

# Modernists and the Modern Environmental Crisis

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'The crisis of the present,' says Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 'is the long deferred resumption of the crisis of modernism.'

If by the resumption of modernism Ratzinger means the method Catholic modernists used in addressing the religious crisis of their time we may fervently hope modernism does resume. For the method of the modernists is useful to us as we face an unprecedented environmental crisis.

Let us make no mistake. We are not engaged in academic theological gamesmanship. We are facing, although career churchmen are hesitant to admit it, a crisis which Jürgen Moltmann well describes as 'a crisis so comprehensive and irreversible that it cannot unjustly be described as apocalyptic. It is not a temporary crisis. As far as we can judge, it is the beginning of a life and death struggle for creation on this earth.'

In 1918, when Tyrrell had been dead for nine years and Loisy had faded from the Church, Von Hügel expressed in a letter to Miss Maude Petrie, Tyrrell's literary executor, his awareness that the method of modernism was permanently useful and even necessary, 'to interpret it (the faith) according to what appears the best and the most abiding elements in the philosophy and the scholarship and science of the later and latest times.'

A cogent case could be made that Pope John XXIII was himself to some extent influenced by the method of the modernists. Even some of his expressions were akin to theirs. He spoke of 'opening the windows' of the Church to the modern world. George Tyrrell had urged Cardinal Mercier, whom John XXIII had known well, to 'throw open the doors and windows of your great medieval cathedral, and let the light of a new day strike into its darkest corners and the fresh wind of Heaven blow through its mouldy cloisters.' Pope John startled the fathers of Vatican II when he distinguished the substance of the faith from its expression. Yet Loisy had often made the same distinction; 'Though the dogmas may be divine in origin and substance, they are human in structure and composition.'

The modernists never addressed the ecological crisis. Their

contribution was, in Bernard Reardon's words, 'a resolute attempt to expose the Church to contemporary intellectual and cultural influences.' Their method is no longer unique to them but was applied by subsequent theologians from Adam to Dulles and was accepted by Vatican II. The modernists accepted, almost certainly too readily, the scientific 'certainties' of their day. And their day was sadly anthropocentric. Nevertheless, in the very resoluteness of their attempts to respond to burning contemporary questions the modernists still command attention.

In their times they were in a minority and those today who appropriate their method in order to respond to a very different problem are also in a minority. For their contemporaries, including Christians, are loathe to admit that industrialism, as it has been known, is not sustainable, and that respectable poverty, a shift away from domination of the environment, is the one sustainable option for man.

No thinker of the past can justly be expected to answer a question he never asked. Demography and ecology were barely in their infancies when the modernists lived. They neither asked nor answered our ecological question, though occasionally they did come close to what succeeding theologians, to their peril, never really grasped: the inter-relatedness of all created things. This was especially true of Von Hügel in his mature years. He described his thoughts while watching seagulls in the Round Pond near his Kensington home.

The elements which each individual had in common with each other individual gull, the elements it had in common with the genus gull, and again with the larger division of water birds, and then of birds in general, and then of warm-blooded animals, and still further of organic beings.

But his touch was unsure, for his holistic insight was not the result of the modernist's method but of the Baron's rootedness in Catholic tradition, especially of the first millennium. For us the inadequacy of Loisy, Tyrrell and Von Hügel is that their theologies fail to address sufficiently the God-given reality of the integrity of Creation. In this failure it seems they were too much like the neo-scholasticism which they sought to transcend.

What, however, the modernists did do was adapt to the conclusions of contemporary science, especially the biblical, historical, philosophical and human sciences. We today seek a theology of creation adapted to what Jürgen Moltmann describes as 'the sciences, technologies and economies which today determine the relationship between human beings, machines and nature.' Von Hügel's return to pre-reformation Christianity, with its richer teaching on the integrity of creation, is a helpful pointer to 'a deeply positive and Catholic world with its already characteristically modern outlook and its hopeful and spontaneous application of religion to the pressing problems of life.' In lucid prose

George Tyrrell expressed the adaptability we seek:

To speak to each man, each class, each people, each age, in its own language, on its own presuppositions—scientific, historical, philosophical, nay, even religious—so far from being contrary to, is altogether consonant with, the democratic spirit of the Gospel.

