

Experience and Discourse, Revelation and Dogma in Catholic Modernism

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Introduction

IN THE FIRST TWO SECTIONS, I will sketch the positions of Alfred Loisy and George Tyrrell. Then, I work back to what is in back of them—Henri Bergson, Auguste Sabatier, Immanuel Kant. Then I look forward to their continuing relevance if not influence. I conclude with a sobering thought.

Alfred Loisy (1857–1940)

After the storm of *L'évangile et l'église* (1902), Loisy composed an explanatory, exculpatory collection of essays on this, that, and the other issue raised therein called *Autour d'un petit livre* (1904). I confine myself mostly to this second book. In reading *L'évangile et l'église*, one has to correct for the aim he takes at Adolf von Harnack in order to find his real target—contemporary Catholic theological method and dogma. Loisy is therefore a little more open in *Autour* as to what he is up to—supposing that characterization could ever be wholly appropriate for Alfred Firmin Loisy.

Loisy's Historical Criticism and Its Results

The first essay in *Autour* is called “On the Origin and Object of *L'évangile et l'église*.” Together with the second, “On the Biblical Question,” it deals with the bedrock of Loisy's theological position, his understanding of historical criticism as independent of faith and the creed in both its method and its results. Criticism demands this independence even if undertaken in service to the Church and to the true and accurate apprehension of the life of Jesus

and the relation of his life and teaching to the New Testament. Loisy writes that the historical point of view is imposed on him by the nature of the task of responding to Harnack: Harnack pretends to give a purely historical account of the relation of the Church to the Gospel; Loisy undertakes to criticize this account historically.¹ But in fact, Loisy has no other point of view to offer. Catholic dogma was not invoked in *L'évangile et l'église*, not only because it was addressed to Harnack, "but because it cannot be received in the order of historical investigation."²

Loisy's sobriquet at the Institut Catholique (1890–1893) was "le petit Renan."³ This tells us of Loisy the historian: he undertakes a positivist reading of texts, in Loisy's case a reading entirely blind, without any criticism of the rationalist and naturalist presuppositions such a reading brings with it. But the sobriquet tells us also of Loisy the man. "The little Renan" shared also with Ernest Renan (1823–1892) an indefatigable conviction of the moral worth of religious sensibility and sentiment. Attending Renan's lectures for three years, Loisy conceived the project of rescuing Christianity from Renan's strictures by a more thorough, more scientific, more exigent historical criticism.⁴

Loisy produces a historical reconstruction of Christian origins within his positivist parameters. As little will the historian find anything divine in the text of the New Testament, Loisy holds, as will a geologist in the strata of the earth: "History grasps only phenomena, with their succession and their connection; it perceives the manifestation of ideas and their revolution; it does not reach the bottom of things."⁵

Loisy's critical reconstruction of events reveals a discontinuity between his own historical Jesus and the faith of the New Testament and subsequent Church, as he makes plain in the fourth essay, "On the Divinity of Jesus Christ."⁶ "One can clarify the faith by history, but one cannot found history on faith"; and again, "it would be a contradiction to suppose that an ecclesiastical definition would render historically certain a fact of

¹ Alfred Loisy, *Autour d'un petit livre* (Paris: Picard et Fils, 1903), 14. Unless otherwise stated, all English translations in the present article are my own.

² Loisy, *Autour*, 14.

³ See Albert Houtin and Félix Sartiaux, *Alfred Loisy: sa vie—son oeuvre*, ed. Emile Poulat with annotation (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1960), 56.

⁴ Marvin O'Connell, *Critics on Trial: An Introduction to the Catholic Modernist Crisis* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 63.

⁵ Loisy, *Autour*, 9–10.

⁶ Loisy, *Autour*, 111–12, 115–16.

the human order that would be otherwise indemonstrable.”⁷ So, as Père Lagrange pointed out in his review of *L'évangile et l'église* in the *Revue biblique*: “Entre Jésus et le Nouveau Testament il y a un hiatus infranchissable” (“Between Jesus and the New Testament there is an insuperable gap”).⁸

The rest of Loisy's position can be understood as a matter of working out the consequences of this alleged gap between Jesus and the New Testament, figuring out what must be true if this is true, but given also that dogma has been religiously required for the maintenance of the Gospel in history, even as Harnack taught, and that the Church has been an agent of man's moral progress.

Upshot for the Truth of Dogma

Loisy says that, as history is independent of dogma, so dogma is independent of history.⁹ In “On the Biblical Question,” he writes:

All these historical enquiries intend only to state and to represent the facts, which cannot be in contradiction with any dogma,

⁷ Loisy, *Autour*, 14; and see 55. We might put the point by saying that, for Loisy, the meaning of any text is independent of the meaning of any temporally subsequent text; as he says in *Autour*, 16–17: “The sense of the evangelical texts is independent of the interpretation that has been given them later, by way of a religious philosophy that is not in the preaching of Jesus. It is the same for the idea of the kingdom of God, for the institution of the Church, for the origin of the sacraments. To translate the idea of the kingdom of heaven under the pretext of conforming this hope to reality, would be, for the historian, to betray it. To suppose that Christ exactly defined the future of his work, and to interpret the texts according to what one knows now about the past of the Church would be, in criticism, an arbitrary act, and even an act of falsification. For the critic, the definitions of the last councils on the institution by Christ himself of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, of the papal primacy, of the sacraments—these definitions are ideas; for the believer, they are general truths the dogmatic expression of which does not determine the nature of the connection that historically attaches the ministry of Jesus to the origin of the Church. The realities and notions of hierarchy, of primacy, of infallibility, of dogma, even of sacrament, correspond to a growth of the Christian community that has a seed, but only a seed, in the Gospel.”

⁸ Marie-Joseph Lagrange, Review of *L'évangile et l'église* by A. Loisy, *Revue biblique* 12 (1903): 297. See Loisy, *Autour*, 213–16, and later, *My Duel With the Vatican: The Autobiography of a Catholic Modernist*, trans. Richard W. Boynton (New York: Greenwood, 1968 [French original, 1913]), 68–70.

