

THE RISE OF MODERNISM IN ITALY.

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“Henceforth burn that which thou hast adored, and adore that which thou hast burned.”
St. Remigius.

IN considering the stand taken officially against modernism by the Church of Rome, one of the few quotable stories in the Decameron comes to my mind. Abraham, a Jew, was inclined to become a Christian but determined first to go to Rome and see the man who was Vicar of God on earth, and study his habits and those of his brother cardinals. If these proved to be of such a character as to make the Christian religion appear superior to the Jewish, Abraham intended to have himself baptized. Accordingly the Jew went to Rome, watched the pope and the cardinals closely, and soon saw their shortcomings. He then became a sincere Christian, giving as a reason for his conversion that if the church continued to live, in spite of the fact that so many prelates, and even the Supreme Pastor himself, were so indefatigable in working its destruction, it must be a sign that the Holy Ghost indeed was its foundation and support.

In the religious history of the world there are epochs insulated by periods of repose, when existing beliefs are disturbed, when convictions previously accepted cease to convince, and when in consequence the obligations deduced from these beliefs and convictions are set at naught. Religion by the general consent of mankind is required to be based upon truth. The supreme importance of religion as dealing with the mysteries of man's creation, his life and future existence, is acknowledged on all sides, and the duties it imposes are accepted as binding. But religion receives this deference only because it is admitted to be infallibly true. If uncertainty and unreliability are found in it its obligations become intolerable and its restraints are not to be endured. From

time to time the speculative world becomes agitated. It awakens slowly to the consciousness that the current religion does not satisfy the requirements of truth. Flaws are detected in the title deeds, or credentials are discovered to be altogether lacking. Speculation subjects the assertions of religion to scrutiny, and questions its authority. Far from acting on any blind instinct of repulsion, speculation pursues with determination and enthusiasm the analysis of religion, that it may detach truth from those heterogeneous elements with which it has been combined by the fraud or ignorance of the past. Unlike Pilate, who, after asking what was the truth, went forth leaving the question unsolved, it grapples with the momentous questions of theology and wrings from them a confession of their truth or of their falsehood with an intensity of purpose paralleled by that with which men in positions of danger struggle for life.

When the world of thought has satisfied itself with an answer—even though the answer be not always highly satisfactory, it may quiet the existing state of apprehension—tranquility ensues, during which men glory in the achievements of those who purged their creed of what was false and brought it to a condition of supposed permanent incorruptibility.

In these times of repose speculation stagnates; no fresh intellectual seeds are sown, or else they fall on soil too exhausted to receive them; whereas those scattered by the foregoing storm slowly fecundate, flower, fructify and decay. The old forces seem to have expended themselves, but this is not the case. Silently and imperceptibly they are gathering for a fresh reassertion of their power, by overthrowing the purified faith because it too has given evidence of imperfections, in order that theology may be reorganized on a still newer and more complete system, which in its turn in the fulness of time will itself be subverted after it has satisfied the cravings of men and has accomplished its temporary mission.

We see this law of religious renewal which actuated most of the religions of antiquity advancing hand in hand with civilization. A barbarous mythology will not long satisfy a cultured people, and unless a reformation be effected and a system elaborated to meet its requirements, that people must lapse into atheism.

Yabushadh rebelled against Babylonian idolatry when the city was under the influence of social advancement. Zoroaster reformed the Iranian creed when Persia was casting off its primeval barbarism. Buddha developed his system against a degraded Brahmanism to satisfy an awakening Indian mind. Votan reasserted truth

as the basis of all religion in Mexico when the Aztec empire was exhibiting a capacity for progress, and Mohammed subverted the Sabian polytheism when that polytheism was dying a natural death. The Greek philosophers in despair at the corruption of the popular mythology did battle for the truth, some by spiritualizing, others by materializing their gods, one school making them allegories of essential virtues, another reducing them to deified natural phenomena.

The law of development, impressed on all animate nature, has as strong an influence on religious beliefs. As the lowest organisms contain rudimentary traces of members perfected in those above them, so also do inferior theological systems exhibit an upward tendency. In cases where civilization and mental culture are not checked, the lower type of religion will eventuate in one higher, truer and nobler than itself—not altogether perfect, it may be, but certainly in advance of its predecessors and containing within itself springs which will impel it forward. Beliefs are never stationary; they are in a state of continual flux. In this they resemble languages, which, though brought to an apparent standstill by a classic literature, are full of dialectic currents which interpenetrate and in course of time overflow that barrier. Sacred standards may in like manner arrest the progress of speculations for a while; but after a time they must give way before the torrent unless they have become so disposed as not to check but to direct into legitimate and safe channels the current of inquiry. On the supposition that a revelation has been made to a man, it must be perceived that since such a revelation emanates from the creator of mind, it cannot be obstructive to reason, but is calculated rather to facilitate its progress. If a revelation be granted, it must be further allowed that it harmonizes with the order of nature and is conducive to the well-being of man individually and collectively, for since it proceeds from the great author of nature and the creator of man, there must be agreement between his various manifestations conducive to the advantage of the creature he has made.

