

FOR MODERNISTS AND FUNDAMENTALISTS

BY WILLIAM C. DREHER

YOUR controversy, which is now filling the columns of our Monday newspapers, begins to weary that growing class of people who regard all theological questions from a still more modern standpoint than that of the "Modernists." For from whatever standpoint we view your little scrimmage—whether from that of anthropology, historical sociology, history of dogma, comparative religion, or cosmical and evolutionary science—it remains but a little scrimmage still, and the smaller the longer we look! And we are tempted often enough to turn away and say: "A plague o' both your houses." The Fundamentalists we can understand, they being such familiar specimens, and they reproducing their kind with such unfailing similitude and in such vast numbers. That even men and women of high ethical ideals are able to convince themselves that those ideals are inseparable from the cosmological and dogmatic conceptions of primitive man is an extremely ancient phenomenon; and that these people are able to suppress intellectual curiosity about the latest achievements of science and even regard these with feelings of intense hostility as attacks upon higher spiritual interests—all this is easy enough to understand for anybody that knows something of the inertia of the human mind.

But the Modernists, while almost equally familiar to us, are not so easy to understand and are certainly less attractive as human specimens than the Fundamentalists. For what can be a less attractive manifestation of human idiosyncrasy than a mind which, feeling oppressed by a certain set of beliefs, makes a weak compromise by casting off a few minor propositions of its creed and then settling back into smug self-content. Think of learned doctors of divinity rejecting the virgin birth, yet holding fast to the incarnation! And yet we men who began as Fundamentalists and have passed on beyond the half-way standpoints of the Modernists, are bound to look with sym-

pathy upon the stirrings that are going on within the ranks of the latter; for it is chiefly from them that our recruits must come, and they at least recognize the possibility of intellectual motion. That there is enough vigor of conviction in the two parties to the controversy to have a quarrel at all is certainly to be recognized as a gain, however unimportant be the points around which the battle rages.

But from another standpoint it is certainly a loss. It is a distinct loss to have this tiny tempest around lost positions stirring up the dust and preventing thousands of people from seeing the real battle of our age. The same effect is produced by many of the books about the Bible which are now occupying public attention. Thus thousands are reading Papini's *Life of Christ* because it appeals to their religious feelings; but these outpourings of a devotee, while they may add to the comfort of believers, have no effect whatever in establishing the historical facts involved in the origin of Christianity. Other thousands, some degrees higher up in the intellectual scale, are reading Van Loon's liberal reconstructions of Bible history; but his readers will hardly be made aware of the most fundamental questions at issue, and many of them will not venture much further away from the safe paths of tradition than Signor Papini's followers.

One of the most vital questions from which Fundamentalists and Modernists alike are thus drawing away attention is that of the historical elements in the Gospels. How far may their records be taken as true history? The Fundamentalist is ready with his answer—always has been ready. He can swallow everything whole—even the conflicting narratives of the nativity given by Matthew and Luke; and the more miracles, the better! But is the position of the typical Unitarian clergyman so vastly superior, who casts overboard all the miracles, only to assert that all that remains of the Gospels is veritable history? But this is such a *non-sequitur*, such a patent case of the pathetic fallacy, that it is bound to pass into the realm of things overlived and forgotten—and perhaps very soon.

That the Fundamentalist-Modernist wrangle and books like those mentioned are detracting attention from far more vital theological literature becomes evident if we consider the fate in this country of M. Alfred Loisy's latest venture in New Testament criticism, which came out in Paris about the end of 1922, under the title: *Les Livres du Nouveau Testament*. Although it is undoubtedly one of the most important and significant books of its class that has appeared for many a day, it has probably not even attracted a bare mention in the American press. That is a noteworthy fact. Think of the foremost

New Testament scholar of his time bringing out a book in which he surrenders nearly every shred of history in the Gospels, and in a country that flatters itself as standing in the very vanguard of civilization that fact does not call forth the merest mention! Verily the smoke-screen created by the Fundamentalists and Modernists is an effective one. My object in writing this article is to drag out Loisy's book from behind that screen.

