put an end to the Firmin series in November 1900. Loisy’s immediate reaction to the censure was to consider publishing the final chapters of the “Essais” as a new book entitled “The Intellectual Regime of the Church.”⁸ He thought better of this, but he did release the substance of chapter 3 of the “Essais” on the religion of Israel as a small, privately printed brochure in 1901.⁹ Still, his initial efforts to publish the “Essais” had failed.

Loisy did not relinquish his plans to publish the historical chapters of the “Essais,” however, so much as change strategy. In part, the “Essais” had been written against the liberal Protestantism of Auguste Sabatier and Adolf Harnack, who published a new book, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, in 1899. When Harnack’s book was translated into French in early 1902, Loisy recast material from chapters 4 through 7 of the “Essais” as a refutation of Harnack’s book and published it as *L’Évangile et L’Église*.

Immediately after finishing *L’Évangile et l’Église*, Loisy returned to the final chapters of the “Essais,” where “reforming views” predominated over historical ones. In the week after the release of *L’Évangile et l’Église*, he reread these chapters with the intention of revising them for

⁶ *Choses passées* (Paris: Emile Nourry, 1913) 181.

⁷ Normand Provencher published this final chapter, with introductory commentary, as “Un inédit d’Alfred Loisy,” *Église et théologie* 4 (1973) 391–413.

⁸ Loisy to von Hügel, 10 March 1901, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:27.

⁹ *La Religion d’Israël* (Paris: Letouzey, 1901). This brochure, along with *L’Évangile et l’Église* and three other books by Loisy, was placed on the Index of Forbidden Books in December 1903.

publication as another book.¹⁰ When *L'Évangile et l'Église* became controversial, however, he returned to the middle chapters of the "Essais" to produce a new book entitled *Autour d'un petit livre*. He still planned to publish the final chapters at some point, but a variety of circumstances prevented him from doing so over the next several years. In 1907 he began another revision, again under the title "The Intellectual Regime of the Church."¹¹ In this context, *L'Évangile et l'Église* appears as part of a decade-long effort to publish the "Essais" rather than as a discrete project in its own right.

To say that *L'Évangile et l'Église* was part of Loisy's effort to publish the "Essais" as a whole is not, of course, to suggest that Loisy did not genuinely consider it to be a refutation of Harnack's *Das Wesen des Christentums*. Loisy's first preserved reference to the project (from May 1902) described with relish his conviction that Harnack relied heavily on an inauthentic verse in the Gospel of Matthew.¹² Over the next few months, Loisy consistently referred in his correspondence to the work in progress as a study of Harnack.¹³ The structure of *L'Évangile et l'Église* reinforces this impression that the book genuinely attacked Harnack. The introduction responded directly to Harnack's new book, attacking his historical reconstructions as closet theology rather than good history. Each chapter of *L'Évangile et l'Église* then began with an original section summarizing Harnack's basic claims on the topic at issue and providing citations.

¹⁰ Notes, November 16, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:158; see also Notes, November 24, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:171.

¹¹ See Notes, October 21, 1903, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:265; Notes, March 17, 1907, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:512–15. The 1907 draft is in BN, Fonds Loisy, ms. 15642.

¹² Loisy to von Hügel, May 18, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:121.

¹³ See, for example, Loisy to von Hügel, August 10, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:124; Loisy to von Hügel, September 28, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:134. For the debate between Loisy and Harnack more generally, see Bernard Brandon Scott, "Adolf von Harnack and Alfred Loisy: A Debate on the Historical Methodology of Christian Origins" (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1971) 211–306, and his introduction to the English translation of *The Gospel and the Church*, trans. Christopher Home (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976) xliii–lxiv; Sykes, *Identity of Christianity* 123–46; Poulat, *Histoire, dogme, et critique* 46–73, 89–102; Dietmar Bader, *Der Weg Loisy zur Erforschung der christlichen Wahrheit* (Freiburg: Herder, 1974) 65–172; Marcel Simon, "À propos de la crise moderniste: Écriture et tradition chez Alfred Loisy," in *Text, Wort, Glaube: Studien zur Überlieferung, Interpretation, und Autorisierung biblischer Texte*, ed. Martin Brecht (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1980) 359–76, at 360–64; and Diether Hoffmann-Axthelm, "Loisy's *L'Évangile et l'Église*: Besichtigung eines zeitgenössischen Schlachtfeldes," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 65 (1968) 291–328, at 296–309; Harvey Hill, "La science catholique: Alfred Loisy's Program of Historical Theology," *Zeitschrift für neuere Theologiegeschichte/Journal for the History of Modern Theology* 3 (1996) 39–59, and *The Politics of Modernism: Alfred Loisy and the Scientific Study of Religion* (Washington: Catholic University of America, 2002) 117–32.

Though drawn from the “Essais,” the remaining sections of each chapter of *L'Évangile et L'Église* also made frequent reference to Harnack's book.

However, other features of *L'Évangile et l'Église* demonstrate that Loisy did more than refute Harnack. First, he followed the topical organization of the “Essais,” not the chronological organization of Harnack's book. He divided the chapter on Jesus in the “Essais” into two parts: one on the kingdom of God and the other on the person of Christ. The other chapters of the book mirrored the chapters of the “Essais”: after the chapter on Jesus came chapters on the Church, dogma, and worship. Further, much of the material for *L'Évangile et l'Église* came directly from the “Essais.” The only substantial additions to the final two chapters of *L'Évangile et l'Église* came in the opening and concluding pages, where Loisy responded directly to Harnack. The rest came from the “Essais” largely unchanged, even in passages referring explicitly to Harnack. For example, Loisy simply added Harnack's name to a three-page passage drawn directly from the “Essais.”¹⁴ Elsewhere, Loisy substituted Harnack's name for Sabatier's in what he presumably considered an attack on generic liberal Protestantism.¹⁵ The chapters on Jesus and the Church contained more substantial new material, but they too incorporated passages of several pages at a time from the “Essais.”¹⁶ This internal evidence reinforces the impression that *L'Évangile et l'Église* was at least partly Loisy's effort to publish the ideas of the “Essais” using Harnack's new book as the occasion.

DISTINGUISHING HISTORY FROM THEOLOGY

Given that Loisy drew heavily from the “Essais” to compose *L'Évangile et l'Église*, a contrast of the two works can shed significant light on the ways in which Loisy's critical opinions had developed in the intervening three years. One development that becomes clear rather quickly is Loisy's greater interest in distinguishing history from theology.¹⁷ The distinction

¹⁴ *L'Évangile et l'Église*, 3rd ed. (Bellevue: Chez l'auteur, 1904) 193: The parallel passages are *L'Évangile et l'Église* 192–94 (*Gospel and the Church* 201–2) and “Essais” 4:523–25.

¹⁵ See *L'Évangile et l'Église* 266 (*Gospel and the Church* 266); Loisy “Essais” 4:645. Harnack claimed not to recognize himself in Loisy's portrayal of him. See his review of the German translation of *L'Évangile et l'Église* in *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 29 (1904) 60. See also David Nicholls, “What Is Liberal Protestantism?” *Theology* 68 (1965) 515–21.

¹⁶ The chapter in *L'Évangile et l'Église* on the kingdom treats many of the topics of the first section of the chapter on Jesus in the “Essais,” but it does not incorporate such lengthy passages, and it reflects changes in Loisy's historical and theological views that are discussed below.

