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Alfred Loisy (1857 – 1940)

Nowhere in Paris or in the whole of France is there a street called after Alfred Loisy who has, nonetheless, left a name not to be forgotten in history. A century ago and against his will, he became the center of a dramatic clash between traditional Catholic culture and the new secular culture, resulting from the Enlightenment and its effects within the Catholic church.

The cultural clash that was inherited along with modern culture naturally became known as Modernism, whose "errors" the pope solemnly condemned in the encyclical *Pascendi*, promulgated on September 8, 1907. But before saying "Modernism," said "Loisysme", and even, by a natural metathesis, "loysisme".

What was it about? The Bible was the reference book of every Christian culture. It was at the same time-and, it seemed, inseparably-word of God and representation of the world, the first guaranteeing the second.

The representation of the world was called into question by what have been called the discoveries of science and, correlatively, the formation of a new mindset called scientific, based on observation and experiment. The first thunderclap in a clear sky was the Galileo Affair, that is, the new astronomy. The second was the appearance of palaeontology, calling into question the origins of humanity and hence the date of the creation of the world. The third was Darwin and the evolution of species, in opposition to the "fixismo" and "creationism" attributed to the Bible.

From approximately 4,000 years before the Christian era, we came gradually to twelve or fifteen billion years, and from a heliocentric system to billions of galaxies. That shows the scale of the "scientific revolution".

But the new culture was not limited to these modifications of our image of the world. With the development of historical sciences founded on the critical study of documents inherited from the past, it is the Bible itself and its text which became the center of a study based on free inquiry. This raised problems and led to conclusions that soon came into conflict with ecclesiastical teaching and, inevitably, widened its field to include the history of Christian origins, the early Church and dogmatic formulations. In France, two names mark out this history: in the seventeenth century, Richard Simon (1638–1712), opposed by Bossuet; in the nineteenth century, Ernest Renan (1823–1892), professor at the Collège de France.

This new spirit and these new methods initially met with radical resistance from the Catholic church and its theologians. Very quickly, however, there appeared the conviction that it was necessary to take all this into consideration and to deal with the consequences as daringly as possible. After Renan, three great names are conspicuous in this effort: Mgr Louis Duchesne (1843–1922), Director of the École française de Rome from 1895 until his death, author of a History of the early church whose three published volumes were placed on the Index in 1911; Père Marie-Joseph Lagrange (1855 – 1938), a Dominican religious, founder of the Ecole biblique de Jérusalem in 1890; Alfred Loisy (1857–1940), originally from the region of Champagne or more precisely, Perthois enduringly marked by Jansenism, ordained priest in 1879, for two years a country pastor, whose entire life was devoted to critical study of the Old and especially the New

Testament, as well as that of Christian origins. Instructor, then professor at the young Institut catholique de Paris in 1882, he was to be dismissed from his teaching post in 1893, placed on the Index in 1903, excommunicated in 1908, professor of history at the Collège de France from 1909 until his retirement in 1931. His dramatic personal history is inseparable from his extensive scientific work, and from the modernist crisis undergone by the Catholic Church. The history of this crisis-in France and in Italy primarily-has produced abundant works for nearly half a century, without however succeeding in being truly integrated into the history of contemporary Catholicism or the religious histories of contemporary France available to us.

To evaluate seriously the contribution and topicality of Alfred Loisy would require an internal history of this vast intellectual movement which, for a century, has profoundly transformed Catholic culture and of the renewal of biblical exegesis as it is practiced today within that culture. We may still be very wide of the mark but such a history is, nonetheless, an essential condition for laying to rest the fantasies that are evoked by the word modernism and by the name of Loisy wherever there is unreflective reaction rather than thought.

Loisy's nature was direct and reserved but extremely discriminating. His religious development was disconcerting and mingled continually with his scholarly objectivity in a way that was confusing. In 1937 he himself described his personal journey as a passing "from belief to faith". He continually proclaimed the limits of reason and affirmed the necessity of religion, a "religion of humanity" that he located in the continuation of the piety of his rustic ancestors. Moreover, he made sure to have inscribed on his tombstone that, if the Church had excluded him from its community, he himself had done his best to remain faithful to its commitments without endangering its life.