

## THE FAITH OF BARON VON HÜGEL

ONE must be either a disciple or a critic. Or, at least, when interpreting the thought of a great man the criterion of interpretation should be indicated. The trouble with M. Nédoncelle's book<sup>1</sup> is that although it is not a simple exposition—it is in its way an apology—although his personal sympathies are evident enough, his general position is left vague. He writes neither as a theologian nor a philosopher; and no appreciation of von Hügel can help us very much unless it is undertaken from both these points of view. As is stated in the Foreword, certain minor changes have been introduced in this English edition. That they were necessary is evident from the fact that in the French edition (p. 114) M. Nédoncelle stated that von Hügel's ideas on the limitation of Christ's knowledge were not contrary to the Faith.

In England it is especially necessary to be accurate about von Hügel. His influence has been considerable in religious bodies external to the Church. In some ways this has been good; the massive fact of a transcendent religion has been brought home to them. But since the Baron, although achieving an ever fuller orthodoxy, never eliminated certain heterodox elements in his statement of religion, his life seems to offer an example of what a "liberal" Catholic of the future might be; that future when Rome shall be more "enlightened." This attitude towards him appears to be common among the Anglican body, now so unhappily in the throes of modernism. It is an attitude which the Baron would have intemperately resented! He was fiercely proud of being an ultramontane Roman Catholic. M. Nédoncelle notes that at the time of the modernist crisis "he did all he could to steady Tyrrell and to dissuade him from joining the Anglican Church."

With the above reservations in mind it is possible to find much that is praiseworthy in his book. The chapter on von Hügel's life and work is admirable. It clears him from the accusation of being the instigator of the modernists' revolt, although he must have been at times a most imprudent director for adventurous souls who had far less grasp of

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<sup>1</sup> *Baron Friedrich von Hügel: A Study of his Life and Thought*, by Maurice Nédoncelle (Longmans; 8/6).

fundamental truths than himself. He was never a modernist. For modernism is not a matter of exegesis and criticism: it is a philosophy. It found its way into many Catholic minds at a period when theological and philosophical formation was poor. Originating in Protestant Germany with Schleiermacher's theory of immanence, it resulted in a doctrine of continuism, of absolute continuity between the religious values discoverable within oneself and the supernatural. The thinking subject can only accept what is demanded by its own thought. Such a doctrine is obviously fatal to the idea of a revelation which is *given* by God. It amounts to a kind of pantheism and is destructive of all religion and worship. This perversion is found, implicitly at least, in every page of Tyrrell. It is never found in von Hügel. Much as he respects nature and insists on the necessity for its development as the material on which grace will act and transform, God for him is always *das ganz Andere*, the totally other in relation to us, a Being whose essential tribute is adoration, and if we would experience Him we must "die, die, day and night to self." His friends were astonished when he did not follow them over the abyss; but he had never been with them.

M. Nédoncelle's later chapters deal with various lines of von Hügel's thought. They provide much information; their serious flaw is that they give no indication of his chronological development. The study of this development is of twofold importance; it enables us to see how as the years went by von Hügel drew nearer to an explicit realization of the deposit of faith to which he always implicitly adhered, and on the other hand it prevents our attributing to him orthodox statements, made at one point in his career, but abandoned later. For example, with regard to the first point, much is made of his supposed hatred of "systems," and the implied reference is always to scholastic theology which is presumed to be a personal eclectic arrangement of mechanically interrelated parts and not, as in truth it is, a spiritual organism docile to all reality. Now it is certain that von Hügel gradually came to understand this truth in regard to the theology of St. Thomas. M. Nédoncelle does not mention this fact. And yet it is of obvious importance, for much of the confusion and incoherence in the Baron's thought would have been avoided if he had understood it sooner. An example of the second point is the Baron's treatment of the

Petrine texts. Father Luke Walker pointed out in **BLACKFRIARS** (August, 1930) that his book on the Petrine claims was written in 1893, and that his defence of the authenticity of the texts there given was definitely contradicted in his later writings. One cannot therefore cite this early work as representative of his final opinion. But no hint of the change is given by M. Nédoncelle.

His book then does little to assist us in forming a judgment. How are we to regard von Hügel? As a portentous thinker too big for the petty classifications of theologians, perhaps too big for the centralized, legalized Roman Church? That solution is too easy. And it is, again, one that the Baron would have loathed. For humility was his most fundamental virtue. As an hypothesis we venture to suggest the following. The essential factor throughout his life was the submission of his mind and will, through divine faith, to the revelation of God proposed uniquely by the Roman Catholic Church. He never doubted that the voice of God has that one single utterance in the world. But that divine Word coming into the human mind is not received passively; it is welcomed actively by the mind, already alive, already tempered by its own activity, its special mode influenced by heredity, education and environment. It endeavours to assimilate the divine Word and to relate it to the truths of the natural order—which are also God's truths. In this process the solitary thinker, living apart from theological tradition, may easily come to conclusions which, although he fails to realize it, are in contradiction with the premises he holds to be divine. Von Hügel was such a thinker, and his difficulties were increased by the special difficulties of his time. It seems then that we may regard his work not as a coherent whole but as so many "*quaestiones*," so many shafts driven into the data of revelation, the outcome of each having to be judged by the theologian on its own merits. As a pure philosopher he is not impressive; as an investigator of Revelation his work varies from profound insights into such problems as the nature of supernatural religion itself, the relation between grace and nature, the implications of the principle of the Incarnation, the light thrown by Revelation on the presence of evil, the nature and exigencies of Christian sanctity, to definitely erroneous solutions of such problems as that of the development of dogma, the foundation of the

THE FAITH OF BARON VON HUGEL

Church, and the limitation of Christ's knowledge with regard to the Parousia. These errors are grave; but if the above-mentioned hypothesis is correct, they do not conflict with the Baron's enduring and simple faith. That it is correct is suggested by a sentence, rightly emphasized by M. Nédoncelle, which he wrote in 1931: "I cannot completely understand this great doctrine of the Parousia. . . . *Our Lord sees something. I do not see clearly what. He is beyond me.*" Is not that the faith of the centurion?

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