

# Father Tyrrell and the Catholic Crisis<sup>1</sup>

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The title of this paper expresses a certain wilful, or at least studied, ambiguity. What Catholic crisis? you may ask; or, more realistically, which Catholic crisis? Upon the publication of the encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, in July last year, there was a single point of agreement between those Catholics who welcomed the papal letter as a major contribution, in Mr Malcolm Muggeridge's memorable phrase, for stemming 'the Gadarene slide into American morality', and those other Catholics who recognized it at once as yet another offering for that ever-growing *catena* of documentary embarrassment which the Holy See, in a kind of reverse Peter's Pence, has generously provided in the course of the last 150 years. The nearly unanimous response—one of the notable exceptions being the author himself, if we are to believe some observers—was that we were now on the threshold of a new crisis, of faith, of authority, what you will, which would reduce the dimensions of the Modernist crisis, 1894-1910, to something resembling a parochial squabble between the vicar and the mothers' union.

There are others, on both the ecclesiastical right and left, who would hold that the present crisis in the Church is simply chapter two, or the logical outcome of that earlier one, that the problems at the heart of the modernist controversy have re-appeared, sometimes in rather new garb, and that we must once again face them and come to terms with them. Generally, of course, those on the right wish to use, more or less, the same techniques used by the Magisterium in the years 1907-1910 to deal with the crisis, that is, censorship, committees of vigilance, secret delation, suppression, condemnation, and, if needs be, excommunication; while those on the left prefer free discussion and dissemination of opinions, open publication and authoritatively-sponsored, albeit controlled, experimentation. In the terms in which I have posed the options you will probably discern the drift of my sympathies, but I would emphasize the the word, 'drift', for I am by no means certain about the best policies to be followed in the present situation, and, as will emerge from the questions which I intend to pose at the end of this paper, I believe some case can be made for the other side as well, if not for their means, at least for their motives.

So the ambiguity of the title is quite intentional. I intend to speak about both crises. First of all, for the obvious reason: that we might

<sup>1</sup>This paper is based on a talk originally given to the Hort Society, Cambridge.

perhaps learn something from the past for the present. But secondly, and in some ways more important to my own purpose: that we might trace certain strands of continuity which link us theologically to that earlier period. And thirdly, because, although it may seem to other Christians of merely domestic interest to Roman Catholics, the ecumenical ambience in which we presently live charges such intra-mural controversies with more than passing interest to those who regard Christian unity as a real desideratum.

I should, then, like to point out three specific areas of concern in Tyrrell's writings which, I think, may be of particular usefulness for us in the present situation, concluding with some comments, put in the form of questions, about the contemporary situation. Certainly there should be no surprise that there is today a renewed interest in the work of the modernists and the movement associated with their name at the turn of the century. An even casual reading of some of the books associated with the most important representatives of the movement reveals many concerns and themes held in common with contemporary theological writing.<sup>1</sup>

It is not, however, with the historical circumstances of the modernist controversy that this paper deals, but rather with three specific contributions of perhaps the most attractive among the various protagonists in the whole unhappy episode, the Anglo-Irish Jesuit, George Tyrrell. The details of his life, his early conversion, the extraordinary popularity of his preaching and writing, the widening gap between himself and the authorities of his order, his dismissal from the Society of Jesus in 1906 and subsequent excommunication in 1907, the circumstances of his premature death in 1909, and the controversy arising from the refusal of the Church authorities to permit his Catholic burial, etc., need not be rehearsed here.