M. Loisy makes a new translation of the New Testament into French, and in printing it he makes two changes which, though merely mechanical, should facilitate the right understanding of the text. In the first place, he rearranges the books according to date of composition, so far as this can be ascertained. Of this rearrangement he writes: "By means of this grouping one may follow in large outline the evolution of Christianity from the time of its birth to the period when the canon of the New Testament was fixed." As the oldest books are what he regards as Paul's authentic epistles, Loisy begins his New Testament with these, after which follow the Gospels, with Mark in the first place. While this rearrangement is in strict accord with the best scholarship and is thus abundantly justified by that fact alone, it has the further advantage of suggesting to the reader that Christianity was at first a dogma and only later a history; and it also suggests the probability that the dogma created the history. Loisy, in fact, almost consciously leads us up to that conclusion when he writes that the "first epistles show the point of departure, the first outlines of the nascent faith"—the import of which words will be apparent to anyone who has noted the absence in the epistles of any mention of Jesus as a man. Loisy further emphasizes the meaning of his rearrangement by saying that the early church found it "necessary to make a place for the life of Jesus, and not merely of his death, in the legend of the Christ"; and again that the "myth of the Christ and the legend of Jesus was in large part constructed because of the necessity of defining and defending its position against Judaism, and of showing how the economy of Christian salvation was announced in the Bible and justified by the prophecies."

But M. Loisy gives the reader further ocular help by a second innovation; he sets up in the form of *vers-libre* all those passages which in the original are written with a rhythmical swing. The reader of our version, unacquainted with the Greek Testament, will be surprised to find how much of it was thus written. About one-half of the text takes this form—in some books less than that, in

others, much more. In choosing it—in itself a wholly legitimate proceeding—Loisy is again suggesting something to the reader: he is intimating that the writer is here mounting his Greco-Jewish Pegasus and no longer feels himself greatly encumbered with the burden of historical responsibilities; that he is in the exalted mood where faith is able to make its own history.

But far more important than these merely mechanical changes is what Loisy himself contributes to the work. He writes a general introduction to the whole volume and then each book receives its own special introduction, in which its contents are set forth from the angle of Loisy's scholarship. These introductions are weighted with deep-cutting thoughts, embodying his latest critical conclusions. Even the liberal school of New Testament critics, who hitherto numbered Loisy as one of their brightest lights, will hardly follow him in his newest conclusions, for he has practically deserted the liberals and advanced to radical ground. One is reminded at times of the views of our own Prof. William Benjamin Smith, a scholar whose work has attracted widespread attention in Europe, although in his own country he still lives behind that smoke-screen. For Loisy adopts at least two of Smith's positions, and that without credit! He adopts the symbolical interpretation of the miracles and much other matter; and Smith's view that the first preaching of Christianity was a crusade for monotheism and an onslaught upon idolatry, takes with Loisy a slightly different form: it is the "evangelization of the pagans."

With Loisy it is a fundamental proposition that Judaism finally clothed itself in the form of a mystery religion, like the other oriental cults, and that this new mystery religion was Christianity in its early form. But in proportion as the cult of the dead and risen Messiah expanded it ceased to be a simple variation of the Jewish religion. In fact, it was precisely the opposition of the young offshoot to its parent that later on proved of vital importance in shaping the Christian tradition. The singularity of early Christian literature he finds to "consist precisely in the circumstance that it sought to present as the authentic fact of Israelitish faith and hope the Hellenistic religion, the mystery of universal salvation which Christianity had become." That Paul knew little or nothing about the earthly life of Jesus is emphasized, without pushing this fact to an extreme conclusion; "Paul and the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews appear to know much more about the actions of the Christ in heaven before and after his epiphany than about the life of Jesus."

These columns are not the place to attempt a complete exposé of M. Loisy's views as set forth in his *Nouveau Testament*. Only a few points must suffice. It is not that the miracles are surrendered *in toto* that the present work has any significance; Loisy had done that long ago; its significance lies rather in the practical surrender of the whole Gospel story as history—except at one point, to be mentioned later. The miracles become “symbolical miracles” or “apologetical fictions,” and at times whole narratives embracing a chain of events are treated as symbolical or as fictional. Nowhere does Loisy undertake to lay his finger upon a fact or word and say: this really occurred as stated, this was really spoken as narrated. The nearest approach that he makes to such certainty is in connection with the trial scene, where Jesus speaks of destroying this Temple and rebuilding it in three days; this, says, Loisy, “has a chance of being authentic.” Never a closer approximation to certainty!

