

THE CASE OF M. LOISY

By THOMAS WOODLOCK

My Duel with the Vatican. The Autobiography of a Catholic Modernist, by Alfred Loisy. Translated by Richard Wilson Boynton. New York: E. P. Dutton and Company. \$3.00.

ALFRED LOISY'S autobiographical sketch, first published in France in 1913, under the title *Choses Passées*, and now for the first time issued in a smooth and idiomatic English translation by Richard Wilson Boynton under the title *My Duel with the Vatican*, should interest those American readers who remember the commotion in Protestant church circles last winter. It is a frank document—at least it bears all the marks of frankness, for the author does not attempt to conceal or to gloss over his own lapses from frankness—and to the careful reader it should prove of great value as a revelation of the real character of the so-called “modernist” movement in religion. Perhaps the most useful comment that I can make upon the book will be to indicate in broad outline the nature of this revelation.

Alfred Loisy was born in 1857. His father concerned himself little with matters of religion; we have the author's word for it that “to him religion was simply meaningless.” His mother was “earnestly devout but with no special fondness for either theology or mysticism,” and it is Loisy's opinion that if he had in childhood manifested any leaning toward the priesthood “they would certainly have dissuaded me.” At eight years of age, wandering alone one day on the hillside, the child (physically rather frail and timid by nature) said aloud to himself—“God is not good!”, remembrance of which “enormous sin” remained with him long afterward. Then, after a short course at the municipal high school of Vitry-le-Francois in 1869, interrupted in 1870-71 by the war, he entered the ecclesiastical high school at St. Dizier in 1872. He had not fully determined to become a priest, despite the counsels and predictions of many, who were, no doubt, influenced by the fact that his health precluded him from the ordinary avocations of life. It was a year later, after his annual retreat that the “fatal choice” was made.

In May, 1874, he informed his parents of his decision. His father was “deeply chagrined,” but accepted it. “My people did not care to risk going contrary to my wishes, and they believed, not without appearance of reason that, since my health seriously limited my chances for the future, the wisest course was to let me do as I chose.” At seventeen years of age he entered the diocesan seminary at Chalons, and in 1875, began his study of theology.

Pages sixty-seven to eighty-three, constituting Sec-

tion IV. of Chapter I. are perhaps the most revealing part of the book. They show that before M. Loisy had entered upon any linguistic or critical studies of the Bible and of ecclesiastical history, he had lost, if indeed he ever had possessed, all faith, as the Catholic Church understands the word, and they show, too, the fundamental distinction between the Church's concept of faith and the concept thereof which is the very heart of “modernism!” It is worth while to note in detail M. Loisy's own statement of the case, for it is the key to all that follows. Speaking of his entry upon theological studies (in 1875), he says—

Although I was even then completely immersed in piety, and foremost among the members of the seminary for my fervor, the first contact of my thought with Catholic doctrine—with what was offered me as an authentic interpretation of divine revelation—was an excruciatingly harrowing experience and all that followed harmonized with this unlucky beginning. I can say without exaggeration that the four years which I was obliged to devote at this period to the study of Christian Doctrine were for me four years of mental and moral torture. I even wonder today how it was that my reason stood the strain, or that my frail health did not succumb under it.

What was the matter? It was simple and it was fundamental, as the autobiographer states it, and the words which I have italicized in the following extract set it in bold relief—

As I had no critical background, any more than those by whom I was being taught; as I saw no one and read no books that could arouse in me doubts as to the foundations of the Catholic faith; as it happened that the sections on the true religion and the Church in which the proofs of the truth of Christianity are given were not reached in our plan of instruction until my last year in the seminary, it was not on questions of fact and problems of history that my mind encountered its earlier difficulties. I was instructed in the economy of the plan of salvation, in the genesis of that act of faith which is a gift of God while yet implying the free coöperation of the believer; the mystery of Jesus Christ, at once truly God and truly man: in the background of this mystery, that of the Trinity, secret of the divine nature, developed in three distinct persons who are nevertheless eventually one: the mystery of grace, coördinate with that of original sin and that of redemption through Christ, an arrangement by means of which the divine mercy is able to rescue the lost humanity that God Himself had consigned to perdition: the sacraments, means of grace, the supreme gift of Christ, and the Eucharist in which Christ perpetuates His presence in the Church. Just in the degree to which certain of these objects of faith had impressed me when employed as sources of religious *emotion*, to that same degree their scholastic explanation in terms of naked *intellect* filled my mind with an ill-defined disquiet. Now

that I was required to *think* all these things rationally and not merely to feel them, I was thrown into a state of prolonged disturbance. For my intelligence could find no satisfaction, and with my whole timid immature consciousness I trembled before the query that oppressed, in spite of myself, every hour of the day: "Is there any reality which corresponds to these doctrines?"