(a) *The analogous nature of theological language*

Tyrrell used to say that 'when the greatest of theologians has said all he has to say about God, he has in fact done little more than a schoolmaster does when he chalks a circle on the blackboard and says, "That is the sun"!' He was preoccupied, perhaps most pronouncedly during his Thomist period, but recurringly through all of his writings, with the analogical nature of theological language. It is in an appendix to *Lex Orandi* that Tyrrell gives a resumé of St Thomas's teaching about the use of analogy in theological speaking (cf. *Summa Theologica*, 1a, 13). In the thomistic context in which he first deals with *analogia entis* he wrote: 'It is plain that these beliefs are at first expressed simply and directly in the terms of things familiar to us, just as if they had been given us through our senses like the facts of history or science; and belonged to the world of appearances. But our mind, with its need of unity and coherence, cannot tolerate the confusion that would result from taking them

<sup>1</sup>For some account of the historical background to the modernist movement, and of certain biographical details about George Tyrrell himself, see 'Who were the Modernists?' by Meriol Trevor, *New Blackfriars*, August, 1968.

(religious doctrines) in their simple literality, and at once sets about explaining them as *analogously* true in some way that will harmonize with the rest of our systematized knowledge.'

To forget the analogous nature of theological language, of the way in which we speak about God, is, according to Tyrrell, to come dangerously near to succumbing to idolatry. 'The interest both of intellectual truth and of religion require us to recognize this fiction [that we can really speak univocally of God and creation; that we can use words, not only those like 'good and 'just' of God and men, but even words like 'person', 'one', 'being', and 'existence', in some kind of non-analogous way] as such, under pain of mental incoherence on one side, and of superstition and idolatry on the other.' Even the Pantheist, who in some way views God's immanence as that of a veritable *anima mundi*, part and parcel of the whole, revealed in nature just as the soul is revealed in the body, cannot avoid falsifying all the calculations of his mind, if he does not see that that immanence itself cannot but be expressed analogously. Says Tyrrell, '... worship is not less idolatrous because the idol is greater than all the creatures put together'. Similarly for the Unitarian: 'The unitarianism of what is called "Natural Theology" always forgets that God can be called "a person", "a spirit", only by way of analogy, and that analogy affects the grammatical article as well as the substantive; that because God is by nature one and personal it does not follow that He is one person and not many.'

But the faith of the Christian is Trinitarian and Tyrrell reminds both the theologian and the believer: 'If the idea of God, as given us by the requirements of religious experience, needed to be explained as analogous in order to be harmonized with our general understanding and scheme of existence, the notion of three persons in God demands yet further adjustment, so as to stand together with our belief in the unity of God. With this belief it [faith in a triune God] seems to conflict just so far as the analogous character of our knowledge of God is forgotten or misunderstood.' Finally, Tyrrell says, 'In all this way of thinking man is made the measure of God; the finite, of the infinite; God is brought inside creation as its organic head, its principal factor; as *a cause, a will, an agency co-operant with, albeit sovereign over, other causes, wills and agencies. Of that power which is another name for Being, which effects by being and not by doing, we can have no proper, but only an analogous conception*', which is to say that, 'the attempts to make our belief in a God of infinite goodness, wisdom, and power, fit in harmoniously with our view of the world around us, as given us by experience and systematized by our understanding, are and will always remain, *inadequate.*'

(b) *The distinction between revelation and theology*

From his insistence upon the analogical nature of theological language which, I think, ultimately separated him from those who asserted that dogmas were simply more or less arbitrarily symbolic

with no correspondence to any higher reality, as well as from those who refused to interpret dogmatic formularies in any but the most literal way, that is, as totally adequate statements of religious truth, I want to turn to yet another contribution which I believe Tyrrell might be able to make to the present theological and indeed ecclesiastical situation. As Father Gregory Baum and others have noted, one of the characteristics of the post-Tridentine Church was a blurring of the crucial distinction between revelation and theology. Tyrrell gave a vivid exposition of this distinction in a number of later books, most notably in the essay, 'The Rights and Limits of Theology', which was published in a book called *Through Scylla and Charybdis: or The Old Theology and the New*. One of the many unsettled questions confronting theologians today, especially in the ecumenical climate in which such enterprises now take place, is precisely the relationship between the biblical literature and ecclesiastical tradition, and their relationship, not only to each other, but to the changing and developing theological formulations in which they are expressed.