⁹ For the independence of history from dogma, see at length Loisy, *Autour*, 14–22.

precisely because they are facts, and because dogmas are ideas representative of faith, which has for its object, not the knowable human, but the incomprehensible divine.¹⁰

Accordingly, “historical, scientific exegesis is not pastoral, theological exegesis.”¹¹ The independence of dogma from history legitimates Loisy’s contention that the Church’s authority, concerned with dogma and theology, cannot touch the historian.¹²

Still, despite the mutual independence Loisy alleges, history wields a sort of veto over what can be at the bottom of things. The “independence” of dogma from history depends very much on what we think dogma is, what its subject is. History “clarifies” faith, Loisy says.¹³ Even more, the extra-theological value of Scripture, that is, its historical value, is the foundation of the theological value, which is simply a development of the historical value.¹⁴ But what can be built on this foundation? Everything, seemingly, if dogma is nothing but an expression of the religious consciousness of man’s relatedness to God. Here we have the “transcendent explanation” of historical fact.¹⁵

This requires, alas, that in its literal sense, dogma be false. When dogma is taken to be a declaration of God through Christ as to how things are with him, and between him and us, then history has something say. What it says is that this very *notion* of dogma is false. One must abandon the idea that dogmas make truth claims.

Dogmas declare the religious meaning of historical facts, but the meanings need not be true to the facts; they need be true only to the religious consciousness and moral experience of man. So, dogma is free from history in two senses. First, it is free from whatever it was that Jesus of Nazareth factually communicated. There is a hiatus from the self-consciousness of Jesus as Messiah to the Church’s declaration of him as incarnate Word. Second, it is free from what he factually is: Jesus of Nazareth need not be

¹⁰ Loisy, *Autour*, 51.

¹¹ Loisy, *Autour*, 51.

¹² Loisy, *Autour*, 52. This line, indeed, seems reminiscent of D. F. Strauss’s declaration in the preface to his *Leben Jesu* that: “The dogmatic significance of the life of Jesus remains inviolate,” whatever doubts there may be as to “the supernatural birth of Christ, his miracles, his resurrection and ascension . . . as historical facts” (James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought* [New York: Macmillan, 1971], 175).

¹³ Loisy, *Autour*, 14.

¹⁴ Loisy, *Autour*, 14–17.

¹⁵ Loisy, *Autour*, 147–48.

the incarnate Son of God in order for the Church with religious meaning to declare him so. The meaning that the interpretation states the fact to have need not itself be inscribed in the fact in either sense, in either the teaching or the being of Jesus of Nazareth. The doctrine of the Incarnation need have nothing but a sort of occasional connection with the self-consciousness and existence of Jesus.

The freedom of dogma in declaring the meaning of historical facts is taken up in part 4, "On the Divinity of Jesus Christ," when he treats the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation.

The revelation of the messianic secret is really accomplished by the Spirit who acts in the community of the first believers. For faith, the witnesses of this Spirit are the apostle Paul, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, and the author of the Fourth Gospel. With this last the revelation is accomplished. And indeed, the fourth Gospel contains the essential elements of ecclesiastical Christology.¹⁶

In other words, the doctrines of Jesus's divine filiation and Incarnation have nothing to do with the teaching and self-understanding of Jesus. In Jesus's own self-consciousness, "messiah" is the expression of his relation to God. This, Loisy says, is the "germ" of the dogma of his divinity. But all that that means is that the doctrine of the Incarnation is *another* expression of his relation to God.¹⁷

In the second place, Christological and Trinitarian doctrines are free from the reality which on the surface they purport to inform us about.

If one maintains, and I think it necessary to maintain, the personality of God as a symbol of his absolute perfection and of the essential distinction that exists between the real God and the real world, is it not evident that this divine personality is of another order than the personality of man? . . . Is it that God is personal in the manner of man, and that the historical Christ testified that he was personal in the manner of God?¹⁸

¹⁶ Loisy, *Autour*, 118–19.

¹⁷ This is not to say that ecclesiastical dogmas declare "the original sense of the [New Testament] writings," of course, as Loisy makes plain in his sixth letter, "On the Origin and Authority of Dogmas" (*Autour*, 216).

¹⁸ Loisy, *Autour*, 151–52.

The answer to these rhetorical questions is *no*, and this excludes a literal if analogous predication of “personal.” Further:

At bottom, the dogma defined only a metaphysical relation between Jesus and God, and it did so especially according to the idea of the transcendent God. The Word was conceived at first as a kind of indispensable intermediary between God, absolute and immutable, and the world, finite and changing. . . . It is true that the development of trinitarian dogma gathered inside the movement of divine life something that at first went from God to the world, and the Christian Trinity ended up by becoming immanent in itself. One ended up, as well, by conceiving it as interior, in some fashion, to Christ, by the personal union of the Word to the humanity of Jesus. But the dogmas of the Trinity and of the Incarnation are nonetheless founded primitively, insofar as they are a doctrine of religious philosophy, on the idea of the divine transcendence alone.¹⁹

Religious philosophy, however, has changed. It “tends more and more to the idea of an immanent God, who does not need an intermediary in order to work in the world and in man.”²⁰

As to a religious meaning that they do have, it is nothing except Christ’s vocation, his relation to God, or his consciousness of relation to God.

Revelation and Agnosticism

Furthermore, it is not as if Christological and Trinitarian dogmas just happen to be false because arising from an outmoded metaphysics. It is not as if they could be replaced with other, true doctrines about God. Any doctrine that purports to state what God is in himself is false. For we cannot really have knowledge of God:

What is called revelation can be nothing except the consciousness acquired by man of his relation with God. What is Christian revelation in its principle and its point of departure if not the perception in the soul of Christ of the relation that unites Christ himself to God, and that which joins all men to their heavenly Father? The perception of these relations took the form of human knowledge, and it is only in this form that they were able to be communicated to men.²¹

¹⁹ Loisy, *Autour*, 152–53.

²⁰ Loisy, *Autour*, 153–54.

²¹ Loisy, *Autour*, 195.

Revelation itself is exhausted in “consciousness of relation.” All the rest is the “form” of knowledge, and is man’s work:

Revelation, in its intellectual definition and in its verbal expression, consists in ideas that have taken birth in humanity, in ideas such as a human intelligence has been able to perceive, only such, moreover, as can exist in human intelligence, such as human language is capable of expressing them.²²

Indeed, and so it is a question of the capacity of human thought and language. However, he continues:

In relation to their object, they are imperfect symbols, which would be insufficient for intellects higher than ours, and which, even for us, are susceptible of explication, that is to say of relative modification and improvement. Revelation is not immutable in the sense that its symbols, once given, would escape all transformation, but because it remains always, for faith, substantially identical to itself.²³

Yes, as consciousness of relation, it remains identical. “Immutability” is glossed as follows:

The changes that are produced in its exterior determination and in its formulas are something secondary in respect to the unity of its spirit and the continuity of its development. In this order, too, one can speak of permanent directions the truth of which is no less incontestable than is their moral efficaciousness, and the form of which is not more immutable than is the condition of humanity.²⁴

The “direction” but not the “formula” remains the same. Loisy identifies

²² Loisy, *Autour*, 198. What Loisy calls revelation is truly of God, who gives to man an interior inclination to the good, a moral impulse—but that, and that alone, is God’s work, his “revealing” gift to man; see *Autour*, 197.