¹⁷ On this issue, see Normand Provencher, “Loisy's Understanding of Theology

between the two approaches was not new to him, as is apparent from the "Essais" itself, but he did not observe it as consistently in the "Essais" as in *L'Évangile et l'Église*. He characterized the "Essais" as the combination, "in very moderate doses," of "history, philosophy, theology, and apologetics," and of these disciplines he stressed apologetics.¹⁸ Even in the more historical sections, he qualified the degree to which his effort was purely historical. For example, he began his chapter on Jesus by disavowing any intention to write a life of Jesus. Instead, he sought to sketch "the principal traits of the life and teaching of Jesus such as the apostolic witness presents them to the religious soul."¹⁹ By contrast, in the preface to *L'Évangile et l'Église*, he insisted that his book took "the point of view of history." He did not, he continued, "attempt to write an apologia for Catholicism and traditional dogma. Had it been so intended, [the book] must have been regarded as very defective and incomplete, especially as far as concerns the divinity of Christ, and the authority of the Church. . . . Since [however] the learned professor (Harnack) announces his work as historical, it shall be discussed solely according to the data of history."²⁰

This greater emphasis on purely historical scholarship in *L'Évangile et l'Église* influenced the way he edited the "Essais." For example, in the midst of a passage drawn from the "Essais," Loisy added material empha-

and History," *Science et esprit* 32 (1980) 109–18. Loisy and Maurice Blondel corresponded on this question, and Blondel subsequently wrote a book on it. On their debate, see Blondel, "The Letter on Apologetics" and "History and Dogma," trans. Alexander Dru and Illyd Trethowan (New York: Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, 1964); *Au coeur de la crise moderniste: Le dossier inédit d'une controverse*, ed. René Marlé (Paris: Aubier, 1960); Poulat, *Histoire, dogme, et critique* 513–33, 548–66, and "Critique historique et théologie dans la crise moderniste," *Recherches de science religieuse* 58 (1970) 535–50, at 543–50; Richard J. Resch, "Christology as a Methodological Problem: A Study of the Correspondence between Maurice Blondel and Alfred Loisy, 1902–1903" (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1975); Christoph Theobald, "L'Entrée de l'histoire dans l'univers religieux et théologique au moment de la 'crise moderniste,'" in *La crise contemporaine: Du modernisme à la crise de herméneutiques*, ed. Charles Kannengiesser (Paris: Beauchesne, 1973) 21–73; Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence* 69–90; William John Wernz, "The 'Modernist' Writings of Alfred Loisy: An Analysis" (Ph.D. diss., University of Iowa, 1971) 285–345; Hoffmann-Axthelm, "Loisys *L'Évangile et l'Église*" 309–17.

¹⁸ "Essais" 3:9, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:446. On the priority of apologetics in the work, see, for example, Loisy to von Hügel, August 8, 1897, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:443.

¹⁹ "Essais" 4:304, 306, quoted with commentary in *Mémoires* 1:458.

²⁰ *L'Évangile et l'Église* vii–viii (*Gospel and the Church* 2–3). Here and elsewhere in quotations from *L'Évangile et l'Église* I use the published English translation in *The Gospel and the Church*. On Loisy's claim to limit himself to the data of history, see below.

sizing the difference in perspective between the historian and the believer. “The historian, as such,” he explained, “cannot appreciate the objective value of this persuasion (Jesus’ belief in an eternal future guaranteed to humanity): the Christian will not doubt it, and, beyond any question, no one is Christian who does not admit it.”²¹ Elsewhere, in passages drawn directly from the “Essais,” Loisy added passing references to “historians” that were not in his source.²² Similarly, he omitted passages from the “Essais” that suggested a necessary connection between historical scholarship and theology.²³ Instead, he insisted that “the historian must resist the temptation to modernize the conception of the kingdom. If the theologian feels bound to supply an interpretation for the needs of the present day, no one will contest his right, provided he does not confuse his commentary with the primitive [i.e., historical] meaning of the gospel texts.”²⁴

Loisy reinforced this stricter division between history and theology in *L’Évangile et l’Église* by implicitly contrasting his own genuinely free historical scholarship to the theologically-motivated historical work of Harnack. If theologians adapted the gospel to the modern context, historians should focus on “the primitive meaning of the gospel texts.” They should let the gospel exist independently of contemporary needs and preferences.²⁵ According to Loisy, Harnack failed to observe this distinction and instead—to the detriment of historical objectivity—he engaged in the task of modern theological adaptation.²⁶ As a result, his image of Christ differed from “any image that the historian can derive from a criticism of the Gospels alone.”²⁷ Loisy therefore called Harnack a “learned theologian” more often than a “historian.”²⁸ These passages answered the rhetorical question that Loisy asked in the preface: “Is the definition of Christianity, put forward by Herr Harnack, that of a historian, or merely that of a

²¹ *L’Évangile et l’Église* 108 (*Gospel and the Church* 122). See “Essais” 4:372–73. See also the final sentence of *L’Évangile et l’Église* 111 (*Gospel and the Church* 125), which Loisy added to a passage otherwise drawn from the “Essais” 4:376.

²² *L’Évangile et l’Église* 203 (*Gospel and the Church* 210–211), compare “Essais” 4:508; *L’Évangile et l’Église* 211 (*Gospel and the Church* 218), compare “Essais” 4:556.

²³ See, for example, “Essais” 4:638, 654–55. The omitted sentences from “Essais” 4:638 appeared in the middle of a passage that was incorporated bodily into *L’Évangile et l’Église* 235 (*Gospel and the Church* 239). See below for a discussion of these passages.

²⁴ *L’Évangile et l’Église* 56–57 (*Gospel and the Church* 73).

²⁵ *Ibid.* xiv (*Gospel and the Church* 8).

²⁶ *Ibid.* 71 (*Gospel and the Church* 86). See Hill, “La science catholique” 15–16, and *Politics of Modernism* 127–32.

²⁷ *L’Évangile et l’Église* 73 (*Gospel and the Church* 88). See also *L’Évangile et l’Église* 94, 95 (*Gospel and the Church* 109, 110).

²⁸ See, for example, *ibid.* 124, xx, xxiv (*Gospel and the Church* 137, 12, 22).

theologian who takes from history as much as suits his theology"?²⁹ The fact that Harnack was a celebrated historian who, as Loisy noted, claimed that his book was historical, made Loisy's concern to be more strictly historical even more striking than it otherwise would have been.

Why did Loisy develop this greater interest in distinguishing theology from the history of Christianity? There is no single reason. Part of the explanation lies in the evolution of his thought, particularly in the context of his polemic with Harnack. As Loisy reacted to the liberal Protestantism of Harnack's allegedly purely historical work, he surely must have reflected on the liberal Catholicism of the historical sections of the "Essais." His revisions of the "Essais" illustrated his greater sensitivity on this point.