He first spoke of this question in an earlier book, *Lex Credendi*, published before his excommunication in 1907; it is curious book, not so much a theological study as a long meditation on the meaning of the Lord's prayer, but in it he wrote of what he took to be his own role in the discussion: 'the iterated recognition of the rights of a sane and free theology ministering to, but no wise confounded with, revelation, whose prophetic truth it endeavours to translate into exact language and to reconcile with the ever-varying requirements of contemporary knowledge.'

To state it very simply, Tyrrell understood revelation to stand simply for an event or experience of great spiritual intensity, while theology was after-reflection upon and formulation of that experience in quasi-scientific language. But revelation itself could be divided, in scholastic terms, into that of the first intention, namely, the revelatory event as such; and that of the second intention, the revelatory experience expressed in the thought-forms, language and other cultural and environmental equipment which the person receiving the revelation necessarily uses as the means for expressing the revelation understood in the primary sense. He suggested that just as heavenly bodies are the proper object of study by the science of astronomy, so revelation is the proper object of study by the science of theology. But just as there could be no orthodox astronomy—it being always subject to unfolding data of the object of its study—so, for Tyrrell, there could not be an orthodox theology as such; it must rather be understood simply as, in his words, 'that philosophical construction of the other world which has been built up from the data of general experience by the reflection and labour of the understanding, and which belongs to the unity of the whole system of our organized knowledge'.

Revelation on the other hand was something quite different for

Tyrrell: 'a truth which is directly practical, preferential, approximative, and only indirectly speculative.' The word thus used primarily denotes an experience and only secondarily and derivatively the record or expression by which that experience is translated by the receiver of it, and thereby preserved and communicated to others. It is when he later remarks that 'it is indifferent to the essential idea of revelation whether the Divine Spirit causes the revealed truth to spring up in our minds, or throw a supernatural and revealing light from within on a truth presented to us from without', and then asserts that in both cases revelation is from within, individual and in a certain sense incommunicable, one can understand his superiors' concern that he was subjectivizing faith in such a way as to reduce it to little more than personal whim.

He was, of course, quick to deny such a charge, and, although he had been deeply influenced by Matthew Arnold, he was emphatic to state that he was not saying that revelation stands to theology as poetic statement is related to scientific statement, as Arnold had suggested, but rather he insisted that there is simply a generic difference between revelational and theological truths: '. . . they cannot be compared as two statements—poetic and scientific—of the same fact.'

It was precisely when revelation comes to be regarded as 'statement' that the error which Tyrrell calls 'theologism' arises, that is, a pseudo-science which 'treats prophetic enigmas and mysteries, which of their very nature are ambiguous and incapable of exact determination, as principles of exactly determinable intellectual value and argues from them accordingly'. The result of this error is to ascribe divine authority to theology and scientific or philosophical exactitude to revelation. And the ascription of divine authority to theology leads the theologian into a cul-de-sac from which there is no emerging. '. . . As soon as [revelation] pretended to be a revealed philosophy and to possess a more or less literal and exact correspondence to fact, substantial variations of form were felt to be inconsistent with the oneness and unchangeableness of truth.' This led to an ecclesiastical control over theology which completely destroyed its claim to be a science, free and undetermined by *a priori* considerations.

In the same essay Tyrrell discussed the meaning of dogma and quoted appreciatively the definition given by a contemporary French Protestant theologian Jean Réville, who wrote: 'On appelle *dogme* une doctrine religieuse formulée par ceux qu'on regarde comme ayant le droit d'exprimer officiellement la croyance de la société religieuse dont ils font partie.' (Dogma might be called a religious doctrine formulated by those whom one thinks of as having the right to express officially the belief of the religious society of which they are a part.) Tyrrell himself thought of dogma as 'a protective husk', and reflected that such a concept is eminently patristic, 'far more so

than the view which regards that revelation as a rudimentary theology which the Church has developed dialectically by applications and explications—thus making the husk continuous with the kernel and of like texture’.