²³ Loisy, *Autour*, 198–99.

²⁴ Loisy, *Autour*, 199. Except for the last sentence of this citation, Loisy is repeating material from the third Firmin essay; see *Prelude to the Modernist Crisis: The “Firmin” Articles of Alfred Loisy*, trans. Christine Thirlway, ed. C. J. T. Talar with introduction (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 59–60. This witnesses to the consistency of Loisy’s mind from the Firmin articles (1899–1900) to *Autour* (1903).

this kind of agnosticism with the traditional apprehension of the incomprehensibility of God.²⁵

Agnosticism and Historical Relativity

Finally, granted the speculative impotence of dogma, and granted the fact that the symbols are fashioned from whatever the philosophy at hand in the culture offers, the metaphysical relativity of dogma, its agnosticism, grounds the historical variability of dogma:

It is inevitable that the scientific commentary of faith be more or less conditioned by the development of science. . . . The theoretical conception of dogma as immutable cannot erase the history of dogmas. The sense that does not change is not that which results precisely from the letter, that is to say the particular form that the truth took in the mind of those who drew up the formula; it is not even in the particular form of the interpretations which followed it according to need; it is in their common basis, impossible to express in human language by a definition adequate to its object and sufficing for the centuries.²⁶

The “sense that does not change” is not in the letter—it is not grasped as such in the proposition. “The sense that does not change” cannot be expressed in human language. Does the qualification save things—inexpressible “by a definition adequate to its object and sufficing for the centuries”? No; this is smoke and mirrors. Dogmas are inadequate for Loisy not just in that they do not express the whole intelligibility of the object. They are inadequate in that they do not express *any* intelligibility, even partial, of the object in itself.²⁷

²⁵ Loisy, “On the Origin and Authority of Dogmas” (*Autour*, 203–4).

²⁶ Loisy, *Autour*, 201–2.

²⁷ This is how we must read the following: “The ecclesiastical formula is not absolutely true, since it does not define the full reality of the object that it represents; it is nonetheless the symbol of an absolute true; until the Church judges it suitable to modify it in explaining it, it is the best and surest expression of the truth of which it treats. The faithful Christian adheres intentionally to the full and absolute truth that the imperfect and relative formula figures. To adhere to the formula as such, with the assent of divine faith, would be to adhere to its inevitable imperfections, to proclaim it imperfectible and adequate, although it be inadequate and imperfect. The Catholic can thus believe the authority of the Church and what the Church teaches. He does not for that reason think that the ecclesiastical formula signifies its object with such perfection that nothing will ever change in it by

But just because they are not controlled by the object they purportedly refer to, they are, and rightly, entirely at the scientific and cultural disposition of the age they seek to address. Revisions are dependent on the changing science and philosophy of man.

The Practical Import of Dogma

What then is the import of dogma? If it is not speculatively true, then of course it must be practically true:

The development of revealed religion is effected by the perception of new relations, or rather by a more precise and more distinct determination of the essential relation, glimpsed from the beginning, teaching man in this way better and better to know the grandeur of God and the nature of his own duty.

In distinction from perceptions of the scientific and rational order, the perception of religious truths is not a fruit of reason alone; it is the work of the intelligence yielding, so to speak, under the impulse of the heart, the work of religious and moral sentiment, of the real will of the good.²⁸

And again:

Religious faith intervenes as a light only in what could be called the moral philosophy of things and the moral condition of human activity.²⁹

God is demonstrated, “not by facts alone or by reasoning alone but by the effort of moral consciousness, with aid from knowledge and reason.”³⁰

Conclusion.

In this reading, we proceed from historical-critical observation of the diachronic incoherence of dogma to agnosticism, the idea that we have no cognitive access to God. *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907) proceeds the other way round, but Loisy and Pius X agree, I think, on the logical connection of the extremes.³¹

way of interpretation. . . . The formulas, old or new, are only the vehicle of the truth” (*Autour*, 206–7).

²⁸ Loisy, *Autour*, 196–97.

²⁹ Loisy, *Autour*, 214.

³⁰ Loisy, *Autour*, 215.

³¹ See Loisy, *My Duel*, 307: “Pius X and his co-workers assuredly were within their

George Tyrrell (1861–1909)

Scholars such as David Wells and F. O'Connor distinguish several periods in Tyrrell's thought. I appeal to essays mostly from his last period, essays contained in *Through Scylla and Charybdis* (1907).

Loisy and Tyrrell are very different men, and I think, very differently motivated. But I do not think their positions are much different, and I will proceed with greater dispatch here.

For George Tyrrell, it is once again the historical variability of dogma that leads him with Loisy to what George Lindbeck would call an experiential-expressivist view of revelation. According to Jan Walgrave, the germ of Tyrrell's position is captured in the following argument.³² Either revelation is propositional, and therefore the development of doctrine is logical, and logically consistent, or revelation is non-propositional, but rather a matter of some pre-linguistic experience, a sort of experiential contact with the divine. But development is not dialectical, not logical. For Tyrrell, this is a matter of historical fact, a fact that really goes without saying, a fact that every educated and dispassionate person recognizes.³³ Therefore, revelation is not propositional. Therefore, it is experiential; it is the ineffable experience of God.

Not only does the non-dialectical, non-logical course of the development of doctrine demand that revelation be thought of as an experience rather than as a speech, but unacceptable consequences would follow if it were conceived of as propositional. For one thing, it would seem that later

rights in indicating the logical connections that might exist between the different phases of the pretended Modernism. They could likewise, if they thought it worth while, exhibit the ultimate consequences of the ideas which they were opposing. But what they had no right to do was to present as an actual form of teaching . . . the artificial construction which they themselves elaborated." Pius's Modernism is an artificial construction; Loisy's criticism was innocent of "agnosticism" (ibid.); Blondel was "caricatured" (ibid.); but still, Loisy seems to grant some "logical connections." The principles were "actual," but the consequences were not yet unfolded. This seems to me a large concession, although it is delivered with little grace.

³² Jan H. Walgrave, *Unfolding Revelation: The Nature of Doctrinal Development* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972), 178, 251. See, for instance, George Tyrrell, "Theologism"—A Reply," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis: Or, the Old Theology and the New* (London: Longmans and Green, 1907), 346–49 (an article that first appeared earlier that year in the *Revue pratique d'apologétique*).

³³ George Tyrrell, "Semper Eadem II," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 153 (an article that was first published in 1905). See also Tyrrell, "'Theologism,'" 346, 349.

