

**Loisy as Himself:
A Brief Presentation of his Carnets personnels**

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Alfred Loisy was an indefatigable autobiographer. In 1913 he published *Choses passées*, which had appeared in a periodical over the previous year. (It appeared in English translation with the catchier title, *My Duel with the Vatican*, in 1924.) After the publication in 1928 of *Ma vie laïque* by Félix Sartiaux, Albert Houtin's literary executor, he was able to read there, in one of the "Silhouettes d'ecclésiastiques," a portrait of an unnamed priest that rather transparently depicted Loisy. Its title, "Chez un tacticien," indicates that the representation of Loisy was less than flattering. Since Loisy had once communicated materials for a biography to Houtin, with the expectation that Houtin would outlive him, he was concerned that a biography had indeed been written. The three-volume *Mémoires pour servir à une histoire religieuse de notre temps* (1930 – 1931) was written to give Loisy's own account of his life and work. The *Mémoires*, which cover 1,800 pages in octavo, constitute an important source of information for the history of the Roman Catholic Church in France. But they also clearly intended to perform an apologetic function. To cite Émile Poulat, "the *Mémoires* are the work of a man who refuses to be seen as he foresees that he will be seen, but who knows that he is seen when he tries to show himself as he sees himself." Despite the lengthy *Mémoires* Loisy was not done yet. In 1937 "From Credence to Faith" appeared as one of the contributions to *Religion in Transition*, edited by Vergilius Ferm. Written in French, it was translated by Maude Petre. Poulat provided the French original as the first part of his *Critique et mystique: Alfred Loisy ou la conscience catholique et l'esprit moderne* (1984). Lastly, *Un mythe apologétique* (1939) contains autobiographical material. All of these were written in order to give or to correct a depiction of himself and thus present a "public" Loisy. In contrast with these autobiographical writings, and also with his correspondence, the Carnets, or notebooks, were not intended to be read by anyone other than himself. So the Carnets are probably the most interesting text to apprehend Loisy "as himself." This paper will survey the Carnets in order to highlight some relevant aspects such as his attitude to life and illness, his judgments regarding himself, on people or politics of the day, or the birth of a scientific book.

The Carnets will be published in an annotated edition. Funding from the National Swiss Fund for scientific research enabled transcription of the notebooks over 2009 and 2010 and part of the annotation by Elisabeth Scheele. The task of annotation has also had the benefit of the expertise of Giacomo Losito. They are the remnants of Loisy's personal diary in which he scrupulously recorded everything that could bear upon his image in the broad frame of the modernist controversy. With the exception of some scattered pages, the

diary for the years covered by the *Mémoires* has disappeared (did Loisy destroy it?). For later years containing this material are extant and are usually designated Carnets or notebooks. (Here I would like to acknowledge the patience and perseverance of Elisabeth Scheele who realized this task in an extremely short compass of time, considering its scale and difficulty. Leaving aside the accounts, the personal diary represents a rather considerable volume.)

The Carnets exist in the form of three notebooks, which look like student exercise books. They exhibit a number of peculiarities. First, the notebooks contain, in addition to Loisy's personal diary, accounts of his personal finances. Indeed, the first notebook is formatted to be a book of such accounts. The latter are distinguished from the diary by placing the financial material at one end of the notebook and the diary beginning at the other end. Notebook one begins with an entry for October 15, 1929 and ends on October 29, 1934. We shall examine here only the personal diary, leaving to other scholars the task of analyzing the domestic accounts of a professor who remained single and pensioned off by the Collège de France in the 1930s.

The notebooks also show Loisy's concern for economy, an inheritance of his French peasant origins with their penchant for frugality. In the first two notebooks, between the diary and the accounts no page was left blank. Moreover each page is completely covered with writing. In the notebook that is formatted with ruled lines as well as the one formatted with printed squares, Loisy does not follow the printed spaces, nor does he observe margins. With his very small and fine writing Loisy is able to insert approximately 40 lines per page and about 60 signs per line. If he had followed the printed format in notebooks two and three, he would have been restricted to 23 printed lines. This renders the notebooks difficult to decipher, further complicated by the legibility of the writing varying from day to day according to the state of his pen and shows a long term decrease over time, to the point of near illegibility in the last months of his life. At the end of the first notebook he observes: "necessary to take another notebook to write my reflections. I take up again my old notebook (*Etudes évangéliques*) from which I've formerly extracted some letters." At the beginning of the second notebook, he remarks: "Today, on March 16, 1936, not having anymore room in my old notebooks to write my personal notes, I bought a new one. Will I fill it? That is another question." These small notes are subject to more than one interpretation. From an historical point of view, this effort at economy could reflect the embarrassment that a pensioner of the Collège de France experienced during the economic crisis of the 1930s. Personally, however, I would like to suggest a cultural interpretation. If we take into account the frequency of Loisy's publications during this period, it is difficult to believe that paper was so rare that Loisy experienced problems in obtaining it. One must also bear in mind that Loisy always identified himself as a pure Champenois and that he always kept the rhythm of life of workers in the countryside by going to bed around 8:30 pm and by getting up at about 4:30 am, to set to work around 5:00 am. Consequently, it seems to me, these notes carry

the mark of the peasant mentality of the French countryside in which Loisy was formed and which banishes any form of waste from daily life. In general, various remarks give indication that Loisy allows himself only utilitarian expenses, without excess. He himself lives in this strict rustic austerity but, occasionally, he knows how to help others. Moreover, these two notes supply the important information that the notebook entries between the end of October 1934 and the middle of March 1936 are missing. In 1937, while rereading his notes for the years 1930 – 1931, Loisy remarked this gap and made reference to “intermediate notes” in an “old grey book” and then in a “notebook with a clasp” which are not in the Loisy papers in the Bibliothèque Nationale and are doubtless lost. It is also noteworthy that Loisy calls his *Mémoires* his diary.