Tyrrell would not deny that the materials of which the prophetic vision or revelation is built up are necessarily borrowed from what he called ‘the mental furniture, the popular belief, the images, the theological, scientific, and historical conceptions of the people to whom it was first accorded’. It is, as he remarks in *Lex Credendi*, necessary to distinguish between Christ’s vision and the expression of that vision, ‘the later being but a rude sketch or suggestion of the former in terms and conceptions familiar to the fisherman of Galilee’. But, as he states in a later essay, ‘however various the imagery and language in which revelation utters itself in different ages and cultures, the underlying reality which reveals itself, now more or less purely and unimpededly, is ever necessarily the same, even as human love is ever the same phenomenon, however various the words and deeds in which it spontaneously finds utterance’. In a particularly striking passage Tyrrell wrote: ‘Here mingled inextricably, as gold in ore, with much that is merely theological and ethical reflection, and much that is mere history and sacred legend, we have that revelation of Himself which God has given at sundry times and in divers manners to the prophets, and last of all through His Son Jesus Christ and His chosen apostles. We have, so to say, the utterance of a collective and continuous experience of the human spirit in varying degrees and modes of contact with the divine.’

In summary, then, Tyrrell saw dogmas as taken primarily, not according to their proper values, but rather according to their protective and prophetic values. They do not give us a dialectically developed body of theological truth ‘but a more or less accidental congeries of defensive propositions, whose religious truth is in every case the re-asserted truth of the revelation which they protect’.

Tyrrell asked a question which churchmen of his time were very unwilling to face because of its threatening implications: does the deposit of faith, do the infallible definitions of the Church bind us absolutely to the categories and thought-forms of the age in which they were formulated? It was his answer, given in the book which he finished only a few weeks before his death in 1909, that they do not. In an essay entitled ‘The Abiding Value of the Apocalyptic Idea’, which appeared in that book, *Christianity at the Crossroads*, he wrote: ‘To contend that the Church’s *theology* has been always the same is preposterous. Only those who have confounded revelation with its theological presentment could be interested in such a hopeless contention, or could be driven to the expedient of treating potential belief as actual.’

Tyrrell regarded his stand on the fundamental distinction between revelation and theology as crucial for Catholic orthodoxy. It was in

the essay on 'theologism' in *Through Scylla and Charybdis* that he wrote: 'The Christian revelation is as stable and unprogressive as man's spiritual forces of love, human and divine; "the same yesterday, today, and for ever". Theology is as variable as is intelligence and information; today different from yesterday, tomorrow from today.' It is difficult to understand how Tyrrell could have regarded the record or expression by which the revelation experience is translated and preserved both for the recipient and those to whom he wishes to convey it—that is, revelation understood as a reality of second intention—as, in some way at least, non-theological, although he did admittedly call it revelation only in a 'derivative' sense. Indeed, we may, I think, quite rightly cavil at his view, or perhaps better, the tendency of his thought—for it remained in many ways an unresolved dilemma for him—to reject the possibility of an orthodox theology. There is, after all, a profound difference between the controlling data of theology and that of astronomy; the latter's is open-ended, itself always subject to new and in a sense contradictory discoveries, while the former's is closed—in the traditional phrase, possibilities for substantial variation and addition 'ended with the death of the last apostle'. Necessary as such a distinction between revelation and theology surely is, it does not entail the rejection of the idea of a science of theology capable of orthodoxy. May we not demand the distinction but refuse the supposed corollary? Would it have not been better to say that between revelation—understood as including realities of both the first and second intentions—and dogma and theology there is the unity, connectedness and mutually controlling power of *analogy*, and that *in this sense* an orthodox theology is not only a possibility but a necessity? Still, the starting point of his concern remains valid: that it is important to distinguish revelation which is the *given* of God, and theology, which is the *work* of the Church.