Christians would have a better purchase on revelation than earlier ones.³⁴ For another, it would seem that the Church would be wedded to antiquated and indeed falsified teachings of ancient science and philosophy.³⁵

The experiential character of revelation means that strictly speaking it is non-cognitive, and does not inform us about the divine.³⁶ The non-cognitive character of revelation does not mean that prophetic and apostolic symbols and images are not normative. They are, as Tyrrell affirmed very clearly toward the end of his life:

Although apostolic revelation is in no sense the beginning or first chapter of Christian theology, yet it is in some sense the criterion both of theology and all those institutional means which the Church has taken for the preservation of the spirit and truth of the Gospel.³⁷

This does not mean that revelation is not general, given to all men everywhere; revelation is universal, but only with certain men do their expressions of it become the rule for others.³⁸ Prophetic image and apostolic figure are normative. Normative, however, is not informative; that is, they do not tell us anything about God. The revealer rather produces an “impression” on us, and only in this sense does revelation “represent” God, the way an effect does its cause.³⁹ For Tyrrell’s experiential expressivism, the expressive pieces come from us, not from God.⁴⁰

Revelation is in no way a *word*, a divine word. As he says in “Theologism,” “revelation must be ultimately of things, not of words or symbols of things.”⁴¹ There is no sense that we cannot have things except through the words. And from the same year:

³⁴ Tyrrell, “Theologism,” 322–23.

³⁵ Tyrrell, “Semper Eadem II,” 153.

³⁶ Tyrrell, “Rights and Limits of Theology,” in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 205–12; Tyrrell, “Revelation,” in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 282–83, 287–90.

³⁷ Tyrrell, “Revelation,” 297. See also the new introduction to Tyrrell, “Rights and Limits,” in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 200.

³⁸ For the general character of revelation, see Tyrrell, “Rights and Limits,” 207–9; see also Tyrrell, “Theologism,” 324.

³⁹ Tyrrell, “Revelation,” 283–84.

⁴⁰ Tyrrell, “Rights and Limits,” 207–8.

⁴¹ Tyrrell, “Theologism,” 314.

Revelation is not statement but experience. "Truth" is used differently of experience and judgment about experience.⁴²

This is so central to grasping his view that I repeat an earlier, but just as insistent statement of the fact that revelation is not statement. Tyrrell says that the task of theology is to "take account of the phenomenon of religion in general and of Christianity in itself," which is to say, he continues, that it must take account of "revelation":

. . . a revelation embodying certain individual and collective religious experiences, which is given in and with those religious experiences, and belongs itself to the category of experience and not that of statement.⁴³

In this way does theology become something like the "religious studies" of contemporary American universities. It is the study of a human practice, not a divine teaching.

Rather than ever inform us about the divine, what revelation chiefly does is install in us a way of life and religion, a moral and religious form of life.⁴⁴ Revelation imparts to us "a new sort of life," "a certain mode or way of life, action, and conduct."⁴⁵ God guarantees a way of life, not news about himself.⁴⁶ What it really is, is *grace*, God's sharing of his life with us.⁴⁷

As for dogma, it is merely protective of the revelatory experience. It excludes false speculative attempts to shape up the content of revelation.⁴⁸ Nicea, for instance, excludes Arius's theory of the relation of Father and Son. A theologian may take the Nicene settlement as directing us to or calling for a speculative statement of the relation of Father and Son. But that is theology only, and theology does not bind.⁴⁹ In itself, and for faith, Nicea does not itself give us a statement about that relation. Dogma is either informative but not binding or binding but not informative. Only what it protects binds—the original expressions of metaphor and symbol and figure. Thus, cognitively, dogma as binding has at most a symbolic or directional value. It is to point us ever more back to the experience, the

⁴² Tyrrell, "Revelation," 285.

⁴³ Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits," 229.

⁴⁴ Tyrrell, "Revelation," 273, 275–76.

⁴⁵ Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits," 205–6.

⁴⁶ Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits," 209.

⁴⁷ Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits," 209, 212.

⁴⁸ Tyrrell, "Revelation," 293, and "Theologism," 330.

⁴⁹ Tyrrell, "Theologism," 341–42.

canonical images, symbols, and metaphors, and to the form of life the experience engenders.⁵⁰ Its value is religious, but not theological, moral but not speculative.

With other Catholic Modernists, Tyrrell has a much greater sense than the Liberal Protestants of the role of the Church and recognizes the revelatory experiences of prophets and apostles as in some way normative.⁵¹ But there is no difference as to the expressive character of dogma, and no difference as to what it gives non-cognitive, non-informative expression of, namely, the experience of the divine.

Working Backwards

"Representations" and Pragmatism

Apart from the highly mediated influence of Kant on both Tyrrell and Loisy, and the direct influence of Bergson on Tyrrell, both of which lines of inquiry we will shortly take up, there is the general modern philosophical invitation to speak of knowing things as having representations of them. Loisy and Tyrrell share in the general estimation that our "representations" are not "adequate" to the realities they are of, and this is supposed to be more especially and obviously true when it is a question of knowing God.

For Loisy, our ideas "are the neutralized images of subjective impressions which imply, certainly, the reality of subject and object, but which do not adequately represent to the subject either the object or the subject himself."⁵² For Tyrrell, our knowledge of the world is a "schematic reconstruction," an "interpretation" of experience, which possesses a "practical truth," and serves as a useful map, but is no "replica" of the territory.⁵³ This is true also in our relations with God, where "the truth of the mental construction is its practical efficacy."⁵⁴ For both Loisy and Tyrrell, as we have seen, religious language is eminently practical, and its truth is exhausted in guiding us to the moral action which puts us in communion with God, a happy relation with God in the "will-world," in Tyrrell's phrase.

At the time, American pragmatism provided a vigorous expression of the

⁵⁰ Tyrrell, "Rights and Limits," 205–7. See also Tyrrell, "Semper Eadem II," 145: "The criterion of present expressions of the ever-revealed truth is not their identity with, or subjection to, those of the past, but their conformity to supernatural experience of the present."

⁵¹ Tyrrell, "Revelation," 292.

⁵² Loisy, *Autour*, 191.

⁵³ Tyrrell, "Mysteries," in *Through Scylla and Charybdis*, 173.

⁵⁴ Tyrrell, "Mysteries," 175.

untruth of our ideas, of our ordinary language, and Tyrrell is helped to his own view of things by his quite explicit and welcoming consideration of this movement.⁵⁵ Loisy's pragmatism does not, I think, extend beyond thinking of religion and Christianity, while Tyrrell's is more thoroughly adopted as a general way to think about the relation of language and reality.

