

ALFRED LOISY¹

Loisy died in 1940 and his devoted disciple, Miss Maud Petre, died in December, 1942. In the pages of this book she attempts to explain the Abbé's religious standpoint by copious citations from his writings, adding her own comments, verily those of a disciple. Just over forty years have elapsed since the publication of *L'Evangile et l'Eglise* took the ecclesiastical world by storm and, with its sequel *Autour d'un petit livre*, was condemned by the Holy See in 1903.² Loisy declined to submit.

What a tragic story it is! Nor is the telling of it by his devoted disciple less so. For while endeavouring to preserve her independence, she is plainly in full sympathy with the master's main contentions. I have read her pages twice if not thrice, and—harsh though it may seem—the word 'egoist,' applicable to master and disciple alike, keeps recurring to the mind.

As Miss Petre herself says: 'Loisy lived by mind rather than by heart, and mental agreement was, for him, essential to friendship.' Hence the breach, first with Duchesne, then with von Hugel: 'his Memoires testify to his sensitiveness and inability to endure contradiction patiently.' Pius X, to whom Loisy had appealed, saw this clearly: 'I have received a letter from Loisy; but while his appeal is addressed to my heart, his letter was not written from his own heart.'

To understand something of Loisy's mentality we have to look back to his days in the Seminary, 1873-1879. Of those days he says: 'The presentation of Catholic belief, as set forth in the dogmatic and moral theology of the Church, began to fill both mind and conscience with invincible disquiet.' But he was ordained and shortly after became a professor. At this period he wrote: 'What we have to do is to renew theology from top to bottom, to substitute the religious for the dogmatic spirit, to seek the soul of theological truth and leave reason free under the control of conscience.' With this end in view he planned an immense work the title of which, if it had ever seen the light, might have been *Scientific Theology*. But

¹ *Alfred Loisy: His Religious Significance*. By M. D. Petre (Cambridge University Press; 7s. 6d.). With an Introductory Notice of Miss Petre and a brief Foreword by herself.

² On June 25th, 1902, all the writings of Loisy were placed on the Index; see, too, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1903, p. 266.

what we can only call the twist in his mind betrays itself when he says :

‘ Convinced that theological orthodoxy could not in the long run prevail against scientific truth, but would be forced to reckon with it and accommodate itself to it, I did not think that the fact of having lost confidence in the absolute value of traditional dogmas unfitted me for the teaching of exegesis in a Catholic faculty. After all, was it not a service to the Church to invite and help her to free herself from a narrow and superannuated gnosis, which compromised her moral action on a world that was increasingly cultured? ’

In other words : he wanted to be a free lance, and for such defenders, however well equipped, the Church of God has no use.

Loisy broke with Duchesne and von Hugel simply because they refused to see eye to eye with him. Yet it is not easy to see what precisely he wanted them to see with his eyes. He speaks of his ‘ lost cause ’ ; but it is hard to discover in what the ‘ loss ’ consisted. He repeatedly demanded to be allowed to defend the Church in an approaching—indeed already present—conflict which he seemed to fancy he alone discerned. The difficulty was that he wanted the battle to be fought exclusively on his own lines. As he wrote to Father Lepidi, O.P., Master of the Sacred Palace : ‘ I have not in me the making of a heresiarch or even a heretic. . . I have served the Church with all the devotion of which I am capable,’ and elsewhere : ‘ I grieve that the Church has not used me and will not use me in her service.’

Was Loisy a ‘ heretic ’ ? Miss Petre says that in addition to ‘ the heresy that denies, there is also the heresy that refuses complete assent, in the belief that the doctrine as it stands, is but a partial statement of religious truth which lies behind and beyond it.’ This ‘ form of latent heresy is, not inconsistent with whole-hearted adherence to the Church.’ We cordially agree ; but then it is not ‘ heresy.’ In this sense Loisy was no heretic. But when Miss Petre goes on to say :

‘ There are minds that are fundamentally heretical, even though their owners may be true members of the Church and uphold her doctrine. Their heretical character consists in the fact that they never think any doctrine to be so through and through, so unimpeachably true, as to exclude all questioning and doubt.’

If this is a correct portrayal of Loisy’s mind—and everything he wrote seems to confirm it—then the Abbé was unquestionably a

heretic. That his teaching was dangerous³ is clear from the repeated complaints made to the Holy See and from the resulting condemnations in 1903.

The word 'orthodoxy' recurs over and over again in Loisy's pages and in those of Miss Petre. For Loisy, says Miss Petre,

'Orthodoxy signified the intransigent defence of religious dogmas, not in a purely spiritual, but in a quasi-scientific sense; for it seemed to him that theologians claimed for theology a double quality of certainty, the quality of faith and the quality of assured scientific truth. The dogmas of faith were true because the Church taught them as revealed truth; they were also true because history and science taught them as historical and scientific truths. It was the validity of this latter point that he denied.'

A fantastic statement. One which every theological Professor would repudiate. For by 'orthodoxy' is meant 'correct ideas,' and, in this context, correct ideas on what God has revealed and which it is the function of his Church to teach. Those correct ideas are enshrined in the Articles of the Creeds. No one ever imagined that those Articles expressed the whole content of Revelation. No theologian ever supposed that his petty probings after the inner meaning of Revealed Truth exhausted it. Indeed the greater the theologian the more he insists on this truth:

'He wants to express the truth,' says St. Augustine of the inspired Psalmist, 'but he fails to do so; he cannot do so, neither can we understand it. Indeed I venture to say of those same holy tongues and hearts through which the Truth is declared to us, that what they are telling us cannot be fully expressed nor even so much as thought.'—(Enarr. i. 14 on Ps. xxxv.)