The reader will observe that before Loisy had learned Hebrew, before he had embarked upon his studies of the biblical text or the history of the Church, before he was twenty-one years old—if his memory more than thirty years later does not betray him—with no "critical background" upon which to base his position, his "reason" had rejected, *a priori*, the entire scheme of Catholic doctrine, and "faith" was for him a matter of "feeling" with which "intellect" had nothing to do. It was, as he himself recognized, the key to all that followed. Painful to him as was the first recognition of the divorce between reason and emotion, when it was once accomplished and, later, synthesized in his "theory of relativity," he devoted the rest of his career in the church to an attempt to convert the Church to his point of view. His "Duel With the Vatican" consisted of his attempt during over twenty-five years of his priesthood, during which he said his daily Mass, to substitute his dogma of "relativity"—pure dogma it was and is—for the entire system of revealed truth represented in the doctrine of the Church.

It was in 1883, four years after his ordination, that he developed in detail this doctrine of relativity; it was in the form of a thesis for his doctorate at the Catholic Institute. He had by that time had two years of study, among others under Abbé Duchesne, and had attended Renan's lectures at the College de France. The idea came to him "suddenly in the middle of a night when I was sleeping poorly in the early part of the year 1883:"

It must have been original to some extent for I had come upon it in none of my reading. My studies as a whole had led me to approximate to it, as well as the endeavor to adjust my critical conclusions to the faith which I was so anxious to conserve. Certain ideas of Renan's may probably have aided me to arrive at it though they were scarcely more recognizable in the result than were the Catholic beliefs with which I started out. It was the result of sub-conscious gestation, not of conscious reflection to the end of building a system.

The idea, as Loisy says, "entirely undermined the absolute character of the Jewish and Christian revelation, of the ecclesiastical dogmas and of Papal infallibility." "What I was beginning to believe regarding the Bible, Jesus, the Christian principles and their origin was the absolute negation of any supernatural character for religion whatsoever." But "I was far from having lost all moral faith." The adjective is important. Notwithstanding that in his mind the whole foundation for the doctrines of the Church had gone, "dogmas like the Virgin birth of Christ and His

resurrection simply vanishing into thin air when once their objective certainty was gone; that a reshaping of the entire Catholic system was inevitable," he had no mind then to leave the Church. The most essential beliefs were indeed in question "but what are beliefs, even, if not symbols which derive their value from their moral efficacy? Was not this moral efficacy the one thing needful?" Here we have again the vital distinction between emotional feeling and intellectual assent; it is the keynote of the whole; it is Arachne's thread which leads the reader through the labyrinth of Loisy's mind to the end. It explains how one may be an "intellectual" sceptic and a "moral" believer. It reduces religious dogmas to a mere "symbol," it dissolves away all fixed, absolute truth, all revelation, all knowledge of God. And it was because Loisy could not convert the Church to this doctrine, during the twenty-five years preceding his final excommunication, that the "duel" ended as it did.

This is the heart of the matter, and it is the heart of the entire "modernist" position. So far as Loisy's studies in biblical criticism and Church history are concerned—the autobiography speaks much of them but tells us little about them—unless we are to make an act of faith in the infallibility of M. Loisy's scholarship and in his conclusions, the matter may safely be left to time and research. The essential thing to note is that—as the encyclical Pascendi pointed out in 1908—"modernism" is a dogmatic system in itself and "relativity" and "subjectivity" are its foundations. The Kantian system is at its root. This was amply apparent in last winter's outbreak in this country. It was neither pure science nor deep scholarship which led to it: it was a pure act of faith in the underlying dogma that caused our "modernists" to make their denials of Christian doctrines. It was a case of *a priori* logic, not a logic of induction. The great lesson of M. Loisy's book is just this and it is to be hoped that readers will not miss it. The translator seems to have done so. "After all," he says, "modernism, progress, reliance on reason, is the spirit of the age in which we live. A Loisy may be excommunicated, as a Galileo was silenced; but that settles nothing. The world goes its way, and an institution—even if it be as ancient and august as the Roman Catholic Church—which refuses to move with it, is left behind. However, the old Church is wiser than any Pope or any single generation of her doctors and the story of Catholic modernism is not yet a closed book." This is a complete misconception of the whole thing. You can have the Catholic Church or you can have "modernism," but "Catholic modernism" you cannot have, for the dogma of one excludes the dogma of the other. And as Newman once said—"Either the Catholic religion is verily the coming of the unseen world into this or there is nothing positive, nothing dogmatic, nothing real in any of our notions as to whence we come and whither we go."