But Loisy's own allegation that he did pure history in *L'Évangile et L'Église* was also tactical. It was part of a broader effort to free his work from ecclesiastical oversight. This story begins on November 1, 1900, when Cardinal Richard's condemnation of the sixth Firmin article became public.³⁰ Richard's condemnation outraged Loisy, who promptly sought to remove himself from Richard's jurisdiction. To do so, he first wrote a letter to Paul Desjardins on November 5 requesting his help in obtaining a position for him at l'École Pratique des Hautes Études. Desjardins arranged a meeting with Gaston Paris (November 8), who explained to Loisy that no chairs in the section of religious sciences were available at that time. But Paris also promised Loisy a position as a *conférencier libre* (an adjunct professor) and as an auxiliary in the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*. Loisy immediately began meeting with the members of the section of Religious Sciences to pursue this option—his first meeting was on November 11—and both the government and the section officially approved his course in early December so that he could begin teaching on December 12.³¹ On November 15, in the midst of these negotiations, Loisy wrote to Cardinal Richard, returning the pension that the archdiocese had awarded him, thus severing his financial ties with the Church at the same time that he cast his lot with the secular university.³²

After the condemnation of his Firmin article and his move to the secular university, Loisy insisted with ever more emphasis that his scholarly work was historical and therefore not subject to theological and ecclesiastical oversight. In a letter to Desjardins, Loisy said that he would respond to any possible objections by Cardinal Richard to his new course at l'École with the assertion that "the object of my course is purely scientific and does

²⁹ Ibid. ix (*Gospel and the Church* 4).

³⁰ *Mémoires* 1:563–65. See also *Choses passées* 215–19; Maurice Clément, *Vie du Cardinal Richard, Archevêque de Paris* (Paris: De Gigord, 1924) 397–98.

³¹ *Mémoires* 2:5–7. See also *Choses passées* 221.

³² *Mémoires*. 1:574–76. See also *Choses passées* 219–20.

not fall under his competence.”³³ Richard did indeed meet with Loisy on December 28, and, true to his word, Loisy tried to explain to Richard the distinction between the theological and the historical points of view.³⁴ Complementing these efforts, in the first months of 1901 Loisy published a second edition of his *Études bibliques*, the preface of which said that he would “henceforth occupy himself with purely critical works.”³⁵

Loisy’s growing scientific independence concerned some members of the Catholic hierarchy, who in March prohibited students at the Catholic Institute of Paris from attending his class. Loisy pronounced himself unconcerned. On March 10, he wrote to Baron von Hügel that “a condemnation by the Index would leave me indifferent. . . . For my future at the Sorbonne, I must publish scientific works. If the Holy Office and the Index feel some pain at this, I will myself feel very afflicted, but I will be obliged to pass out of the Church.”³⁶ Over the next few years, Loisy continued to lay great weight on his historical credentials and his intellectual freedom.³⁷ These events surely influenced him as he revised the chapters from the “Essais” for *L’Évangile et l’Église* in order to highlight the distinction between historical and theological approaches to the Bible and to identify himself with the historical approach.

RADICALIZING HISTORY

As a corollary to his insistence on distinguishing history from theology, Loisy’s particular historical opinions were becoming more radical, a development that also surely reinforced his decision to downplay the theological significance of his historical work. The centerpiece of Loisy’s refutation of Harnack in *L’Évangile et l’Église* was his claim that Jesus understood the kingdom of God in strictly apocalyptic terms. The issue, Loisy explained in his introduction to the chapter on the kingdom, was the relationship between the apocalyptic and the moral elements of Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom.³⁸ Section one then identified Harnack with the moral camp and argued that he was wrong. “The dominant idea,” Loisy insisted,

³³ Loisy to Desjardins, December 9, 1900, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:13. Loisy subsequently published a book entitled *Les mythes babyloniens et les premiers chapitres de la Genèse* based on this course.

³⁴ Notes, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:17. See also *Choses passées* 222–24.

³⁵ *Études bibliques*, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:27.

³⁶ Loisy to von Hügel, March 10, 1901, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:27–28.

³⁷ On Loisy’s concern for his academic reputation in 1903 and 1904, see Harvey Hill, “More Than a Biblical Critic: Loisy’s Reform Agenda in Light of His Autobiographies,” in *Personal Faith and Institutional Commitments: Roman Catholic Modernist and Anti-Modernist Autobiography*, ed. Lawrence Barmann and Harvey Hill (Scranton, Penn.: University of Scranton, 2002) 11–35, at 28–30.

³⁸ *L’Évangile et l’Église* 36 (*Gospel and the Church* 54).

"is obviously that of the kingdom which is soon to be. . . . The entire gospel only develops this warning. . . . The idea of the celestial kingdom is then nothing but a great hope, and it is in this hope or nowhere that the historian should set the essence of the gospel."³⁹

Loisy's comments on the kingdom from the first section of his chapter on Jesus in the "Essais" differed strikingly. Here, too, Loisy identified a moral and an eschatological interpretation of the kingdom in Jesus' preaching, but instead of defining them in opposition to each other and identifying himself with those who interpreted Jesus apocalyptically, he tried to combine the two options. He began with the apocalyptic character of Jesus' preaching, but explained that scholars should not "exaggerate the importance of the eschatological element to the point of denying the moral and present element of the kingdom. . . . Jesus spoke often of the celestial kingdom as already present. The apocalyptic idea and the moral idea are interpenetrated, and one can say that the first is the sensible form of the second; the unity of the gospels' teaching is founded on the intimate association of the two elements."⁴⁰

The more moral and less apocalyptic tone of Loisy's picture of Jesus appears most concretely in his different assessment of key biblical passages. In *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy accused Harnack of basing his reconstruction of Jesus on two passages: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27) and "The kingdom of God is among you" (Luke 17:21). Both passages, Loisy claimed, stemmed from the early Church and could not, therefore, serve as convincing evidence for the views of the historical Jesus.⁴¹ In the "Essais," on the other hand, Loisy made claims strikingly similar to those he attacked in Harnack, and he based them on these same passages. "The condition of salvation is entirely interior, entirely religious, and entirely moral," Loisy explained. "It is a gift of God in the soul and it is already the kingdom. 'The kingdom of God is within you,' said Jesus to those who asked him about the signs of the great coming."⁴² And "How much deeper, more religious, more really divine the

³⁹ Ibid. 37–41 (*Gospel and the Church* 56–59). On Loisy's apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus, see Wendell S. Dietrich, "Loisy and the Liberal Protestants," *Studies in Religion/Sciences religieuses* 14 (1985) 303–11, at 303–6; Scott, "Introduction" lxiv–lxv.

⁴⁰ "Essais" 4:315, 317. Based in part on a reading of the sixth Firmin article, Joseph Coppens describes Loisy's interpretation of messianism at this time in similar terms ("Le messianisme selon A. Loisy," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 27 [1951] 60–62).

⁴¹ *L'Évangile et l'Église* xix–xx (*Gospel and the Church* 11–12). See also Ibid. 54–56 (*Gospel and the Church* 70–72), where Loisy discussed Luke 17:21, and 74–76 (*Gospel and the Church* 90–91), where he discussed Matthew 11.

