

BARON VON HUGEL ON THE PETRINE CLAIMS

TOWARDS the end of June appeared a little work entitled *Some Notes on the Petrine Claims by Friedrich von Hügel*. An intimate friend of von Hügel's was, apparently, thinking of becoming a Catholic, and had received from a High Anglican a letter containing 'a reasoned attack on the Roman position.' Von Hügel set down these notes in answer to this attack. Though written in 1893, they had not hitherto been published. A warm welcome has been given to the book in the Catholic press. In the July *Month* Fr. Vassall-Phillips, in the course of a long notice, writes: 'The publication of such an answer from such a pen, coming, after so many years, from beyond the tomb, constitutes an event of outstanding religious importance.' A reviewer in the July *BLACK-FRIARS* expresses himself thus: 'Friedrich von Hügel the resolute thinker, is in every line of this precious little book It is to be hoped that in the circles where Friedrich von Hügel is honoured almost as a prophet this little masterpiece of the prophet may direct tired eyes and feet towards the consolations of the Rock.' And a review in the latest issue of the *Tablet* (July 26th) tells us that these Notes 'should dispel the baseless notion that Baron Friedrich was a somewhat stinting Papist and that he yielded to the Petrine Claims with less than a very good grace'; to this review attention is drawn in the front-page *Notanda* thus: 'Baron Friedrich von Hügel "being dead yet speaketh" as a champion of the Holy See.'

I confess that it seems to me somewhat naive to found such absolute judgments about von Hügel on these Notes written in 1893. I do not think that anyone who was well acquainted with von Hügel's works

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and was anxious not to give a false impression of his mind about the true Church, would express himself as these reviewers have expressed themselves. There are other and much later works that have to be taken into account. 'Being dead he yet speaketh' other things surely incompatible with Catholic teaching.

These Notes were written in 1893. It was not till some years later that the Eschatologists began to exercise such domination in the exegesis of the Gospels. Some even in the Church succumbed to it, Loisy and Tyrrell among others. It is certain that under the influence of the same movement von Hügel too came to take up a position which, if true, would deprive the great Petrine texts of most of the force which the Vatican Council attributes to them. This can be shown only by giving one or two rather long quotations.

In 1904 he wrote as follows :

As historians, we now know that the institution of the Church is far less directly and completely attributable to Our Lord than used to be believed. . . . Historical criticism has ended by clearly establishing how that Church organisation and Officialism, in all but the very rudimentary, Synoptic-Gospel form of their original operation—a form so akin to the Franciscan brotherhood during the Poverello's lifetime—is not the direct and deliberate creation of Our Blessed Lord Himself. But for the two exceptions confirmatory of the rule, His denunciation of the official abuses, and His modest organisation of the little preaching and curing fraternity of His Apostles, all competent scholars are coming to see how entirely He kept and lived and died, as far as in Him lay, within the pale, a member of the Jewish Church—and this if only because, whatever be the reason, He spoke and acted according to the current belief that this Church, indeed all earthly arrangements, would soon end at his Proximate Second Coming. Now this conclusion necessarily involves the recognition that all and every officialism beyond that simple brotherhood, so simply trained, organised and sent out by Him, can but go back germinally and not formally

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and materially to Him, somewhat as the visible universe itself was germinally created by God in the beginning, and not in the state or form in which we now see it . . . We require the Church as much as ever; it is as venerable and sacred as ever; but, as to the form in which we now have it, it is mostly of divine institution in the sense in which the family and human society are—God's work, under the immense impulsion given to humanity by Christ Our Lord's teachings, life, death and glorified existence—a work built up in and through and for the abiding necessities, aspirations and helps of men

And lastly, this same historical criticism is demonstrating, with apparent ruthlessness, the limited and non-infallible character of Our Lord's recorded manifestation of human knowledge; His adoption of all the scientific, literary, critical assumptions, picturings and beliefs of His own age and country—even inclusive of such an apparently spiritual belief as that in the proximity of His Second Coming.¹