Henri Bergson

It is not surprising that Loisy and Tyrrell had no confidence in a resurgent but by no means mature recovery of the philosophy of the pre-Enlightenment and pre-Revolutionary Church to help them theologically, to which their exposure was, anyway, very limited.⁵⁶ What is surprising, *perhaps*, is their confidence in the modern movements that surrounded them—Loisy as to the rationalism of the higher criticism, Tyrrell as to pragmatism and Bergsonism. Tyrrell's revolt against "scholastic rationalism" was already complete by the time he took up Bergson, but he is grateful to him for offering an already scouted philosophical course.⁵⁷

For Bergson, language exhausts itself in its practical import, the help it gives us to navigate in the world. It speaks of the relations between things, but does not get at things in themselves.⁵⁸ For that, there is intuition.

⁵⁵ For which, see Clara Ginther, "‘Notre attitude en face du Pragmatisme’: George Tyrrell's Relation to Pragmatism," in *The Reception of Pragmatism in France and the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890–1914*, ed. David G. Schultenover, S.J. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 185–215. According to Ginther, his principal difference from James in thinking of matters religious is that he takes experience in a wider sense, "as the experience of *the whole body of Christ* throughout time and space" (214).

⁵⁶ O'Connell, *Critics on Trial*, 123, contrasts the exposure of Tyrrell and Loisy to St. Thomas with that of Marie-Joseph Lagrange. The attempts of Loisy and Tyrrell to enter into Thomas on their own were predictably without success.

⁵⁷ David G. Schultenover, *George Tyrrell: In Search of Catholicism* (Shepherdstown, WV: Patmos, 1981), 203. There does not seem to be a similar impact on Loisy. Sartiaux reports Loisy reading Henri Bergson's *L'évolution créatrice* (1907), citing Loisy's *Mémoires* (*Alfred Loisy: sa vie—son oeuvre*, 193), but that is too late for *L'évangile et l'église* and *Autour*. Tyrrell read Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* (1889) and *Matière et mémoire* (1896). According to Schultenover, *Religion as a Factor of Life* (1902; under the pseudonym of Ernest Engels) "demonstrates how thoroughly he entered into the Bergsonian horizon" (203).

⁵⁸ I cite Bergson's excellently concise and vibrant "Introduction to Metaphysics," in *The Creative Mind*, trans. Mabelle Andison (Totowa, NJ: Littlefield and Adams, 1975). First published in 1903, it gives the tenor of Bergsonism just at the time of Modernism. The contrast of our knowledge of things in themselves and relations between them introduces the "Introduction."

Intuition gives us ourselves—our own *durée*—that is, the inmost reality of the person.⁵⁹ But intuition gives us also whatever we possess of the reality of *anything*.⁶⁰ But once durational reality is cashed out in language—the *morcelage* of the conceptual pieces of thought and language that freeze what is flowing, and stop the motion that is the real—then language abstracts, falsifies, misleads. The concepts, ideas, and representations much spoken of by Descartes and the empiricists and Kant turn out to be useful for practical purposes, but not for grasping the real.⁶¹

Access to the true and the real occurs not by language, therefore, but by experience. And if this is true of our knowledge of the self, a religious thinker will infer that it will be true as well of the one in whose image we are made. Access to the true and real God will be beyond language, in religious experience.⁶²

Auguste Sabatier (1839–1901)

Immediately in the background of both Tyrrell and Loisy there was Auguste Sabatier, the ornament of French liberal theology in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Sabatier broadcast *en claire* what Tyrrell and Loisy had to encode in their earlier works like Tyrrell's *Lex Orandi* and the Firmin articles of Loisy. For Sabatier, revelation is strictly and manifestly the experience of God, an experience that is both the answer to prayer and that elicits prayer,⁶³ and whose principle function for Sabatier is to strengthen the sense of our freedom and moral agency in a world that the sciences tell us is deterministic.⁶⁴ The criterion of the authenticity of a revelation, in fact, is precisely that it enrich and enhance and strengthen our spiritual and moral life.⁶⁵ Dogmas for their part express the experience of God; they express the

⁵⁹ Bergson, "Introduction," 162–164, 169.

⁶⁰ Bergson, "Introduction," 190–91, on the invention of calculus.

⁶¹ See especially the criticism of Kant in Bergson, "Introduction," 195–97.

⁶² Some note a general interest in mysticism and mystical experience for various modernists, which could, doubtless, orient them anew from another angle to thinking of revelation as experience; see *Modernists and Mystics*, ed. C. J. Talar (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009). The connection is more evident with Baron von Hügel and Henri Bremond, it seems. Loisy takes up Bergson's interest in mysticism (*Two Sources of Morality and Religion* [1932]) much after the Modernist period.

⁶³ Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History*, trans. T. A. Seed (New York: Harper Torch, 1957 [French original, 1897]), 25–29, 30.

⁶⁴ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 12–13, 18–19.

⁶⁵ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 60–61.

feeling of dependence on God (Friedrich Schleiermacher).⁶⁶ However, they do not really tell us anything about God; that would be the mistake of “intellectualism.”⁶⁷ In this Sabatier expressly recognizes the strictures of the Kantian critique.⁶⁸

The presence of God just *is* revelation in itself; it in us the feeling of our dependence on him; and this emotion—that is, “religion”—produces in turn the idea of our relation to God—that is, dogma—and indeed brings forth every religious form and rite and formulary.⁶⁹ Dogma considered as an idea, in its theoretical aspect, is the envelope and expression of our relation to God, which is the implication of our religious feeling, which is the product of the presence of God.⁷⁰ It seems to be speaking about God; all it really expresses is the emotion, the relation.⁷¹

Dogma has, as it were, two faces: interiorly, its soul is piety, or consciousness of relation; exteriorly, its body is some intellectual or even philosophically formulated statement. For Kantian reasons, however, the intellectual form of dogma cannot really inform us about God. Still, such form is necessary in order to express the emotion, the consciousness of the relation, both so as to communicate it to others and to rekindle it in ourselves.⁷² Such forms are wholly the work of man, not God; they are not revealed; revelation is consciousness of the presence of God.⁷³ Further, since the intellectual form is always constructed out of whatever intellectual or philosophical materials lie to hand in the culture of the time, they are also historically variable.⁷⁴

Loisy and Sabatier: the Firmin articles

Loisy insisted he never read Kant and was no philosopher.⁷⁵ Still, his engagement with Sabatier—the French Albrecht Ritschl—was close indeed, as the Firmin articles demonstrate (1898–1900),⁷⁶ and Ritschl connects us to Kant. Sabatier’s was a lasting influence on Loisy, as the last

⁶⁶ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 45.

⁶⁷ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 137–38.

⁶⁸ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 276–77, 326.