⁴² "Essais" 4:313.

sense that [Jesus] attached to this divine filiation appears when he said to his disciples . . . ‘No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. . . .’ The whole Galilean gospel lives in these words with the first fervor of his hope. One reads there into the base of the soul of Jesus.”⁴³

Clearly Loisy’s historical views had changed dramatically in the years between writing the “Essais” and *L’Évangile et l’Église*. Why? In his earlier, more moral and less eschatological, view of the kingdom, Loisy showed his reliance on the biblical conclusions of the liberal Protestant Heinrich Holtzmann, whom he quoted several times in the “Essais.” Not surprisingly in a work where he attacked the liberal Protestantism of Harnack, Loisy drew far less on those sections of the “Essais” that reflected liberal Protestant views than he did on other sections.⁴⁴ But his change was not simply strategic. Rather, his views developed in relation to his ongoing scholarly activity. Before 1901, Loisy’s most important scholarship had been on the Old Testament, and his primary work that year was on Genesis in relation to Babylonian myths. However, the administration at l’École suggested that he turn his attention to the New Testament. Loisy did so in courses on the parables (fall 1901) and Jesus’ Galilean ministry according to the Synoptic Gospels (1902). As was his practice, Loisy planned to publish a book based on his teaching—in this case a commentary on the Synoptic Gospels. Loisy did not actually publish the commentary until 1908, but while researching it in 1902 he conceived the idea for *L’Évangile et l’Église*; his ongoing research for the commentary led him to revise *L’Évangile et l’Église* for a second edition.⁴⁵ The change in Loisy’s interpretation of

⁴³ “Essais” 4:337–38.

⁴⁴ Loisy acknowledged that this consideration contributed to his change in tone. He went on to explain it in terms of his ongoing scholarly work. Although he relied on Holtzmann less in *L’Évangile et l’Église* than he had in the “Essais,” Holtzmann reviewed Loisy’s work, including *L’Évangile et l’Église*, positively. See Hans Rollman, “Holtzmann, von Hügel, and Modernism – 1,” *Downside Review* 97 (1979) 134–43, and “Holtzmann, von Hügel, and Modernism – 2,” *ibid.* 221–44.

⁴⁵ Loisy to von Hügel, May 18, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:121. The most tangible evidence of how his work on the Synoptic Gospels influenced the composition of *L’Évangile et l’Église* comes from the second edition, to which he added a chapter, “The Gospel Sources,” based on his opening lecture in fall 1902. On Loisy’s biblical interpretation at this time, see Nadia Lahutsky, “Paris and Jerusalem: Alfred Loisy and Père Lagrange on the Gospel of Mark,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 52 (1990) 444–46. See *Mémoires* 1:456 for Loisy’s own account of his evolving position. On the continuing evolution of his critical ideas, with particular attention to the Gospel of John, see C. J. T. Talar, “Loisy Rereading/Loisy Rewriting,” in *(Re)Reading, Reception, and Rhetoric: Approaches to Roman Catholic Modernism* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999) 35–82.

Jesus' preaching on the kingdom surely stemmed in large part from this ongoing exegetical and historical work.

The way Loisy edited the material on the kingdom from the "Essais" for publication in *L'Évangile et l'Église* also illustrates the degree to which he downplayed theological questions in the latter. In the former, he acknowledged the theological problem that the apocalyptic element of Jesus' preaching could present to contemporary theologians. Because Jesus spoke of "the definitive coming of the celestial kingdom . . . as not far off," Loisy explained, Jesus maintained to some extent the "popular messianism" of his day. "The interpolation of death . . . reduced eschatology properly speaking to the second rank . . . from which it could not produce in the Christian conscience the troubles that it had excited in the Jewish conscience."⁴⁶ But what did it mean to suggest that Jesus maintained a "popular messianism" that only his death cured? Did this not imply that Jesus was "really deceived, and did he not deceive others with his conception of the kingdom, his messianic preoccupations, and the thought of his imminent return"? This was, Loisy said at the time of writing the "Essais," the "grave and fundamental question of fact," "the true difficulty" that undermined Christian faith and that Catholic apologetics was failing to address.⁴⁷ Loisy repeatedly returned to this issue in passages excluded from *L'Évangile et l'Église*. In one of the omitted passages, he conceded that "the Christian sense has always been disconcerted by the realism of Jesus' assertions touching the circumstances of his near return." Theologians typically responded "with artifices of exegesis" that did no more than "avoid these declarations."⁴⁸ He made similar comments in other passages that he excluded from *L'Évangile et l'Église*, even though such comments appeared in passages that he included.⁴⁹

The fact that Loisy elected to ignore this "fundamental [theological] question" in *L'Évangile et l'Église* was striking, because the problem became more rather than less serious as his biblical interpretation became more radically apocalyptic. He could end the chapter of the "Essais" on Jesus with the assertion—in another passage omitted from *L'Évangile et l'Église*—that "Jesus did not have need to return on the clouds in order to confound Caiaphas and his accusers. . . . His image stands erect at the summit of history because . . . he followed to the end . . . the way of duty that

⁴⁶ "Essais" 4:343–34.

⁴⁷ See Loisy to von Hügel, August 8, 1897, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:444.

⁴⁸ "Essais" 4:371. Loisy included material that immediately preceded and followed this passage—see *L'Évangile et l'Église* 102 (*Gospel and the Church* 117) and 108 (*Gospel and the Church* 122).

⁴⁹ See, for example, "Essais" 373, 374, 375, where we find passages included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 107–8 (*Gospel and the Church* 121–22), 108–9 (*Gospel and the Church* 123–24), and 111 (*Gospel and the Church* 124–25).

his conscience showed him.” He remained, therefore, “present to all holy souls.”⁵⁰ But this resolution of the problem presupposed the dual nature of Jesus’ preaching on the kingdom: both future apocalyptic and present morality. As Loisy emphasized the apocalyptic character of Jesus’ preaching more and more exclusively, a purely moral kingdom resulting from it became increasingly inadequate. By confining himself to the question of Harnack’s historical interpretation of Jesus’ preaching, Loisy avoided this issue to some degree. But even if his historical emphasis allowed him to avoid (or at least postpone) this theological difficulty, it was clearly one of the places where his “argumentation against Harnack implied a critique of the gospel sources still very circumspect, but more radical [theologically as well as historically] in many points than that of the Protestant theologian.”⁵¹

CATHOLIC APOLOGETICS

Although Loisy emphasized the exclusively historical character of *L’Évangile et l’Église* and consciously ignored potentially controversial theological questions, the book also defended Catholicism. He ended the book with the claim to have shown “how Christianity has lived in the Church and by the Church,” and he later said that defending this claim was “the principal object of the book.”⁵² The centerpiece of this demonstration was his theory of development, which he drew from the work of John Henry Newman and discussed at length in chapter 1 of the “Essais.” Against Harnack’s effort to identify an ahistorical essence of Christianity, Loisy argued that Christianity inevitably changed as it adapted to changing historical circumstances, and that these changes were perfectly legitimate, indeed necessary for the very survival of the religion. Accusations that the Catholic Church had distorted the Christian message by departing from its primitive simplicity therefore missed the point.⁵³ Those Catholics who ap-

⁵⁰ “Essais” 376. Compare *L’Évangile et l’Église* 111 (*Gospel and the Church* 125), which incorporated passages immediately preceding and following this quotation.

⁵¹ *Mémoires* 2:168, and *Choses passées* 246. Loisy’s journal from October 1902 identified the related question of the divinity of Christ as one of the three “delicate” points of *L’Évangile et l’Église* (Notes, October 13, 1902, quoted with commentary in *Mémoires* 2:150). His critics quickly recognized the delicacy of the point. See, for example, Hippolyte Gayraud, “*L’Évangile et l’Église*,” *L’Univers*, January 2–3, 1903, p. 1. In *Autour d’un petit livre*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Picard, 1903) 129–30, Loisy explained his failure to discuss the divinity of Jesus by reminding his readers that he wrote as an historian who relied only on the historical record rather than on theological doctrine.