In an address delivered in 1919 on 'The Apocalyptic Element in the Teaching of Jesus' he said:

The institution remains small in Jesus's lifetime, not because Jesus objects to a large institution, a Church, or because this small institution is, in any essential point, different from the Church. The institution remains small simply and solely because of the Proximate Expectation; and with the fading away of the proximity, the Preaching Band automatically becomes the Church.²

If he is to be judged by an address on 'Institutional Christianity,' delivered in 1918, he appears to have held that the two great Petrine texts, Matthew xvi, 18 and 19, and Luke xxii, 31, 32, were not really Our Lord's own utterances, but were expressions of a later development:

Finally the Synoptic Gospels, in their apparently later constituents, sum up for us majestically these developments. [He then refers to the two texts in question.] 'God so loved the world,' this great passage may appeal to us more than 'Thou art Peter'; yet only both, and not

¹*Essays and Addresses.* Second Series (1926), pp. 11, 18-20.

²*Essays and Addresses.* First Series (1921), p. 129.

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one only can, for a large and logical outlook, represent the genius of Christianity, comparatively late as may be both these articulations of it.³

It is difficult to see what other view von Hügel could have taken of these texts, refusing, as he apparently did, to Our Lord that knowledge of the future which they would pre-suppose in Him if they were really utterances of His. I am not denying that von Hügel was 'a champion of the Holy See.' But I think that before acclaiming him so enthusiastically it is as well to know how he championed it.

It seems to me that von Hügel's mind on the true Church is fairly given in several passages of the Memoir which Mr. Bernard Holland prefixed to *Selected Letters 1896-1924*. I will quote two of these passages :

Thus what Friedrich von Hügel stood for, all his life, was Catholicism, Roman Catholicism, as the best and highest development of the Christian religion in history, but wider and more free in its range than now, tolerant in seeing good in all that is sincerely religious outside itself, both in the past and in the present, not afraid of scientific ascertainment of facts in any direction (p. 38).

He did not actively desire to make converts from Church to Church, or to disturb those whom he found peacefully and contentedly grazing in their native pastures, and finding there all that they need, though he believed that the Catholic and Roman Church was richest in spiritual possessions and potentialities, the most complete and the most abiding (p. 40).

Alongside of these passages should be set some words which von Hügel himself wrote to Tyrrell in October, 1905 :

All things point . . . to the wisest, truest, at bottom most costing, course being, nowadays, for us all (short of the clearest call of conscience not only *away* from this or that, but *to* some definite other religious, positive, position), to stick to the Church in which we find ourselves;

³*Ibid*, pp. 262, 263.

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and this, especially, when that Church happens—whatever may be its excesses and disfigurements—to represent, alone in that degree and clearness, certain fundamentally important elements of religion (p. 134).

I can only ask : Could such passages as the first two be written of, could such a passage as the third be written by, one who did full justice to the uniqueness of the Church of Rome? According to Catholic doctrine Jesus Christ, having full knowledge of the future, founded a Church which He meant to be one, and of this one and only true Church the Roman Pontiff is the head. I confess I do not find it easy to reconcile some of von Hügel's opinions with this doctrine.

Again I am not denying that von Hügel was, to use his own phrase, ' a convinced Roman Catholic.' It is quite certain that he was. But it does not follow that it is advisable to approve, without discrimination, all that he wrote in support of his conviction. The *Tablet* reviewer thinks that ' the Notes should dispel the baseless notion that Baron Friedrich was a somewhat stinting Papist.' How Notes written in 1893 can be supposed to answer so absolutely for the thirty years of the Baron's life that still remained it is difficult to understand. Von Hügel was, in a certain sense, a somewhat stinting Papist. He stinted in the matter of Our Lord's knowledge and of the Petrine texts.

Von Hügel was a profound thinker and a saintly man, and it would be a far pleasanter task to draw attention to what was best in him. But there is a time to praise and a time to criticise. As Mr. Bernard Holland says in his *Memoir* (p. 31), von Hügel was regarded with suspicion at Rome. And who will deny that he had given cause for it?

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