From a statistical point of view, we can observe that the personal diary tends to lengthen. For the last months of 1929 and the first months of 1930, the diary is only a long list of names. As noted, at the time Loisy was drafting the *Mémoires*. Then the diary begins to lengthen somewhat and becomes suddenly much more extensive for November 1930. The year 1931 is relatively brief, while 1932 is exceptionally long from August 13, 1932, the date on which he decides to answer Henri Bergson’s book *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. This reading monopolizes his attention until September 9th and he will fill 41 pages of note, concluding with a remark that clearly indicates the polemical intention of his reply, *Y a-t-il deux sources de la religion et de la morale?* The end of the year 1932 is very brief, 1933 a little less so. Entries for the year 1940 are confined to weather, health issues, medical treatment, and to news about the war.

The fluctuation can be explained by Loisy’s being able to dedicate more time to his writing after his retirement in autumn of 1932. From March 1940 he sharply reduces his writing, to cease this daily activity on April 24th due to his health.

So much for the general parameters of the Cahiers. What of their content? These notebooks contain a diversity of information: indications of the weather, his state of health, his visitors, his epistolary activity, his work, and academic, political and religious current events.

While living at Ceffonds (from summer 1934) a daily note generally begins with an indication of the weather, which is sometimes completed by remarks on the state of plants and crops. While of little interest to our concerns, they do show Loisy connected with his rural origins and living in close contact with nature and its seasons.

A daily note always contains the scrupulous, almost mathematical statement of the medical treatment become increasingly burdensome with his declining state of health. The first mention of his illness goes back, if I’m not mistaken, to November 4th, 1932, after a visit to the doctor, during which he learns of the gravity of his situation. With the next day commences the crippling treatment, providing some relief though not a cure for the malady that will carry him off seven and a half years later. In spite of the very repetitive character of these entries, a colleague historian of medicine judged them very important because they provide information on an expanding field of research, that of the

relationship of the patient with his illness. This kind of entry evolves. While notes remain scattered over 1932 and 1933, they become obsessional in 1934. In 1936, in Carnet II, Loisy seems resigned in his acceptance of his disease. The indications continue to be precise and systematic but do not give rise to lengthy development. But, as we have just seen at the beginning of the second notebook, Loisy is without illusion regarding his future. (In the published volume the entries on Loisy's state of health will not appear, although they have been transcribed.)

Regarding his life at Ceffonds, Loisy mentions his relations with the Bonnot family which lives in the apartment fitted out on the first floor of the house. M. Bonnot will help Loisy over the course of his illness, with a limitless dedication. He will be an absolutely irreplaceable help for Loisy, who is perfectly aware of that. Loisy also gives importance to his garden. He mentions its state, his work in it, and the daily walks he takes. He also notes the exceptional events which break up the daily routine at Ceffonds. Finally, he records the difficulties he experiences with help, with his old gardener and especially with the different cooks who succeeded one another. These notes are often full of humor. For example, April 20th, 1934: "The clumsiness of the female cook is beyond reckoning. Yesterday the apple soufflé was an absolute failure. The eggs which she uses have to be used for something. But I was not able to make sure where they were from. Nothing from the Holy Office, until now." The juxtaposition of ill-assorted data exhibits the spontaneous and personal character of the notebooks very well.

Loisy systematically mentions the visits and virtually all of his correspondence. As we can imagine, in the years preceding his retirement Loisy was regularly courted by candidates for succession, especially since he had a position at the *École Pratique des Hautes Études* in addition to the one at the *Collège de France*. We find the caustic irony which he never abandoned in the judgments concerning his courtiers.

The situation obviously will change from the point of his settlement at Ceffonds, in spring of 1933. In this small village of the Haute Marne the visits naturally come more rarely than in Paris. By exception Loisy notes the contents of his discussions that he had with his visitors. Mostly, he writes a simple appreciation (good visit of a given individual).

With regard to his correspondence, as in the *Mémoires* we find at times the complete copy of sent letters. Although the notebooks cover essentially the period of retirement, Loisy lives in almost permanent contact with numerous interlocutors. He continues to be perfectly informed. However his primary source of information remains the printed media: the newspaper *Le Temps*, *La vie catholique*, *Osservatore Romano*, etc. It is through these newspapers and, to a lesser extent, through the TSF (radio) that he acquaints himself with political and religious current events. For example, the excommunication of Joseph Turmel which he learns about on November 12th, is the object of a long note in which he brings to light some errors contained in the decree of the Holy Office.