(c) *Community and authority in the Church*

But there is still a third aspect of Tyrrell's writing, not unrelated to the first two, which strikes today's reader as remarkably contemporary in many ways. And it is here that I am concerned specifically with the crisis of which I spoke in the beginning, not perhaps so much the modernist crisis as such, for that is past history and its principal participants long dead, but rather the crisis of the Church today. We continue to possess, sometimes quite unconsciously the heritage of that earlier crisis, of fear and anxiety, and obsessions about the orthodoxy and purity of the faith, and now, perhaps more vividly even than then, we are in the process of trying to understand the proper relationship between the Magisterium of the Church, i.e. its teaching authority, and the Church itself, i.e. in the words of the Second Vatican Council, 'the people of God'. Tyrrell's own experience with his ecclesiastical superiors had sharpened his sensitivity to the problem of authority and freedom in the Church. In

an essay entitled 'From Heaven, or of Men' he wrote that it is wrong to regard authority in the Church as an external influence 'streaming down from heaven like a sunbeam through a cleft in the clouds and with a finger of light singling out God's arbitrarily chosen delegates from the multitude, over and apart from which they are to stand as His vicegerents'. He insisted rather that for men, 'God's highest and fullest manifestation is given, not in the clouds, nor in the stars, but in the spirit of man, and therefore most completely in that completest expression of man's spirit which is obtained in the widest available consensus, and is the fruit of the widest collective experience, of the deepest collective reflection'.

It was not simply a question for Tyrrell of 'laicizing' the Church. What was essential was to recognize the participation of the laity in that sovereign priesthood and authority from which those of the official hierarchy are derived. 'Nothing could be more antagonistic to the spirit of the Gospel than the usage by which in certain quarters the "Church" has come to be almost a synonym for the clergy.' Thus, on the question of Church reform which was becoming more and more pressing, Tyrrell wrote: 'It is said reforms must come from below. Let us rather say they must come from above, from God immanent in the entire community which stands above both priesthood and laity. . . . There is no need of *violent* revolution, but only of a quiet, steady re-reading and re-interpretation of existing institutions.'

What Tyrrell sought for was a willingness to use democratic processes and structures in the Church. By democracy, however, he did not mean mere Josephism, the subjection of the clergy to the laity, of the few to the many, but—in his own words—of 'the clergy and the laity alike to the whole body which exists logically prior to any such division; to that formless Church, to whose service the hierarchic institution is but instrumental, from which its authority is derived, to which it is responsible, by which it is reformable'. Tyrrell believed that at the deepest level the Church is 'that body of the Holy Ghost, which underlies and gives life to the superimposed ecclesiastical organization it has evolved for itself, has ever retained its own charismatic hierarchy of gifts and graces; its royal priesthood after the order of Melchizedek to which the official priesthood is related as a sacrament to its substance or as material and temporal to the spiritual and eternal'.

It will perhaps sound a paradox after these remarks on what I take to be three specific areas in which Tyrrell's insights may be of special use to the Church today, in the midst of the present Catholic crisis, when I say that in summary Tyrrell's greatest contribution to the present 'state of Christ's Church' is precisely the deeply conservative bent with which he approached all of the problems, theological and ecclesiastical, which concerned him. He liked to compare him-



self and von Hügel to John Colet and Erasmus, in their respective concerns—to retain all that was best of the old and accept all that was best of the new; many of his more fiery continental colleagues he likened rather to Luther whom, whether rightly or wrongly, he thought of as an ecclesiastical revolutionary. It is true, of course, that he finally despaired of the movement for reform in the Church and spoke of revolution as the only alternative to stagnation and ultimate isolation from the real world, but for him, revolution must be quiet and gradual—he called it ‘a non-violent revolution’ in *The Church and the Future*—and distinguished from reform not so much by its methods as by the radical nature of its questions, programme and possible outcome. He himself was very reluctant to jettison any of the Church’s dogmas or traditions so long as they betrayed even a spark of life. It was perhaps his deeply rooted conservatism that caused many of his critics to accuse him of an ecclesiastical schizophrenia: of propounding one Catholicism for the masses, another for the educated. And it must be admitted that such an accusation is not without justice, although he had a profound belief in the obligation of the *majores*, the educated, an élite not unlike that of Coleridge’s clerisy, to distinguish between that which is clearly of faith, and those things which are secondary, merely *adiaphora*, which, as education and learning became more universal, the masses might be expected to lay aside as well. I suggest, however, that it was precisely his conservatism which moved him to desire above all else that this necessary work, *aggiornamento*, if you will, be done gradually and with great subtlety of approach. He had enough of a knowledge of ecclesiastical history to know that it was sometimes advisable to wait for the results of the autopsy before assuming that a given tradition or institution was dead. It is perhaps especially in this attitude of mind, a kind of devout conservatism linked with a disinterested and somewhat sceptical awareness of the need for radical reform, which is his greatest contribution to the present.