⁵² *L’Évangile et l’Église* 278–79 (*Gospel and the Church* 277), *Mémoires* 2:167, and *Choses passées* 245–46.

⁵³ *L’Évangile et l’Église* xxvi–xxix (*Gospel and the Church* 16–19). See also “Essais” 3:92–113; A. Firmin [Loisy], “Le développement chrétien d’après le Cardinal

preciated *L'Évangile et l'Église* typically emphasized the power of this defense of Catholicism against Harnack, and Loisy himself later claimed that his attack on liberal Protestantism was the most satisfying aspect of the book.⁵⁴

This combination of history and apologetics is perhaps surprising in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, where Loisy explicitly disavowed theological and apologetical intent, but it was fundamental to his source, the "Essais." As we have seen, the "Essais" sought to constitute "a science of religion . . . in the Church and for it."⁵⁵ The historical chapters of the "Essais" from which *L'Évangile et l'Église* was drawn contributed to this historical science but were also dominated by, in Loisy's words, "apologetic considerations."⁵⁶ The historical material in *L'Évangile et l'Église* simply reflected these same "apologetic considerations," notwithstanding Loisy's emphasis on history.

Still, why did Loisy, with his increasing commitment to history as distinguished from theology, retain this apologetic material when he edited the "Essais" for publication? One explanation for this intellectual turn back towards the Church was professional disappointment at l'École. The death in March 1901 of Auguste Sabatier, the holder of the chair in ancient Christian literature in the section of religious sciences, created a vacancy that Loisy hoped to fill. Even before the decision on Sabatier's replacement was made, Loisy worried that other professors in the section "feared that I am not free to treat questions of biblical criticism," and he asserted yet again that "I place myself on scientific terrain."⁵⁷ Loisy's assertions notwithstanding, the section did indeed award the chair to another candidate, although Loisy was allowed to continue to offer his course. Embittered,

Newman," *Revue du clergé français*, (December 1, 1898) 5–20; Hill, *Politics of Modernism* 106–16; Ronald Burke, "Was Loisy Newman's Modern Disciple?" in *Newman and the Modernists*, ed. Mary Jo Weaver (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985) 139–57; Nicholas Lash, "Newman and 'A. Firmin,'" in *John Henry Newman and Modernism*, ed. Arthur Hilary Jenkins, Internationale Cardinal-Newman-Studien, vol. 14 (Sigmaringendorf: Glock und Lutz, 1990) 56–68; Turvasi, "The Development of Doctrine in John Cardinal Newman and Alfred Loisy," in *John Henry Newman: Theology and Reform*, ed. Michael Allsopp and Ronald Burke (New York: Garland, 1992) 145–87; Wernz, "The 'Modernist' Writings of Alfred Loisy" 68–75.

⁵⁴ Bishop Mignot and Baron von Hügel both sent Loisy appreciative letters to this effect (quoted in *Mémoires* 2:133, 157). Gabriel Monod, an historian at the Sorbonne, wrote similarly in his review of the book (quoted in *Autour d'un petit livre* 287). For Loisy's own view, see *Mémoires* 2:167.

⁵⁵ "Essais" 3:6, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:445.

⁵⁶ *Choses passées* 181.

⁵⁷ Loisy to Desjardins, May 8, 1901, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:30. See also *Choses passées* 225.

Loisy informed Desjardins in June that he would be happy to leave the section.⁵⁸

The following year, throughout the period in which he wrote *L'Évangile et l'Église*, an opportunity to leave l'École presented itself in the form of a nomination for a bishopric. Loisy first learned in January 1902 that Prince Albert intended to nominate him for the bishopric of Monaco.⁵⁹ He began *L'Évangile et l'Église* in May of that year and finished it in August. At roughly the same time (August 3) he learned that he was also a potential candidate for a bishopric in France. In a letter of August 10 to Baron von Hügel, Loisy announced his second candidacy and expressed hesitation about publishing his new book.⁶⁰ To reassure himself, Loisy consulted another ally, Bishop Eudoxe-Iréné-Edouard Mignot of Albi, on August 15. Before reading the manuscript, Mignot expressed reservations about its impact on "our cause" for the bishopric, but subsequently he enthusiastically recommended publication.⁶¹ Mignot and Loisy continued to discuss his prospects for one of the two bishoprics, and, in a letter of advice, Mignot said that he had considered suggesting a delay in publishing *L'Évangile et l'Église*, but then he had decided that the book was more likely to help Loisy's candidacy.⁶² Two days later, Loisy, following Mignot's advice, solicited the support of Cardinal Mathieu, and he included in his letter of appeal a promise to send Mathieu a copy of *L'Évangile et l'Église* as soon as it appeared.⁶³ The book duly appeared two weeks later, on November 8, only to be condemned by Cardinal Richard two months later, an act Loisy attributed to an effort to block him from becoming a bishop.⁶⁴ Although Loisy's episcopal candidacy ultimately came to nothing, the connection that he drew at each stage between his candidacy and his book suggests that he hoped it might appeal to the Church. A historical

⁵⁸ Loisy to Desjardin, June 24, 1901, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:31. For Loisy's account of this episode as a whole, see *Mémoires* 2:29–33 and *Choses passées* 225–26. In fact, Loisy continued to teach at l'École as an adjunct professor until 1904, when he resigned as part of his submission to the Church's condemnation of *L'Évangile et l'Église* and others of his books.

⁵⁹ *L'Évangile et l'Église* 92, 95. See also *Choses passées* 232–34. For the story of Loisy's campaign to become bishop, see Marvin O'Connell, "The Bishopric of Monaco, 1902: A Revision," *Catholic Historical Quarterly* 71 (1985) 26–51; Hill, "French Politics and Alfred Loisy's Modernism," *Church History* 67 (1998) 521–36, at 523–29, and *Politics of Modernism* 175–79.

⁶⁰ Loisy to von Hügel, August 10, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:124–25

⁶¹ Mignot to Loisy, August 19, 1902, quoted in *ibid.* 126; Mignot to Loisy, 17 September 1902, quoted in *ibid.* 132–33.

⁶² Mignot to Loisy, October 25, 1902, quoted in *ibid.* 143–44.

⁶³ Loisy to Mathieu, October 27, 1902, quoted in *ibid.* 145. See also *Choses passées* 234–35.

⁶⁴ *Mémoires* 2:148, and *Choses passées* 241.

attack on liberal Protestantism that simultaneously defended Catholic teaching seemed promising.

Loisy's apologetic agenda complicated his ostensibly historical book, but it was consistent with his vision of disinterested historical criticism in and for the Church. In his letter to Mathieu seeking his support for his episcopal candidacy, Loisy noted, with some exaggeration—given his desire to leave l'École—that he had “a very honorable scientific career open before him.” As long as he taught at the Sorbonne, he said, he would necessarily continue to promote biblical scholarship for its own sake. He added that he would prefer to use his academic expertise on behalf of the Church, conciliating scientific progress with Catholic faith and doctrine.⁶⁵ From this perspective, *L'Évangile et l'Église* was an example of this conciliation, a historical work that demonstrated the possibility of combining science and Catholicism. As such, it fulfilled the goal that he set for himself in the preface of the “Essais,” even if it crossed the disciplinary boundaries that he established for himself in the preface to *L'Évangile et l'Église*.