In fact everything floats in a glorified haze of faith and religious enthusiasm. “Inspired men attributed to Christ discourses that he never pronounced, actions that he never performed, but which they themselves *saw*. Others were well able to write in the name of Peter and Paul, putting themselves into their places in another kind of vision, giving themselves almost no thought of what we should call a fraud.” “Others *saw* in the same way other instructions and other pretended facts in the life of Jesus. Here, for us, vision and fiction coalesce, and they are such fictions as were suggested by an apologetic motive.” And our narratives of the passion “represent much less an historical tradition than the ritual drama commemorating that passion, a drama conceived in accordance with Old Testament texts which were thought to have prefigured it.”

In connection with such Old Testament texts Loisy advances a theory that seems to promise valuable results for understanding how little critical the New Testament writers were in their methods of composition. Every careful reader of it must have observed the singular use made there of Old Testament passages—a certain arbitrary twist of words, wrenching them from their context and applying them without scruple to events which could not have been in the minds of the authors. Loisy assumes that there existed collections of Old Testament messianic texts and motivates this theory as follows: “The existence of such collections, which continued in favor during the first centuries of the Church, appears as a guarantee also for the Apostolic age. For not only the language of the third Gospel and the Acts, that of the fourth Gospel, and the sys-

tematic procedure in the first one of making citations give occasion for believing that the texts regarded as Messianic formed collections for Christian edification and practice from the earliest period; but also when we find the same series in the discourses of the Acts, in the Epistles and even in the Gospels employing the same form, . . . with the same variations from the original texts cited, we must admit that the authors of the New Testament had no longer to glean from the scriptures the passages that might serve for their purposes of demonstration, and that they had at their disposal testimony collected beforehand for the use that they made of it."

Loisy is more conservative in assigning dates to the New Testament writings than some other critics more radical than he. Thus he places the major Epistles of Paul in the fifth and sixth decades of the first century. The Gospels are placed for the most part thirty or forty years later. But this does not end the matter, for all the books had to run the gauntlet of one or more redactors. What the work of such editors might mean is shown by Loisy's opinion of what they did to the Acts. Assuming that the original book was written about A. D. 80, he concludes that it underwent its final redaction about 120-30. This was an "abominable sabotage, made without art, well-meant, with pious gestures, . . . a veritable recasting which put it on the level and into the tone of mediocrity . . . by which its success could be assured."

Loisy's destructive criticism reaches its height perhaps in treating of the trial and crucifixion. He says of Mark's narrative of those events as "touching in its naivete," and of the trial before Pilate, "nothing is consistent, unless it be the charge of pretensions to messianic royalty"; and his rejection of this trial held "on the holy night of the Passover" is registered with an exclamation point. Of the charge that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, Loisy says, "that divine quality was not assigned to him except in the Christian Mystery"; and the whole passion and trial is summed up thus: "Our narratives represent much less an historical tradition than the ritual drama commemorating that passion."

After this the reader is prepared to conclude that Loisy has surrendered the historicity of Jesus altogether; but that is not the case and this is the exception referred to above. In the present work indeed, Loisy's belief in the historical reality of Jesus is nowhere roundly asserted; he only refers to it here and there as a given fact, but perfunctorily and without the slightest attempt to substantiate it. Here the strongest statement of his view shapes itself thus: "It

remains nevertheless very probable that Jesus came to Jerusalem for the Passover, and that he was crucified before the week called that of unleavened bread."

And yet we know from other writings by Loisy published in 1922 that he still insists upon the historicity of Jesus. In one of his articles he replies to those who urge a mythological explanation of the whole Gospel story: "We have something better to do than refute them. If they become too pressing we shall simply demand, 'where is the match?'" He is here alluding to a dictum of Nietzsche's, who says somewhere of Jesus: "A founder of a religion may be insignificant—a match, nothing more." Loisy accordingly still holds fast to the historicity not because he finds any convincing records on which to build, but merely upon the assumption that Christianity itself necessarily presupposes a single great personal founder—an assumption which can by no means be regarded as valid.