'Orthodoxy,' said Loisy, 'is a myth. There is no such things as an unchanging doctrine.' And Miss Petre herself quotes—and apparently endorses—D. R. Davies *On to Orthodoxy*, p. 112:

'I do not mean by orthodoxy the officially accepted Creeds and confessions of the Church so much as the substantive experience and knowledge that are proclaimed in those Creeds,' and she herself remarks: 'Perhaps the Church has not always shown sufficient faith in her own spiritual character. This is

³ No one realised more clearly the dangerous character of the ideas so persistently advanced by Loisy than did the late Père Lagrange, see his reviews in the *Rev. Biblique*, Jan. 1916, pp. 250-259; April, 1923, p. 282; Oct., 1932, p. 622. Nor were writers in the *Journal of Theological Studies* less pronounced, see the issues for July, 1928, p. 413; Oct., 1931, p. 443.

what Loisy tried to indicate when he repeatedly asserted that the spiritual essence of doctrines was not impugned by history.' 'The Church,' she says, 'has to struggle with her own digestion—that is with her own children who stir up the process more unpleasantly than any number of avowed enemies. She can better defend herself from the latter and continue longer in a state of peaceful quiescence; not dealing directly with the pabulum which she has got to absorb in the end. . . . As we look back on the history of the Church, we know that the resistance always does come to an end by the incorporation of that force into her own life. But, like every living thing, she must do it in her own way; a way that is often unjust to her victims, who have to suffer because the Church herself is in the throes of digestive pains. Every Church has to serve out its forms of worship as well as its articles of belief; so long as, in that Church, we find and feel the highest teaching of spiritual reality, we accept her doctrine.'

If that is not 'egoism' 'individualism'—in other words 'heresy'—I do not know in what form of words heresy could be more plainly expressed.

For theologians as such this 'Professor of Theology' had no use: 'the angel of the schools disconcerted me by the boldness of his logical constructions, for which I found no solid foundation.' The truth he persistently recognised was 'that theology failed in so far as she claimed to be science, science failed in its attempt to take the place of theology. And faith survived both. . . . his quarrel with theology was that it failed in respect for the unknowable.' How strange to find one who resented dogma and pleaded for a reasoned approach to the truths of revelation yet saying that 'scholastic theologians have been, and many still are, fierce rationalists, like their counterparts, the absolute theorists of science and reason.'

Yet what else is theology save a human science applying the God-given powers of reason to the God-given truths of revelation? It is the unceasing, and may we say ever-changing, endeavour to assimilate the unchanging because unchangeable deposit of things to be believed, 'avoiding profane novelties and knowledge falsely so called,' it is the fulfilment of what St. Jude regarded as an obligation on the faithful, the 'contending earnestly for the faith once and for all delivered unto the saints.'

With the appearance of the Decree *Lamentabile sane* and the Encyclical *Pascendi* Loisy's intransigent attitude became more definitely marked than ever:

'The Pope has truly said that he could not keep silence without betraying the deposit of traditional doctrine. . . . the two positions' are taken. . . . the divorce is complete. . . . It is impossible to foresee when, and how modern thought and society can be reconciled with the Catholic faith and institution. . . . we cannot usefully speak to them of reconciliation when they are turning their backs on one another.'

How far Loisy derogated from traditional teaching on the Incarnation appears in his insistence on the emphasis on the word 'made' in Acts ii.36, 'God hath *made* that same Jesus both Lord and God'; 'this simple distinction, made from the beginning by Peter and Paul, but often neglected ever since, is the foundation of *L'Evangile et l'Eglise*.' Hence his steadfast denial that history could prove, even from Christ's own words, the doctrine of his Divinity. At the same time he upheld, against Paul Couchoud and Harnack, the reality of Christ's human nature. Yet even here he betrays his habitual attitude :

'There are only two sane attitudes for the interpretation of the Gospel, that of the historian, who takes it as it is, and endeavours to analyse the character and original meaning of the texts, and that of the Church, which, without regard to the limitations of its primitive sense, draws from the Gospel the teaching that is suitable to the needs of modern times.'

One wonders what meaning Loisy could have attached to the definitions so painstakingly drawn up by the Church of God at Ephesus and Chalcedon; one wonders, what concept he had formed of the Church herself. It is but the old story again: as St. Optatus wrote to the Donatists 'Your fundamental error is that you have never grasped what is meant by "the Church."' Yet Loisy could write: 'Roman Catholicism, as it is, must perish and deserves no regret. It could survive by transforming itself, but it will not.'

'We learn much,' says Miss Petre, 'when we learn our limitations.' Did Loisy ever learn his limitations? Here was a man who openly declared that his one aim was to show that theology, dogma, apologetics, orthodoxy—nay the Church herself—were all in a fatal groove, nay worse—were working on mistaken lines. Quoting Miss Petre once more: 'He knew that those to whom he had to address himself had no understanding of the problem; but he believed that the Church was greater than any of her passing representatives.' In plain words, then, for the Abbé Loisy there was no such thing as an ever-present *Ecclesia docens*, no living 'pillar and ground of the truth.'

HUGH POPE, O.P.