⁶⁹ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 229.

⁷⁰ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 240.

⁷¹ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 240–41, 298–99.

⁷² Sabatier, *Outlines*, 256–58, 318, 321.

⁷³ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 242–43.

⁷⁴ Sabatier, *Outlines*, 246–47.

⁷⁵ Sartiaux, “L’Oeuvre d’Alfred Loisy,” preface to *Alfred Loisy*, citing Loisy’s *Mémoires*.

⁷⁶ See above, note 24.

pages of *L'évangile et l'église* make clear, where he evokes man's position between the necessities of scientifically described nature and the freedom to which God calls him in his moral action. Loisy ends his volume where Sabatier began his own *Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion*. In *My Duel with the Vatican*, Loisy observes that his difference from Sabatier bears on the *social* character of religion.⁷⁷ This leaves his indebtedness to Sabatier on religion and revelation largely intact.

He seems indeed to reproach Sabatier for his subjectivism, stripping revelation of its intellectual and doctrinal content and reducing it to man's experience or consciousness of God's motion in man's psychology.⁷⁸ Thus the following:

Each of the essential assertions which constitute objective revelation started off by being a subjective revelation, an assertion by God himself speaking to the conscience of a human being, and this assertion was a manifestation of God, which in this way carried its own absolute certainty for the person favored with it.⁷⁹

Revelation is here an "assertion," and God "speaks." But then on the next page:

The fundamental truths of religion have not been communicated in the form of speculative teaching, but as divine facts in some fashion experienced by those who perceived them, at the actual time when their minds conceived of their intellectual representation.⁸⁰

Revelation is not then a proper teaching at all (speculative or practical), but an experience of divine fact, a perception of the divine, the representation of which is a human and not a divine work.

And again, the criticism of Sabatier's subjectivism notwithstanding:

If it is admitted that upon contact with the divine, there springs forth from the depths of the religious soul a lively light for the intelligence, communicable to other souls, then it is admitted that revelation is the production of a substantially divine truth, divinely

⁷⁷ Loisy, *My Duel*, 175.

⁷⁸ Loisy, *Prelude*, 50–51. His criticism comes adorned with citations to St. Thomas on prophecy (56–57).

⁷⁹ Loisy, *Prelude*, 60.

⁸⁰ Loisy, *Prelude*, 61.

initiated although always humanly perceived and formulated. Nothing more is needed to safeguard the truly traditional idea of revelation.⁸¹

First is the divine “contact,” whence “springs forth” whatever is communicable to others. The divine “initiative” is completed by human “formulation.”

Moreover, revelation as Loisy conceives it here is something general, and the “divine action upon the mass of humanity must be considered of the same order as the action of revelation in men inspired.”⁸²

Tyrrell and Sabatier

For Tyrrell, it will be enough to refer to his great intellectual biographer, David George Schultenover. Tyrrell reviews Sabatier’s earlier *The Vitality of Christian Dogmas and Their Power of Evolution* in the *Month* in 1898.⁸³ Here, Tyrrell rejects Sabatier’s view that dogma is the “husk,” as Schultenover has it, “in which the religious emotion of Christ . . . clothed itself.”⁸⁴ Later he is more receptive to Sabatier, but Schultenover thinks Tyrrell distinguishes his own position “from that radical subjectivity that would make dogma a wholly arbitrary symbol of divine mystery and truth.”⁸⁵ Again, reporting Tyrrell’s mind in 1901: “Tyrrell always felt that there was a very fine line between the objective, representative value of dogma and its purely symbolic character, and he always argued for divine guidance in the framing of dogma.”⁸⁶ This, I think, is special pleading, since the line is fine only for someone lost in experiential expressivism. Nor does such a scruple gainsay the mature position outlined above, according to which revelation is not a statement.

Behind Sabatier: Ritschl and Kant

If we ask why the Modernists have no confidence in human language to speak informatively and truly of God, the answer is that Loisy and Tyrrell, through Sabatier, and through him through Ritschl, share in the strictures of Kant’s First Critique.

Ritschl shares with Kant the idea that the principal value of religion

⁸¹ Loisy, *Prelude*, 51.

⁸² Loisy, *Prelude*, 53.

⁸³ *Vitality* appeared in English in 1898; *De la vie intime des dogmes, et de leur puissance d'évolution* was published in 1889.

⁸⁴ Schultenover, *George Tyrrell*, 59; see also 371n32.

⁸⁵ Schultenover, *George Tyrrell*, 194.

⁸⁶ Schultenover, *George Tyrrell*, 194.

is to enable us freely to obey the moral law over against the determinisms nature and society.⁸⁷ He rejoices that Kant frees us from a Scholastic and metaphysical idea of God, and restores the knowledge of him to the practical order. Harnack shares this interest in making the Gospel practical news, news guiding our moral choices. And the same view surfaces in Loisy and Tyrrell. Loisy confesses in his journal that he is loathe to leave the Church, not because he maintains any confidence in her doctrine—he does not—but because it has been so great and indispensable an engine of the moral improvement of mankind.⁸⁸

That Loisy never read Kant we may well believe. That he was not swimming in the great nineteenth-century stream of agnosticism relative to God, the soul, and freedom introduced by Kant, and the reduction of religion to morality, is more difficult to credit. But like Raymond Brown objecting to Cardinal Ratzinger, he shows no awareness that the practice of modern exegesis is philosophically informed.⁸⁹

Ignorant of the letter of Kant, Loisy therefore reads the letter of Scripture within an unacknowledged philosophical framework, one recognizably within the limits within which Kantian reason insists religion be kept. They dictate the positivist spirit with which Loisy reads the New Testament. The question of revelation and of Scripture as a witness to revelation is bracketed. Loisy, like Kant's purely moral interpreter of Scripture, approaches the bible as a wholly human artifact, as Loisy does also the subsequent doctrinal production of the Church.⁹⁰ No Church dogma, according to Kant, can burden the interpreter or historical critic

⁸⁷ Helmut Thielicke, *Modern Faith and Thought*, trans. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 331, 333.

⁸⁸ Loisy, *My Duel*, 101, 194-5, 168.

⁸⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: On the Question of the Foundations and Approaches of Biblical Exegesis Today," in *Biblical Interpretation in Crisis: The Ratzinger Conference on Bible and Church*, ed. Richard Neuhaus (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 16. Nor did Loisy discuss the philosophical background to his practice even later, as far as I can see. See the largely taken-for-granted rationalism of the first chapter of his *The Origin as of the New Testament*, trans. L. P. Jacks (New Hyde Park, NY: University Books, 1962). The French edition (1936) was about the last thing Loisy published.