THE BREAKING OF THE DROUGHT

By MICHAEL WILLIAMS

A FEW drops of rain fell heavily; huge, hot globules that seemed to burst like toy torpedoes as they plopped down in the dust of the road in Oak Tree Canyon, through which I was riding from the Empire Ranch to Rosemont, in southern Arizona. Great clouds that to my inexperienced eyes looked like the gathering of a tremendous tempest, were rolling down from off the Santa Rita mountains, with violet sparklings of lightning among them, and a deep muttering of thunder.

I made haste to get through the canyon and so on to shelter. Yet, living as I was among the ranchers of Pima County where ten percent of all the cows were dead of starvation and thirst, I felt I ought to be content to suffer a soaking, and consoled myself with the fact that everybody else would be greatly rejoicing that the terrible drought was broken at last. For this was the worst drought known for a score of years. The previous summer the rainfall had been very light. In the spring, it had completely failed. The cattle were thus in poor shape to face the long, hot, arid summer. The few springs and water holes that usually could be depended upon had soon dried up. Hundreds of farmers in valleys where they usually secured snug hay crops, gathered not a straw. There had been a slight storm two weeks before this day, but one storm does not make a rainfall in Arizona! What was needed was a daily tempest—and a flood, and a cloudburst or two, so to speak—so arid was the roasted earth.

The dozen drops were false prophets. There was no need for me to put on my slicker! Instead of protecting me from a shower bath it simply was the means of giving me a sweat bath. If anything is more suggestive of the hottest hot room of a Turkish bath than the effect of wearing an oilskin coat on a hot day in the desert, I'd be most curious to know what it is.

The puff of wind that had heralded the falling of the scattered drops of rain passed on up the canyon, and died with a sigh of utter exhaustion among the oaks; throttled, as it were, by the soft, heavy hand of the smothering heat.

As I started my horse forward, after stopping to drink from my canteen, a black moving shadow fell on the sand before me; then another, and another. Looking upward into the profound gulf of sun-drenched blueness between the jagged edges of grey cloud, I saw three buzzards descending.

From behind a belt of mesquit up the slope of the canyon there came a mournful sound. I knew what it portended. I knew what I should see if I rode to the clump of mesquit; so I did not do so. Too many times before had I looked at what was there!

A calf or a cow was slowly dying. Like thousands

of its kind, weakened by starvation, it had fallen, never to rise again. The buzzards were dropping down to investigate. If the dying creature was a calf, they would sit down and wait for the tid-bit; if it was an old and bony cow, they would turn up their ugly noses and pass on. The buzzards and the coyotes were fat and lazy that terrible year.

I have seen ten or a dozen buzzards at once disposing of the choice portions of a young calf, while not far away lay a score of older cattle quite undisturbed.

I carried a rifle slung on my saddle. But it is unlawful to shoot dying cattle unless you are the owner thereof. You must forbear your hand from the trigger, albeit the mourning cries of the starving and fallen creatures are at the very gates of your ranch. The reason for this law is that without it, too easy would it be for beef eaters, without respect for property rights in the meat they desire, to kill a steer or a cow, and if any questions were asked to say the deed was one of mercy to the beast.

I counted fifteen newly dead and three dying cattle in a ride of less than four miles the other day. The forest ranger in the Santa Rita mountains told me he had counted more than thirty in one canyon. At the Empire Ranch I was told that probably a thousand cows were already lost to this one company. The Empire ships its Arizona cattle to its ranches in California, and fattens them, and sells them at, say, about \$45.00 each; so that the loss of a thousand head means a loss of more than \$40,000; to say nothing about the expense of raising them, or the further loss entailed in the shortage of breeding cows next season. Millions of dollars were lost each month of the drought in Arizona.

Passing on through the canyon, as I descended the trail on the other side toward the great mesa looking towards Tucson, I could see grey dust storms whirling like water-spouts across the plain, sometimes as many as six visible at once. It was as if the whole immense country—the mountain ranges, and foothills, and lonely mesas uprising from the desert like solitary islands, and the desert itself—was crumbling into powder, dessicating, and peeling, and cracking, and falling apart because of the terrific and melting heat.

And always as I recall this vision of awful aridity and immense solitude, there will be associated with the scene in my memory the acrid, ammoniacal, odor of dead cattle; the galloping grey form of a coyote; the wheeling shadow of black buzzards; and the indescribably mournful sound of a dying cow.

A cattleman who had been in the business in Pima County for thirty years said to me the other day—"It's the poor cows that get the worst of it, always;