MODERNIST THEOLOGY

If Loisy hoped the publication of *L'Évangile et l'Église* would advance his episcopal candidacy because it demonstrated the apologetic potential of his scholarship, why then did he not emphasize his apologetic agenda more strongly? His growing commitment to the distinction between theology and history, coupled with his interest in impressing academic colleagues with his historical rigor, may have been a factor. But Loisy's form of apologetics could itself be controversial with his Catholic brothers and sisters. As we have already seen, Loisy's historical response to Harnack raised challenging theological questions, as in the case of his apocalyptic interpretation of Jesus' preaching. More generally, Loisy defended the Church not as it was, but as he thought it should be: a progressive institution open to modern challenges and opportunities. Thus, implicit in both the historical and the apologetic positions of *L'Évangile et l'Église* was a criticism of the Church of his day. Hence Loisy's hesitation about publishing the book in 1902 and his subsequent comment that “the least political wisdom would have advised me to put aside the presentation [of his name as a candidate for a bishopric] and to postpone the publication [of *L'Évangile et l'Église*]” for at least a few years.⁶⁶ To emphasize theology more than he did may have seemed too risky.

The same applies even more clearly to the book's implicit reform

⁶⁵ Loisy to Mathieu, October 27, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:146. See also *Choses passées* 234–40.

⁶⁶ *Choses passées* 232.

agenda. Loisy both promoted that agenda and downplayed it. “This is not the place,” he wrote at the end of the chapter on Christian dogma, “to examine whether the tendency of modern Catholicism has not been too tutelary, or if the movement of religious and even scientific thought has not been more or less impeded by it.”⁶⁷ He ended the book as a whole the same way. “The adaptation of the gospel to the changing conditions of humanity is as pressing a need today as it ever was and ever will be. It is no part of the present book to say what difficulties—more apparent, perhaps, than real—this work may encounter in the Catholic Church.”⁶⁸ But, he later admitted, his historical book in fact “insinuated with discretion, but effectively, an essential reform of the received exegesis, the official theology, and ecclesiastical government in general.” He acknowledged taking “precautions” with his language in the book, but added that taking these “precautions” did not dissimulate my opinions but remove their aggressive character.”⁶⁹ In this context, he also called the book “his apologetic and reforming thesis,” and “a sort of program of progressive Catholicism.”⁷⁰

What were the precautions of language in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, and what was the “essential reform” that he proposed, however implicitly? To answer this question, we must turn to the “Essais.” We have already seen Loisy’s claim in his conclusion to *L'Évangile et l'Église* that “it is no part of the present book to say what difficulties—more apparent, perhaps, than real—this work [of adapting the gospel to the changing conditions of humanity] may encounter in the Catholic Church.” To identify these difficulties and to propose ways to overcome them was, however, the explicit object of the “Essais,” as Loisy had stated in the preface.⁷¹ Furthermore, the continuation of the quotation from *L'Évangile et l'Église* indicates where the difficulties lay: it was also not part of that book’s goal to explain “in what way the agreement of dogma and science, reason and faith, the Church and society can be conceived today.”⁷² To explain how to conceive this agreement was, however, precisely the goal of the final chapters of the “Essais,” which thus attempted the task that *L'Évangile et l'Église* proposed. And, again as we have already seen, Loisy was working on publish-

⁶⁷ *L'Évangile et l'Église* 219 (*Gospel and the Church* 225).

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* 278 (*Gospel and the Church* 276).

⁶⁹ *Mémoires* 2:168. See also *Choses passées* 246. Loisy wrote his autobiographies in part to defend his religious integrity. The claim that he did not dissimulate his theological opinions was part of this defense and was, no doubt, overstated. For our purposes, the point is that he acknowledged that *L'Évangile et l'Église* was not in fact pure history, but rather had a reform agenda. See Hill, “More than a Biblical Critic” 22–23.

⁷⁰ *Mémoires* 2:150; *Choses passées* 233.

⁷¹ “Essais” 3:9, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:446.

⁷² *L'Évangile et l'Église* 278 (*Gospel and the Church* 276–77).

ing these final reforming chapters as a separate volume in the same week that *L'Évangile et l'Église* appeared. All of this suggests that the reforms he sought in the latter were essentially those he advocated more explicitly and with fewer "precautions of language" in the "Essais."⁷³

The first element of Loisy's reform program as it appears in the relevant chapters of the "Essais" was to blame the Scholastic theology dominant in the Church for the faults of anti-Christian rationalism. For example, in an omitted passage adjacent to material included in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy argued that "all the arguments . . . of popular rationalism against the idea of dogma" were "involuntarily suggested to it by the popular conceptions of the theologians. One opposes scholastic reasoning [by popular rationalists!] to a scholastic conception quite badly defined."⁷⁴ Speaking elsewhere about the efficacy of the sacraments, he suggested dismissively that readers should allow "theologians to discourse at their leisure on the properties of the body of Jesus in the Eucharist These curious, almost indiscrete, speculations could formerly have had an interest; perhaps they are now rather an obstacle than an aid for faith."⁷⁵ Rationalism particularly infected historical scholars, and here, too, Loisy laid the blame at the feet of theology. "The theologian," he said, "is not without responsibility in the error of [historical] critics." Theologians confused theology and history despite "all the progress which has made history an independent and *sui generis* science, even when it has religion for its object." This confusion "induces and solicits the critic to combat theology with history, in place of simply combating an unscientific and a priori theological conception of religious history."⁷⁶

The most fundamental mistake of theological rationalism, and the one that elicited the most substantive anti-Christian rationalist attacks, was the assumption of its own absolute and immutable character.⁷⁷ Against this position, Loisy argued for a greater sense of historical relativism. He opened a section defending the legitimacy of Catholic doctrine by asserting its relativity. And for Loisy, this relativity meant "not only that the formulas [of doctrine] are perfectible as expressions of ideas which humanize, in some way, the divine revelation, but that these ideas are equally [perfectible]."⁷⁸ Near the end of the same section, amidst material included in

⁷³ Although Loisy set forth his ideas for reform more systematically in the final chapters of the "Essais," they also appeared in the chapters he used as sources for *L'Évangile et l'Église*.

⁷⁴ "Essais" 4:539; immediately followed by a passage published in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 205 (*Gospel and the Church* 213).

⁷⁵ "Essais" 674.

⁷⁶ "Essais" 448–49.

⁷⁷ See, for example "Essais" 448–49.

⁷⁸ "Essais" 533. Loisy emphasized this point over the next several pages, none of

L'Évangile et l'Église, Loisy omitted a passage which repeated that "the doctrinal form of religion is relative" and that this relative form could and had to undergo "perpetual transformations."⁷⁹ In the next chapter, Loisy traced the historical development of the liturgy and sacraments. Following a passage otherwise quoted in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy added that "the scholastic determination is a simple phase in the history of the sacramental institution that we must regard as a complete living organism. It is the fashion in which this institution has been understood since the Middle Ages; it is not the absolute and definitive formula."⁸⁰