⁹⁰ For the authoritative moral interpretation of Scripture, see Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore Greene and Hoyt Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 101-3. Such an interpreter is distinct from the mere biblical "scholar," interested only in the historical origins of Christianity, who "settles no more than that there is nothing in the origin of Scripture to render impossible its acceptance as direct divine revelation" for those who need faith in such an event (103).

of Scripture.⁹¹ And just as no dogma binds Loisy in his reading of the New Testament, neither is his historical reconstruction of doctrinal history really a reconstruction of *doctrine*.

Approaching the New Testament and the history of doctrine as purely human artifacts, the very agnosticism of the First Critique will turn out—miraculously!—to be generated from below. New Testament criticism will find no single thread of articulation, cumulative and homogeneous, bearing on Christ, but rather a series of separately tied and isolated knots of human experience and aspiration, connected at the literary level, perhaps, but by no necessary or intelligible links bearing on a common *referent*. In Loisy's reading, the various data of Gospel and creed and dogma are appreciated as saying various things at various points in time to various peoples about God, Christ, the Church, the sacraments. Since the many things said of any one of these subjects are not coherent, there is no intelligible core they are all in fact getting at and expressing and are governed by.

So, Gospel and creed and doctrine do not make statements about any reality truly named by the words "God," "Christ," "sacrament." These words are and can be no more than symbols of an experience of God, symbols whose utility therefore must be practical, since it cannot be speculative.⁹² They help us live well. The lasting import of Scripture is, as Kant (and Spinoza) taught, practical. Religion within the limits of reason is a wholly moral affair, where the criterion of morality are no words of God but, ineluctably, postulates and products of practical reason. "Religion" is then judged in its practical import according to an already established criterion of philosophical reason. The Second Critique is logically prior to *Religion Within the Limits of Reason*.

Looking Forward

Étienne Fouilloux wrote in 1998 that "the modernist crisis constitutes the intellectual matrix of contemporary Catholicism in the exact measure that this crisis is defined by the will to re-read the founding message [of Christianity] by the gleam of the scientific knowledge of the last century."⁹³ The

⁹¹ Kant, *Religion*, 96, 104.

⁹² Pierre Colin, "Le Kantisme dan la crise moderniste," in *Le Modernisme*, ed. D. Dubarle (Paris: Editions Beauchesbe, 1980), 31, asks very acutely whether Pius X's *Pascendi* does not confuse metaphysical agnosticism (Sabatier) with the methodological atheism of Loisy's critical method (and see further discussion on 59–63). What is important to see, I think, is that in the end, the second leads to the first.

⁹³ Étienne Fouilloux, *Une Église en quête de liberté: La pensée catholique française entre modernisme et Vatican II (1914–1962)* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1998),

Second Vatican Council did not “rehabilitate” modernism, or “open the window to a new modernism,” but neither did it impose the view of their fiercest opponents.⁹⁴

What is the relation of Modernism to the *nouvelle théologie*? Fouilloux considers three groups in the aftermath of the condemnations of 1907 and 1910.⁹⁵ First, there were the priests and religious who were excommunicated and whose works were proscribed (Loisy, Joseph Turmel, Prosper Alfarcic). Second, those who submitted to Rome, like E. Le Roy, or who were silenced (L. Laberthonnière). Third, those who chose to occupy a *position particulièrement délicat*, the “particularly delicate position” of rejecting the radicalism of the Modernists (Loisy, Tyrrell), and who, on the other flank, rejected the intransigence of those who could not admit any exegetical or philosophical progress: Lagrange, Rousselot, Blondel.⁹⁶ The “new theology,” Fouilloux says, was *la fille légitime* of this third group, its legitimate daughter.⁹⁷

Others are less careful in delimiting the relation. For Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, the “new theology” returned to Modernism without any qualification.⁹⁸ He did not distinguish Henri Bouillard from Maurice Blondel, nor Blondel from Tyrrell. Gerard Loughlin and Jürgen Mettepenningen agree with Garrigou-Lagrange. According to Loughlin, the “new theology” is a return to and vindication of Modernism. He says this in virtue of what to my mind is an excessively mild evaluation of Modernism: no doctrinal relativism to be discerned there at the beginning of the last century; the Modernists simply wanted to distinguish the abiding proposition of doctrinal truth from differing statements thereof, and recognized the working of history on different formulae of the same truth.⁹⁹ Loughlin focuses especially on Tyrrell, and defends him against the charge of agnosticism by arguing that he belongs rather in the camp of those who read St.

10: “La crise moderniste constitue la matrice intellectuelle du catholicisme contemporain, dans la mesure précisément où elle se définit par la volonté de relire le message fondateur à la lueur des connaissances scientifiques du siècle dernier.”

⁹⁴ Fouilloux, *Une Église*, 11.

⁹⁵ Fouilloux, *Une Église*, 29–30.

⁹⁶ Fouilloux, *Une Église*, 29.

⁹⁷ Fouilloux, *Une Église*, 33; see also 303–4 for the distinction between the new theology and Modernism.

⁹⁸ Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, “La nouvelle théologie—ou va-t-elle?” *Angelicum* 23 (1946): 126–45.

⁹⁹ Gerard Loughlin, “Nouvelle Théologie: A Return to Modernism?” in *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology*, ed. Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36–50, at 48–49.

Thomas the way Herbert McCabe and Victor White do.¹⁰⁰ This is very unconvincing.¹⁰¹ For Tyrrell, God moves, touches, stirs, impels the soul. But he does not *speak*. One would never know this from Loughlin.

There is also Jürgen Mettepenningen's very similar construction of twentieth-century history. The title of his *Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* states his thesis very succinctly.¹⁰² The Modernists were no heretics but merely held against the *neo-Scholasticism* of the time that revelation is on-going, that dogmas change in form and content, and that the critical reading of Scripture must be accorded its rights.¹⁰³ The continuity of two factors, "the introduction of history into theology," for understanding both Scripture and dogma, and the partial abandonment of neo-Scholasticism, prove the first part of Mettepenningen's thesis to his own satisfaction.¹⁰⁴ For the second part, the Council appropriates "the central features of the ambitions of the *nouvelle théologie*" under the guidance of several "new theologians," subsequently conciliar *periti*, especially in *Dei Verbum*; thus, we are given to understand that the Council embraces the defining features of Modernism as well.¹⁰⁵ This, too, is little convincing, given the broadness with which things like the wonted attention to history is characterized, and given Mettepenningen's inability to distinguish key figures on the issues—for instance, he sees no reason to distinguish Pierre Battifol and Loisy on the independence of history from faith.¹⁰⁶ On the other hand, Fergus Kerr would recognize in Henri de Lubac an effective agent of the anti-Scholastic aim of Modernism.¹⁰⁷

With Fouilloux, there is a more finely grained assessment by Hans Boersma. Boersma is aware of the temptations to draw a line from

¹⁰⁰ Loughlin, "Nouvelle Théologie," 43.