It would be naïve and uncritical to suppose that the modernists’ attempt at *aggiornamento* was faultless. Many of them, by what von Hügel believed to be at heart a bondage to antitheses induced by their scholastic training, over-reacted to the intransigence of the authorities, although it was a very human response in the face of suppression of dissent. Among the most human was George Tyrrell, and it is precisely his compassion that makes him more attractive than, for example, that rather bloodless savant, the Abbé Loisy. But the time has surely come for a re-habilitation of these men and their movement, if it can be so-called; one thinks in particular of Ernesto Buonaiuti, the friend and seminary room-mate of John XXIII, and the outstanding exponent of Italian modernism in its final phase as well as the courageous opponent of the rise of Mussolini’s fascism; but especially the most persuasive and sympathetic of the movement’s leaders, George Tyrrell. His condemnation forced him in his final

period to speak and write intemperately and sometimes unjustly; he lacked perhaps that pastoral sensitivity which must be part of the perennial equipment of the theologian, refusing strong meat to babes. But in the most profound sense he tried always to abide by that dictum, *sentire cum ecclesia*, to think with the Church. The task which he saw the Church facing was one of radical demythologization. He understood that term in a larger and more inclusive sense than is commonly used. For him it was not simply the elimination of archaic and magical elements from the presentation of Christian belief that was demanded. He meant rather a sociological demythologization, one which would affect all forms of external expression, i.e. he saw all areas of institutionalization as somehow analogous in the same way that theological language is analogous.

For Tyrrell, as well as for many thoughtful Roman Catholics today, it seemed an altogether open question whether the Church, i.e. the Roman Catholic Church, could adapt to the mentality of the contemporary world Christian ideas and values by giving to the challenging aspects of the modern world the full strength they demand and at the same time not lose its deeper character and basic identity. Tyrrell liked to say that the other Christian bodies had better order their coffins when it becomes clear that the Roman Church is finished, but he was fully conscious of the irony of the present situation, and posed the question in almost the same words used by the American religious historian, Thomas O'Dea, who asks, in his recent book, *The Catholic Crisis*: 'Is it not precisely those established expressions of Catholic faith, unchanged and defensively clung to, which rendered Catholicism increasingly irrelevant to the advancing Western world that preserved within its own ranks the interior intensity and authenticity of faith?'

The poignancy of that question was felt by Tyrrell as it is felt by us as we come to a personal awareness of what the experience of myth-breaking entails: there is perhaps a breakthrough to a deeper level of understanding; there is also a growing realization of the radical insecurity of the human situation which what might be called the institutional realism of the older theology and ecclesiology had managed to mask, and with it there is the anxious groping for new forms of common life not yet attained.

It seems to some of us now, as it seemed to Tyrrell then, that we cannot dismiss this final question lightly. If the reason for Christianity's power to maintain the awareness of God and the covenantal relationship to him is bound up with ancient forms of belief, cult, and organization, then what will happen if these forms are altered in a sufficiently bold and far-reaching manner to make them relevant to the modern, unbelieving world? This, I think, was the fundamentally valid question, still unanswered for Tyrrell at the time of his death, and which, even now, is at the base of the anxiety of the conservatives in the Church today.