Although Loisy drew an ever sharper distinction between the disciplines of history and theology, he believed that historians could teach theologians about this historical relativity and about the resulting possibility of modernizing outdated expressions of Catholic faith and practice. Loisy made this point repeatedly throughout the relevant chapters of the "Essais." The most recent stage in the development of dogma, he explained, "is reached at the same time that what one can call criticism commences."⁸¹ A key lesson of criticism, and indeed of modernity more generally, was historical relativity. After asserting that all human expressions were historically relative, Loisy added, "we do not have to demonstrate here the relativity of our knowledge. Philosophy and modern science are founded on this incontestable principle, which theology has always admitted implicitly, although it hesitates still today to recognize it."⁸² By showing theologians the historical evidence for this "incontestable principle," historians could help theologians to recognize it more explicitly. For example, Loisy claimed, tracing the historical development of the liturgy "has provoked in scholarly theology a grand disarray." "One cannot too much recommend pondering" some of the more curious chapters of liturgical history "to those who profess the immutability of sacramental rites and the determination by Christ himself of the matter and form of each sacrament."⁸³ Hopefully, after studying history more carefully, theologians could abandon their un-

which he included in *L'Évangile et l'Église*. Following this material, he drew on this section heavily for *L'Évangile et l'Église*. By this time Loisy had emphasized relativity for over a decade. See Notes, dated 1883, BN, Fonds Loisy, ms. 15643, quoted in part in *Mémoires* 1:119–25. Loisy added that relativism was fundamental to *L'Évangile et l'Église* and *Autour d'un petit livre*. See also *Choses passées* 74–75; Hill, *Politics of Modernism* 60–62; Provencher, "Origin and Development" 318–20.

⁷⁹ "Essais" 4:558. This passage was immediately preceded and followed by passages incorporated into *L'Évangile et l'Église* 214 (*Gospel and the Church* 221), 216 (*Gospel and the Church* 222–23).

⁸⁰ "Essais" 616. This passage was immediately preceded by a passage that Loisy included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 248 (*Gospel and the Church* 250).

⁸¹ "Essais" 552.

⁸² *Ibid.* 535.

⁸³ *Ibid.* 614; this passage was immediately followed by one Loisy included in

tenable claims to absolute immutability and instead accept that the liturgy, and every other facet of Christian faith and life, developed over time.⁸⁴

Loisy made this same point most strongly in his chapter on the Church. Even after acknowledging the limitations of historical scholarship, he insisted that "critical work has become indispensable in order to prevent theology from paralyzing science and faith at the same time." The idea of development, he continued, was "the only idea that corresponds to the truth of the facts, or, better said, the only idea that, in the present state of science, establishes a just relationship between our historical knowledge and the principles of faith." Unfortunately, the Church would not accept this idea "except under the external pressure of criticism." The constitution of the Church was flexible, he insisted, claims to the contrary notwithstanding. "What one did yesterday is not the absolute rule for what one does today; what one does today does not create a rigorously obligatory precedent for the future. *Such is the lesson that history teaches clearly to theology and to criticism.*"⁸⁵ Historians could see in history that everything was relative, and they could in turn teach theologians this fundamental principle, which theologians implicitly acknowledged but had so far refused explicitly to recognize.

The fact that Loisy, in his chapter on the Church, argued most forcefully that theologians should learn about historical relativity from historians suggests that his primary reform interest concerned the Church. This issue dominated not only this chapter but also the one on Catholic dogma, where ecclesiology was one of three doctrines discussed at length and the one with which he concluded.⁸⁶ Loisy's interest in ecclesiology had not waned by 1902. In notes written about *L'Évangile et l'Église* on October 13, 1902, he identified "the type of authority that pertained to the Church" as the third key issue in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, along with the divinity of Jesus and the efficacy of the sacraments. Of the three, ecclesiastical authority was the least "indefinable" and therefore presumably the one most tangible, most rooted in history, and most perfectible.⁸⁷

Loisy's primary concern in his discussion of the Church was that theo-

L'Évangile et l'Église 247 (*Gospel and the Church* 249). Later in the same section, in an omitted passage amidst included material (*L'Évangile et l'Église* 235 [*Gospel and the Church* 238–39]), Loisy added that "the theologian has not the least interest in contesting the facts that the historian is obliged to ascertain" (638). Omission of this passage suggests Loisy's view that theologians might contest these facts after all, even if they did not have the right to do so.

⁸⁴ "Essais" 508–9. Part of this section—not the part quoted here—appeared in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 203 (*Gospel and the Church* 210–11).

⁸⁵ See "Essais" 450–54, my emphasis.

⁸⁶ The other two doctrines were Christology and grace.

⁸⁷ See Notes, October 13, 1902, quoted in *Mémoires* 2:150.

logians work to moderate its centralized authority structure. The first section of the chapter on the Church—a long one from which little appears in *L'Évangile et l'Église*—traced the historical development of the Church as it became increasingly centralized, a process that had culminated in the 19th century. Loisy defended this development, but he argued that problems arose when theologians failed to recognize the fact of ongoing historical development and tried to freeze it. Far better to recognize that centralization in the Church “cannot go further in the direction that it has followed to our days.”⁸⁸

In the second section of the chapter on the Church, Loisy continued his defense of ecclesiastical centralization, but he also looked forward to its future reversal. As a result of “the general movement,” he conceded, the Church “has desired to give juridical, or rather constitutional, form to her preeminence and hierarchy” and “became a government” that inherited “the imperial tradition.”⁸⁹ To these passages, which he included in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy added predictions about future reductions in papal authority and ecclesiastical centralization, which he omitted. For example, he argued that the political influence of the Church was “transitory in many regards” and that “the future could not fail to relieve the pope of it by rendering it partially useless and incompatible with the entire development of spiritual authority. In itself, the purely human, economic, and political development of societies is not an affair of religion; consequently, it is not an affair of the Church nor of the pontificate.”⁹⁰ Elsewhere Loisy complained of the “confusion” that came from “the intimate association of Church and State.” The “force of events” would dissipate this confusion, he predicted, as the State increasingly concentrated on civil government and the Church on spiritual activity.⁹¹ Loisy therefore foresaw “the progressive diminution of the direct action of the pope in the temporal and political order.”⁹²

The third section of the chapter on the Church expressed hope that Catholics would come to recognize that “bureaucratic organization can become a cause of decline for the Church just as it is for the State. If this

⁸⁸ “Essais” 4:407, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:461.

⁸⁹ “Essais” 426–28, partly quoted in *Mémoires* 1:462. Cf. *L'Évangile et l'Église* 148–50 (*Gospel and the Church* 159–61).

⁹⁰ “Essais” 428–29. This passage was part of a longer passage otherwise included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 150 (*Gospel and the Church* 160–61).

⁹¹ “Essais” 430–31. These passages were preceded and followed by passages included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 151 (*Gospel and the Church* 161–62).