A second useful element in the modernists' method was their willingness to be open to the truth, no matter what the consequence. Von Hügel was as open to truth as were Loisy and Tyrrell. But he was more cautious, and worked more cautiously. In 1906, shortly after Tyrrell's dismissal from the Society of Jesus, Von Hügel wrote to Tyrrell, 'The Church is more and other than just these Churchmen ... we—our housemaids too, are true, integral portions of the Church, which in none of its members is simply teaching, in none of its members is simply learning.'

A third useful characteristic of the modernists' method was their respect for and reference to the Catholic tradition. No contribution of theirs is more necessary for an ecological theology than this one. In the concluding paragraph of his masterpiece, *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy argued that to respond to a crisis one should look to the entire tradition:

The best means of meeting it (a contemporary crisis) does not appear to be the suppression of all ecclesiastical organization, all orthodoxy, and all traditional worship—a process that would thrust Christianity out of life and humanity—but to take advantage of what is, in view of what should be, to repudiate nothing of the heritage left to our age by former Christian centuries, to recognise how necessary and useful is the immense development accomplished in the Church, to gather the fruits of it and continue it, since the adaptation of the Gospel to the changing conditions of humanity is as pressing a need today as it ever was and ever will be.

George Tyrrell argued that what makes one a Catholic is 'solidarity' with the communion of saints, past and present. Within the communion which he described there is much and there are many to provide wisdom for any crisis, 'a massive consciousness of solidarity with the whole Catholic communion, past and present, by whose spirit he is animated, whose beliefs, hopes, aspirations, and sentiments he shares.' In the tradition a Catholic thinker would find a foundation upon which he may build a response to his own contemporary problems. Tyrrell thought a Christian should turn to 'the heritage of the gathered experience and reflections of multitudes of generations from which, as from a starting capital, he may set forth in search of further gains.'

A fourth useful characteristic of the modernists' method was their recognition that doctrine expands, develops and to some extent even

changes. Loisy flatly contradicted received neo-scholastic theory: 'dogmas are not as truths fallen from heaven and preserved by religious tradition in the precise form in which they first appeared.' Dogmas, he affirmed, 'are the least imperfect expression that is morally possible.'

Von Hügel recognized that doctrine does not exhaust but points to divine Truth. 'God is, overflowing; and there is an end of that point.' George Tyrrell, arguing that 'definitions are simply safeguards and protectors of revealed truth', wrote that 'the process of defining things briefly by their differences leads to the fallacy of forgetting their other constituents.' Tyrrell recognised that doctrine expands and, like new wine, bursts old wine skins. 'Wine skins stretch, but only within measure; for there comes at last a bursting point when new ones must be provided.'

Our own crisis is unique in a way that theirs was not, and more fateful, because potentially fatal, than was theirs. But in June, 1903, on a midsummer day in the midst of his five-year stay at Richmond, Yorkshire, with his early death only six years and one month away, George Tyrrell wrote on a card to a friend, 'I write for a small circle of readers, those who belong to three generations ahead.' If his theological method, and that of Loisy and Von Hügel, is helpful to Christians responding to today's environmental crisis, then George Tyrrell once again may be correct.

## **With my body**

**John Bate**

Two slim children, sitting side by side, eyes  
on the map she held, were planning  
a journey—then paused, and with deep kisses  
pressed each other's mouths with truths  
they had to say, then, back to the map,  
her finger pointing to where they should go,  
he assenting, as it seemed to us.  
The carriage was cramped and old-fashioned,  
uncomfortable seats made us restless,  
so how could we keep from paying attention,  
or fail to notice the presence  
that hovered around them, or stop  
our memories, as we watched their abandon,  
that throwing together of frail futures,  
recalling our own unvisited temples,  
and the guest there unadored?