¹⁰¹ Loughlin refers us here in the main to Tyrrell's *Lex Orandi*, but he does not inform us that it is a less radically and less clearly expressed version of *Religion as a Factor or Life*, nor does he make any mention whatsoever of the more mature but more inflammatory essays on revelation and doctrine in *Between Scylla and Charybdis*. It can be hard to obtain *Religion as a Factor of Life* (no library in the United States registers having a copy); see the detailed exposition in Schultenover, *George Tyrrell*, 216–36.

¹⁰² Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie—New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

¹⁰³ Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 21.

¹⁰⁴ Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 21.

¹⁰⁵ Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 36.

¹⁰⁶ Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 20; see rather O'Connell, *Critics on Trial*, 215–17.

¹⁰⁷ Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 86.

Modernism through the *nouvelle théologie* to the Council.¹⁰⁸ But he resists it for two very telling reasons. First, there was no move to *ressourcement* in Modernism; Loughlin's claim to find this in Modernism's "retrieval of medieval sources" is surprising, to say the least.¹⁰⁹ Second, Boersma defines the new theology especially by its reviviscence of "the patristic sacramental hermeneutic" for approaching Scripture, and there is nothing of this in Modernism.¹¹⁰ The common enemy of neo-Scholasticism and the common attention to history (in some form, in some way, for some purposes) do not make the new theologians the inheritors of Modernism.

Conclusion: An Abiding Modernist Issue

Old heresies never die and they never fade away, either. The nature of revelation remains as urgent an issue as ever it was for Modernism. *Dei Verbum* insisted that revelation occurs in words and deeds (§2) and that the Holy Spirit asserts what the human authors of Scripture assert (§11). But this did not prevent Raymond Brown from famously denying in 1980 that God speaks in or through Scripture.¹¹¹ In the first place, the idea that he does is mythological. Second, if he did, the study of Scripture could not be wholly independent of dogma, and could not be critical according to Enlightenment standards. But if divine speech is mythological, an impossible conjunction of the divine and human, can divine action be otherwise? So much for the "words and deeds" of *Dei Verbum*.

What then is revelation? Whatever it is, it must be something other than the words of Scripture. Whether it is prior to discourse in the consciousness of prophet or messiah, or whether it is something to be discerned in the over-all experience of a large community extended in space and time who produced the book and continue to produce it anew in ever repeated interpretive enactments, the formulation of revelation will be ours. This second view seems to be the view of Terrence Tilley, a contemporary philosopher of religion, for whom the content of Christian tradition is a collection of life-enhancing practices, and the propositions necessary to describe and guide them are true according as the consequences of the practices are good. Truth is something constructed by

¹⁰⁸ Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 290.

¹⁰⁹ Loughlin, "Nouvelle Théologie," 48.

¹¹⁰ Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 291.

¹¹¹ For discussion of Brown's 1980 article, and for its opposition to his actual exegetical practice, see Michael Maria Waldstein, "Analogia Verbi: The Truth of Scripture in Rudolf Bultmann and Raymond Brown," *Letter & Spirit* 6 (2010): 93–140.

a living community, and realist according as it is successfully practical. Tilley eschews experiential expressivism, but on his view, doctrine will be as mutable as any Modernist ever supposed it to be, and besides saying that revelation is “Christ,” it will, more conformably with Tilley’s project, be said to be something not antecedent to (for how could it be apprehended?) but strictly correlative with the practices that make up the content of tradition.¹¹²

For Karl Rahner, to take a more influential figure, all the words of Scripture and dogma mean only to express the transcendently experienced state of affairs in which Absolute Mystery comes close to us. Whatever else they mean, they *normatively* mean only this. This large and very undetermined view of the content of revelation, if such a word as “content” has any application here at all, leaves us to envisage calmly and cold-bloodedly the changes of doctrine and adjustments that must be made in its expression after the Enlightenment. Rahner, who began his theological career with a very anti-Modernist vindication of the propositional form of revelation, ended his long theological day much closer to Modernism. We must acknowledge the “possibility,” he writes, that:

In the transmission and expression of dogmas properly speaking there may be inseparably mingled ideas, interpretations, etc., which are not part of the binding content of the article of faith concerned but which have not been explicitly separated from this article at a particular epoch in history by traditional theology or even by the Church’s magisterium.¹¹³

This seems to imply that we cannot really know what it is we are assenting to when we say the creed. Moreover, it is the Enlightenment and its attention to history that makes us aware of this very Modernist “possibility,” the possibility that what we assert in confessing the teaching of the Church is—not to put too fine a point on it—false.¹¹⁴

¹¹² See Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), 156–70, on the constructivist consequentialist view of truth, and 170–77, where Avery Dulles’s view of revelation is said to be compatible with Tilley’s account of truth, and “revelation is not a foundation for Christian faith and practice but the correlate of faith within a tradition of the practice of faith” (175).

¹¹³ Karl Rahner, “Yesterday’s History of Dogma and Theology for Tomorrow,” in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 18, *God and Revelation*, trans. Edward Quinn (New York: Crossroad, 1983), 3–34, at 11.

¹¹⁴ For a very trenchant rejoinder to this kind of relativism, see John Lamont, “The Historical Conditioning of Church Doctrine,” *The Thomist* 60 (1996): 511–35.

What is revelation? Is it experience or discourse? It is experience for those for whom modern philosophy has detached human discourse from the real, or for whom it has made it mythological.

The prior problem is with discourse itself: there is no divine discourse about the real if there is no discourse about the real.

The manifestation of discourse as what it is, therefore, comes to light as a *praeambulum* of faith: human discourse must be capable of making the intelligibility of realities present to us, and we must be able to appreciate ourselves as creatures whose work it is to be receptive to being, before ever we can hear the word of revelation.

On the other hand, it may be that healing this very modern wound to the understanding of man as the image of God, the rational animal, the shepherd of being, the agent of truth¹¹⁵ —perhaps this healing can occur only in the hearing of the word of God. In other words, can such a *praeambulum fidei* be established now, in our present circumstances, outside of the Catholic philosophical tradition? Can we be appreciated even as Plato and Aristotle appreciated us, can our intelligibility as the animal whose job it is to make the intelligibility of things present to him—can this be seen as what we are, only under the sacred canopy? As with all else human, as we discover today, so here, with what defines us as human. N.V

¹¹⁵ In the terms of Genesis, Porphyry, Martin Heidegger, and Robert Sokolowski, respectively.