⁹² “Essais” 434 (followed shortly by a passage included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 153; *Gospel and the Church* 163–64). Loisy explicitly paralleled the growing separation of church and state to the growing separation of modern science and theology (*L'Évangile et l'Église* 432; omitted, but immediately followed by a passage included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 151 [*Gospel and the Church* 161–62]).

eventuality occurs, one can foresee that it will produce new relations between the particular Churches and the Roman Church" without "prejudice to the legitimacy of current relations, just as these latter do not condemn the state of things that existed in the first centuries."⁹³ Loisy ended the chapter looking ahead to the time when ecclesiastical authority would not "exercise a sort of jealous surveillance over intellectual activity," but would rather take as its mission "to form strong individuals, to direct, control, and govern less than to teach people to direct themselves, control themselves, govern themselves."⁹⁴

In the next chapter, "The Church and Christian Dogma," Loisy continued to worry about the abuse of ecclesiastical authority and to assert that the Church could reform its theory and practice of authority. As in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, he began this chapter with an assertion that dogmas were necessary and that they necessarily developed.⁹⁵ The first section then offered an historical survey of the crucial doctrines of the person of Christ, grace, and the Church. In the final part of the section, Loisy claimed that "one will perceive some day that the connection [of temporal and spiritual power] is not essential and that maintaining it creates more problems than advantages. It is also true that the conditions for the exercise of pontifical infallibility have been very vaguely defined." Loisy explained the ambiguity at some length, and concluded this discussion by noting that a later chapter would return to "the anomalies presented by the exercise of teaching authority in the Church. But after what we have learned of the development of institutions and dogmas in the Church, it is permitted to us to think that the conception can be improved."⁹⁶ This idea was controversial, of course, and Loisy omitted this discussion from *L'Évangile et l'Église*, even though he included material immediately preceding and following this discussion of Church authority.⁹⁷ The second and third sections of the chapter similarly acknowledged problems with the current exercise of authority in the Church—for example, criticizing the "idolatry of papal power."⁹⁸

Loisy was clearer on the problems with the exercise of church authority in his day than he was on the particular form it should take, but he did offer some suggestions about how to conceive ecclesiastical authority in the

⁹³ "Essais" 453–54.

⁹⁴ "Essais" 461. This passage immediately followed a passage included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 165 (*Gospel and the Church* 175).

⁹⁵ "Essais" 463–64, quoted in *Mémoires* 1:463. See also *L'Évangile et l'Église* 171–72 (*Gospel and the Church* 180–81) for the same basic idea, although modified to fit Loisy's response to Harnack.

⁹⁶ "Essais" 505–8.

⁹⁷ This discussion appeared within a longer section otherwise included in *L'Évangile et l'Église* 201–2 (*Gospel and the Church* 209–10).

⁹⁸ "Essais" 4:531.

modern period. He ended his chapter on the Church in the “Essais” with the claim that “the principle of solution for all present and future difficulties is acquired; it is the same that has resolved all those of the past: the Church exists for the salvation of people; people do not exist for the temporal exaltation of the Church.”⁹⁹ Protestants who did not understand this principle of Catholicism reproached the Church “for holding its members in a state of perpetual minority,” when, Loisy claimed, the Catholic Church actually respected and protected “the autonomy of the Christian conscience” better than any other Christian institution.¹⁰⁰ Although Loisy did not include this passage in *L’Évangile et l’Église*, he did express essentially the same idea there. “The Church,” he said, “is an educator rather than a dominating mistress; she instructs rather than directs, and he who obeys her does so only according to his own conscience and in order to obey God. In principle, Catholicism aims as much as Protestantism at the formation of religious personalities, souls master of themselves, pure and free consciences.”¹⁰¹ In other words, the Church was, or should be, a moral educator training its adherents to be autonomous moral agents.¹⁰²

Although *L’Évangile et l’Église* drew on the “Essais” and made many of the same points, the “Essais” tended to be more direct, as Loisy himself said.¹⁰³ In the “Essais,” he was primarily concerned about immobility in the institutional structure of the Church and critical of abuses in ecclesiastical authority. In keeping with these concerns, he clearly attacked conservative Catholics for their attempt to arrest the development of the Church more than he attacked Protestants. On the surface, *L’Évangile et l’Église* reversed this balance by foregrounding the refutation of Harnack and downplaying any theological and reformational implications of the book. But Loisy’s refutation of Harnack implied the same criticisms of conservative

⁹⁹ “Essais” 462. See also *L’Évangile et l’Église* 164 (*Gospel and the Church* 173–74).

¹⁰⁰ “Essais” 457–58. On Loisy’s concern with the Protestant accusation that the Church held its adherents in a state of perpetual minority, see Hill, *Politics of Modernism* 143–73.

¹⁰¹ *L’Évangile et l’Église* 166 (*Gospel and the Church* 175–76). Part of this passage comes from “Essais” 4:456.

¹⁰² Summarizing this position in his *Mémoires* (1:473), Loisy noted that “the theology of which I spoke would be a religious and moral pedagogy,” and added that he “conciliated without difficulty the authority of the Church with the relative autonomy of the individual conscience by attributing a pedagogical character to this authority.”

¹⁰³ In his autobiography, Loisy commented that the relevant chapters of the “Essais” were “better balanced” than in *L’Évangile et l’Église*, where his points were accommodated to the demands of his response to Harnack (*Mémoires* 1:460). The chapters from the “Essais” were, he continued, “more rich in content than the corresponding chapters of *L’Évangile et l’Église* . . . and clearer in their conclusions” (*Mémoires* 1:464).

Catholicism that the "Essais" made explicitly, even if the criticisms remained only implicit. This argument from historical relativity to the moderation of Church authority appears to have been the "essential reform" that *L'Évangile et l'Église* implied, and to make his criticisms of ecclesiastical authoritarianism implicit rather than explicit seems to have been the major "precaution of language" in the book.

CONCLUSION

In *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy sought to appeal to professional historians and to the Catholic hierarchy while being faithful to his own theological convictions, and thus he produced a work that has been the subject of debate since its first appearance. Contrary to Harnack's historical claims, Loisy argued that Jesus was an apocalyptic preacher. As a Catholic apologist, Loisy added that liberal Protestant accusations that the Catholic Church had corrupted the gospel were not necessarily true. And as a would-be Church reformer, he insisted that liberal Protestant accusations were certainly not true of the Catholicism that could be. The Church could, and eventually would, recognize the fact of historical development and modify its authoritarian structure accordingly.

This combination of claims, and the various audiences to which Loisy addressed each, make interpreting *L'Évangile et l'Église* difficult, particularly given Loisy's increasing emphasis on the distinction between history and theology. Many critics have responded by emphasizing Loisy's subtlety, and sometimes his dishonesty. He clearly was a subtle thinker who carefully considered the impression that his writings would convey. It seems plausible, however, that the difficulties of the book also reflect genuine ambiguities in Loisy's own thinking. His historical opinions and his understanding of the relationship between historical scholarship and Catholic theology were evolving at the same time that he was wrestling with his vocation in the secular academy and in the Church. Contemporary readers need not attribute the difficulties of the text to Loisy's obfuscation under those circumstances. The difficulties may rather reflect honest confusion on his part.

Still, comparing and contrasting the "Essais" and *L'Évangile et l'Église*, and taking into consideration Loisy's professional circumstances at the time of their composition, can clarify this otherwise confusing combination of history, apologetics, and a reform agenda. And it is in clarifying the reform agenda shared by the "Essais" and *L'Évangile et l'Église* that the comparison of the two has the most value. Loisy promoted a theory of historical relativism that both explained past changes in Catholic faith and practice and opened the door to future ones. If theologians would only learn about historical relativity from historians, Loisy contended, they

could enter into the task of adapting the gospel to the modern situation, including especially the task of moderating the exercise of Church authority to avoid the potential political and intellectual abuses to which the Church was subject at the beginning of the 20th century. Loisy did not explain exactly what reforms were necessary to enable the Church to fulfill its task of forming mature religious personalities, and he did not address some of the pressing theological questions that his reform project raised. But this ideal of a progressive, modern, religious institution was the heart of his vision for the Church, the source of his reforming zeal, and the key to his Modernist agenda. This ideal also put him at odds with the dominant conception of the Church of his day. The publication of this conception in *L'Évangile et l'Église*, however prudent its tone, set the stage for his excommunication six years later.