Christianity came into the field at the period of religious opinion most ripe for its reception, when the ancient religions had absolutely no means of substantiating their claim for acceptance. That the claim of Christianity should be devoid of all uncertainty cannot be expected from a religion resting upon a revelation. Natural religion will always possess this advantage over revealed religion, that it is sustained by the testimony of observation whereas the

latter depends on historical evidence which can never be indisputably and conclusively established.

According to Christian teaching, natural religion is harmonized with that of revelation: they support and illustrate each other.

II.

The history of modern Europe is the history of a revolution in every phase of human life, but above all in religion and politics; a revolution, as a learned writer characterizes it, that has its roots in the past, while its branches overshadow us in the twentieth century. This great spiritual crisis has to-day reached its culminating intensity, owing to the new orientation of the public mind which is adverse to the traditional formulation of the religious spirit.

In the Church of Rome it was reserved for Leo XIII properly to acknowledge and fully to estimate the spirit of the age. The high-minded Pope began to make himself known as a man free from prejudice in the fierce conflict between church and state for the temporal power. His conduct toward Father Curci can well serve to illustrate my assumption.

Father Curci was a well-known Jesuit who under Pius IX had been expelled from the Society of the Jesuits on account of his refusal to subscribe to three propositions as fundamental doctrines of the Roman Catholic church: (1) the speedy re-establishment of the temporal power of the popes; (2) the duty of all sincere Catholics to abstain from political elections; (3) the impossibility of the co-existence of the papacy and the kingdom of Italy.

"To these propositions," said Father Curci, "I am resolved not to subscribe, and rather than do so I would be cut to pieces." In consequence of these sentiments he was subjected to much persecution during the later years of the pontificate of Pius IX. Under Leo XIII, fresh trouble having arisen on the publication of *La Nuova Italia ed i Vecchi Zelanti*, Father Curci was advised to go into retirement for a time, and preparations were made for his retreat in the Basilian monastery of Grotta Ferrata. But because of outside pressure the superior at the last moment refused to receive him. When Leo XIII learned this he offered Father Curci hospitality in his own apartments at the Vatican, but was at once vehemently urged to condemn the views of the priest. Leo's only answer was, "There is a congregation whose business it is to look into and pass judgment on this matter. It is for them to do their duty." The affair was finally referred to the Inquisition which gives no reasons for what it says or does, and of course the book was condemned as a

libel on the church and Holy See. The sentence was forthwith submitted to the pope, who was forced to sign it in order to avoid a serious schism in the church.

But in the years that followed, Leo XIII perceived the new orientation of the public spirit and the untenable position of Catholicism. Realizing that theories have forever lost their precedence over observation and are now submitted to the crucial test of experience before they are given credence, the learned pope decided to quit the old position, and in more than one of his encyclicals clearly and cautiously paved the way for the modernist movement in Italy. The theological waters were first troubled by his "*Aeterni patris*" in which when speaking of scholastic philosophy as basis of the sacred sciences, he declared that "if anything is met with among the scholastic doctors which may be regarded as something investigated *with an excess of subtlety* or thought *without sufficient consideration*; anything which is *not in keeping with the certain results* of later times; anything in short which is altogether *destitute of probability*, we have no desire whatever to propose it for the imitation of present generations." This encyclical gave new ideas to the young clergy at Rome and was taken as the banner under which they started the vigorous movement that we now term "modernism." What hitherto had been taught and spoken of in secret now began to be the subject of public conversation, lectures, articles and pamphlets. Modernism soon influenced every section of society. To the common people it meant the reconciliation between church and state in Rome; to the majority of cultivated Italians it meant the reconciliation between religion and science. Hence Murri, Minocchi and others of the Italian clergy; Meda, Fagozzaro, Labanca and others of the laity, were foremost in the struggle for the triumph of modernism as the only system to make the church useful to mankind.

The doctrine formulated by Loisy and Tyrrell is too well known to be reported here. Loisy's modernism is only half radical. Without entering into a long discussion I will simply say that in my opinion both of them failed to draw proper conclusions from their principles. For instance Loisy admits the Christ of faith and then denies the Christ of history, as if in a question of this nature Christ could be an object of faith without being first an object of history.