The death of Henri Bremond which he learns of on August 18th, 1933 elicits from him a brief and poignant observation, one of the rare sentimental expressions that Loisy penned: “great misfortune, and for me great absence.” Loisy had the deepest admiration for Bremond and will pay him tribute in *George Tyrrell et Henri Bremond* (1936). From August 16th til September 1st, 1936 Loisy rereads and classifies his correspondence with Bremond, from which he quotes numerous extracts, having decided on August 17th to publish something on Tyrrell and Bremond. Then, on September 2nd he begins the writing of this book, which he pursues until September 24th, when interrupted by the proofs of his *Les Origines du Nouveau Testament*. On September 17th he dedicates himself to the revision of his manuscript which he sends on October 19th to Nourry.

As is the case with the *Mémoires*, the Cahiers reveal the image of a man completely dedicated to his scientific work against the backdrop of resentment against the Roman Catholic Church which rejected him.

The notebooks also contain mention of numerous deaths, of clerics especially, but no one arouses a reaction comparable to that of Bremond. For his sister, he briefly mentions her state of health, then becomes laconic about her death. “July 22nd [1932]. Death of my sister at six o’clock in the afternoon. Slow death. July 25th. Burial.”

Finally, we shall end this survey with an evocation of Loisy’s observations regarding international politics and the rise of fascisms in particular.

Loisy’s opinion on Mussolini is not easy to document at the beginning. We lack the transcription of the scattered sheets which cover the years 1915 to 1925 (Bibliothèque Nationale) and which could contain something on the coming to power of Mussolini at the end of 1922. In the notebooks, the first mention of Mussolini occurs on November 28th, 1929. “Buonaiuti, Mussolini’s theologian and assistant in his arguments against Pius XI.” But in the published *Mémoires*, Mussolini is repeatedly mentioned, with regard to his political succession and again with respect to the Lateran Treaty. His “imperialist nationalism” is denounced. It is difficult to date these mentions with precision, but it is clear that, at the latest beginning in 1931, Loisy has little doubt regarding the nature of Mussolini’s regime.

On May 26, 1931, we read in the notebooks: “In answer to consultation regarding an American letter which wants to put me forward as honorary member in a Mark Twain Society for Peace, which would have Mussolini for its honorary president, Canet advises me to be cautious in my answer. I shall not reply at all. The proposition comes from an extremist or a shirker. The second being the more likely, silence seems more preferable to me than a discreet refusal.”

The term fascism occurs for the first time only on July 3rd, 1931. “The day’s *Le Temps* announces the publication, in *Osservatore Romano* of an encyclical in which Pius XI condemns the fascist oath as illicit and immoral. Letter of Bremond yesterday telling me that the pope is very worried, judging that an era of persecution has opened. It is very possible. And the condemnation of fascism arrives a bit late.” On July 17th he regrets:

“Condemnation of the fascist oath, but no condemnation of the doctrine. We shall wait for a long time the encyclical against nationalism.” Finally, this sentence on October 18th, 1931: “surrender of Pius XI before Mussolini.”

On October 26th, 1933, meditating on a project of an open letter to the pope on the war, Loisy writes: “Hypothesis which lies within the realm of the possible, and even the most likely: at this moment Rome is waking up to the orthodoxy of the concessions in the moral order in making a pact with Mussolini and with Hitler as with the great pillars of religion.” Afterward Loisy will denounce this triple alliance in harsh terms.

Closing off this brief outline, let us retrieve this passage of July 4th, 1934, which fixes the image Loisy will have of Hitler: “In the newspaper, these days, we could see how Hitler got rid of people who hamper his policy, even if they be his oldest assistants. This man is crazy, and this madman is dangerous.”

Although analysis of all these notebooks is still in progress and can bring some correctives, we can express surprise at some unexpected silences.

We don't find the slightest allusion to Loisy's spiritual life. Struck by major excommunication, Loisy was obviously forbidden any participation in any religious ceremony of the Roman Catholic Church. But private worship was not forbidden. It is difficult to believe that Loisy abstained from any spiritual life. In any event, his notebooks are absolutely mute til now on this subject.

Another strange silence is the almost complete absence of the lexicon of feelings. Certainly Loisy expresses his moods on a number of occasions and the reader can guess them here and there. But, true to his Champenois origins, Loisy almost ever expresses his feelings in any direct way. It is necessary to discover them under the cover of the subtlest irony to the point of satire. Loisy excelled at this and he will delight the Carnet's reader.

The published edition of the notebooks will provide a better appreciation of the man and his work. It will be possible to follow the quotidian life, reactions, and judgments of a person who suffered from the Roman Catholic Church and the French society of his time. It will also be possible to observe the genesis of some of the later publications of Loisy.

More profoundly, this edition will provide first-hand documentation for historians of Christianity, of Modernism, of biblical sciences, and of mindsets during the inter-war years. Deeply marked from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the Great War, Loisy is a lucid and informed observer of his time. He mercilessly denounced the expansion of totalitarianisms and the absence of reaction by democratic countries.