It would take too much space to point out his main glaring contradictions. As to Father Tyrrell, the unfortunate Jesuit, he added nothing to and discarded nothing from Loisy's theories. He was remarkably successful in pointing out the divergencies of the

gospels, but then shrank from the logical conclusions. Examining the gospels he found that the Catholic faith is at variance with the scientific discoveries of the age. He felt, as Loisy did, that his principles logically carried out would ultimately subvert the divinity of Christ, but then what were his conclusions? Strange to say, like Loisy and other clergymen, the practical conclusion of Father Tyrrell was that the gospels fail to show the divinity of Christ and the divine institution of the Catholic church, but, be all this as it may, "Let us believe in the Catholic faith, let us cling to the Catholic church, of which we are to remain the most devoted and loving sons."

Harnack in Germany, though arbitrary and aprioristic in such matters, has certainly been more consistent. Father Tyrrell forgot the famous saying of Euripides, "It is best not to be too wise about the gods" and so met with the same fate as many reformers in the Catholic church.

Whenever religious opinions sprang up and gained a certain vogue which were not in accordance with the teaching of the official Church of Rome, they were pitilessly condemned. Pius X fearing from past experience lest movements and changes in philosophy may end in assaults on religion, and apprehensive that in the investigation of nature something may be found to subvert, or at least to shake, the authority of religion, especially with the unlearned—Pius, remarkable for simplicity, purity, regular life and piety, failing to recognize the difference between our modern conception of truth and the conception of truth in times gone by; failing to perceive that modernism within the Catholic church is the result of insufficiency of Catholic teaching, insufficient to content or control any longer the mind of man, which is ever evolving fresh problems, ever seeking to pierce the horizon, to widen its limits and to better its state; failing to consider all this, he has formally and solemnly condemned all the new theories about the gospels and their interpretation.

The state of affairs has long been very clear. To the official Catholic church change and death mean much the same.

Modernism at the present hour is not capable of an exact definition. A long time is needed before men can clearly penetrate its whole vital significance. However, we are positive that the sentiment of religious liberty, as it now obtains, will not diminish. Modernism will soon systematize its scattered theories, making clearly visible the aim toward which mankind is tending. Since the mod-

ernist movement will be permanent and radical, it will necessarily be slow.

Modernism in Italy has opened a wide gulf between the authority of the church and the clergy. The condemned theories are spreading in disguise. Pius X and all the popes to come will always be irreproachable guardians of the Catholic faith, but they will not succeed in stemming the irresistible tide of the new tendencies. Catholicism, especially in Italy and France, will never be radically changed, but the Catholics in these two countries will not always remain what they are. Even if modernism seems to disappear below the surface of the waters as if its force were exhausted, it will yet be seen to exercise more or less influence on the future. I firmly believe that all the Catholics of the world are slowly but surely, almost unknowingly, falling into modernism, and its authority clearly shows that the Vatican is ceasing to be a recognized vehicle for spreading Christian doctrine. In Italy almost all the people are Catholics, or style themselves so, but there every man believes as much or as little of Catholicism as suits him. The time is past when the great majority of people in Italy (and not only in Italy) received as impregnable every jot and tittle of what the popes and cardinals teach. They obey the church as the humor takes them and if they find it easy to obey, but when interest or position pull strongly the other way, they make just as little scruple about disobeying. In Italy, the land of Catholic unity, every man fashions and squares his creed to his own taste or his own convenience.

The figure of Pius X stands now in the same relation to that of Leo XIII as the figure of Adrian VI in the sixteenth century stood to that of his predecessor, Leo X. The humble figure of Adrian VI, says Gregorovius, is one of the most tragic in the history of the papacy. A pious and learned man, but utterly ignorant of political craft, Adrian soon after his elevation set about inaugurating a series of pious but fruitless endeavors to reform the church. But the church and the world continued to have their own way.

After four hundred years, Pius X is repeating the attempt. Unfortunately he fails to comprehend the new world into which the church has been ushered, and the relation in which she stands to it.

Every great institution and age has its work to do in the field of undeveloped energies, but the field is inexhaustible in resources, for the intellect of man is boundless in its reserved powers. No limit can be assigned to the future triumphs of genius. We are as ignorant of some future wonders as the tenth century was of steam and telegraph wires. Nor can we tell what will next arise. The

wonders of the Greeks and Romans would have astonished Egyptians and Assyrians. Oriental civilization gave place to the Hellenic and the Roman, and they in turn gave place to the Teutonic. So the ages and the races move on. They have their missions, become corrupt and pass away. But the breaking up of their institutions, even by violence when they cease to be a blessing to the world, and the surrender of their lands and riches to another race, not worn out but new, fresh, enthusiastic and strong, have always resulted in permanent good to mankind.

Who can estimate the immeasurable influence of the new theories about the Catholic religion? Modernism will soon be the true sun which shall dissipate the shadows of superstition and ignorance that cover so great a portion of the earth, and this shall bring society into a healthful glow of unity and love.