

LOISY AND HIS CRITICS IN THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH.

ABBÉ LOISY is one of the most distinguished Biblical scholars that the Roman Catholic Church has produced in recent times. He has the same task for the Latin countries that W. Robertson Smith had for Great Britain, namely, to maintain the rights of Biblical criticism against the no less arrogant than unhistorical claims of traditional dogmatism.

So long as his criticism confined itself to the Old Testament, Loisy was not seriously disturbed; for Leo XIII., in his kindness of heart and breadth of mind, protected him from the intolerance of the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris and other the like prelates. But Loisy could not limit himself to the study of the Old Testament alone. The irresistible force of circumstances, as well as his own intense interest in the study of the Bible as a whole, compelled him, as it has many others, to apply the principles of criticism to the Gospels.

Criticism has advanced in recent years from the lower or textual criticism through the higher or literary criticism to the more serious historical criticism. Harnack's lectures on the Essence of Christianity brought this criticism in a striking manner before the Christian world, and Roman Catholics, no less than Protestants, were obliged to consider it. Loisy has written the best reply to Harnack¹ that has yet appeared, and has given a noble defence of the Roman

¹ *L'Évangile et l'Église*, 2me ed. 1903. *The Bible and the Church*, N.Y. 1904. Loisy defends his position in *Autour d'un petit Livre*, 2me ed. 1903.

Catholic position against Protestantism as well as Rationalism ; but this counts but little with traditionalists, who in his case, as in similar ones with which we are familiar, charge him with yielding so much to the enemy that what remains is of little worth to them. Tradition must be taken in its entirety, or not at all. To discriminate between the official tradition of the Church, and the traditional theories of the theologians is destructive to all theology and criticism. So they say, and so they act, not hesitating to risk the Christianity of the Catholic Church, nay, the Christianity of Jesus and His apostles, upon the correctness of traditional opinions which have never received the sanction of the Church, or of its most distinguished fathers and theologians. The attacks upon Loisy in a literary form are too numerous to mention. Those that have had the widest circulation, so far as I have been able to determine, are those of Bishop Camus,¹ Abbé Frémont,² and the venerable Jesuit theologian Palmieri.³

Camus, in the proud consciousness of his prelacy, writes with authority. The gist of his argument is—Thirty-five years ago I gave a solution of the synoptic problem⁴; it is temerity in you not to agree to it (p. 25). Tradition has once for all settled the question of the Gospel of John (p. 35 seq.); it is infidelity to the Church to question it. Your exegesis is false (p. 121). If your system of theology were true, there would be no supernatural left in Christianity; Christianity would be false (p. 125).

Frémont, as becomes an Abbé, is more modest, yet even he ventures to give a psychological explanation of the errors of Loisy. At the same time he strikes at the root of the matter when he charges Loisy with making a

¹ *Fausse Exégèse, Mauvaise Théologie*, 1904.

² *Lettres à l'Abbé Loisy sur quelques points de l'Écriture Sainte*, 7me ed. 1904.

³ *Se e come i Sinottici ci danno Gesù Cristo per Dio*, 1903, and *Esame d'un opuscolo, il quale gira intorno ad un piccolo libro*, 1904.

⁴ Introduction à la *Vie de N.S.J.C.*

separation between History and Theology, which he himself insists are inseparable (p. 10 seq.). He claims that the study of Biblical History must be carried on in subjection to traditional Theology. He concludes by urging Loisy to resume his studies "under the sunlight of tradition." Then he will no longer "despoil Moses of his Pentateuch or St. John of his Gospel" (pp. 165-166).

Palmieri, as a learned theologian, writes from a dogmatic point of view. When Loisy says that a critic cannot follow any different method in the study of Holy Scripture than he applies to other ancient documents, he replies that Holy Scripture must be studied by a different method by every true Catholic, who is restrained from useless and dangerous labours by the magisterial judgment of the Church, to which God has committed the Scriptures.¹ In the course of his discussions, he goes as far as Billot, Professor of Dogmatics in the Jesuit University, the Gregorian, at Rome, who asserts that it is contrary to sound Catholic doctrine to recognize any lack of knowledge whatever in the human mind of Christ. He admits that this has not been affirmed by any distinct and solemn definition of the Church, but that nevertheless it is the common faith of the Church, and must be adhered to by all who would be Catholic, and remain free from heresy.²

It is more convenient to consider the case of Loisy and his critics by an examination of the criticism of Frémont, who puts it in a less technical and more popular form.

Frémont makes four serious charges against Loisy, which he tries in every way to sustain. The same essentially are found in Camus and Palmieri, though not so well arranged. These are: (1) Loisy finds no sufficient historical evidence that Jesus taught His disciples that He was divine; (2) Loisy finds no sufficient historical evidence that Jesus rose from the dead on the third day, leaving an

¹ *Esame*, p. 28.

² *De Verbo incarnato*, ed. 4, 1905, p. 284 seq.

empty tomb; (3) Loisy finds no sufficient historical evidence that Jesus Himself founded His Church before His resurrection; (4) Loisy regards the fourth Gospel as not an historical composition of St. John, but an allegorical and mystical writing of one of his disciples. There can be no doubt that Frémont searches out the most serious difficulties in the position of Loisy, and that these are accurately and fairly stated. We shall consider them in their order.

1. Loisy holds as firmly to the divinity of Jesus Christ as do his critics; but he bases his conviction on the authority of the Apostles and the Church, and not on the immediate teaching of Christ Himself. Frémont, on the other hand, claims that "if Christ did not Himself clearly affirm that He was God, we could never have any means of knowing it" (p. 15).

My studies of the Gospels convince me that Jesus did in fact teach His disciples that He was divine, and that the apostolic doctrine of the divinity of Christ is based on the teachings of the Master Himself.¹

At the same time, I must admit that this teaching of Jesus is limited to a few statements towards the close of His life; that it is implicit rather than explicit, and that it is not so evident that truth-seeking scholars may not question or even deny it.

Frémont attempts to sustain his position (*a*) by asserting that the term "Son of God" never had merely Messianic significance (p. 22).² Nothing can be more false. The "Son of God" is indeed an older Messianic term than Messiah itself. It is given in the prophecy of Nathan to David.³ It is constantly used in the New Testament in a purely Messianic sense, and if it has any

¹ See *The Incarnation of the Lord*, 1902, pp. 33 seq.

² So Palmieri, *Se e come*, pp. 25 seq.

³ See my *Messianic Prophecy*, 8th ed. 1902, pp. 127 seq.

other, that must be shown from the context, and cannot be inferred from the term itself.

(b) The statement that the Jews condemned Jesus to death, not because He claimed to be the Messiah, but because He claimed to be divine, rests upon nothing more substantial than the interpretation of the term given above, and the assertion of some modern Jewish rabbis, especially in a private visit made by Frémont to some of them in Paris a short time ago (p. 26). The accusation before the Sanhedrim, the statement of Jesus Himself under oath, which was the ground of His condemnation, and the inscription on the cross, all show that He was condemned as King of the Jews, a false Messiah, and not as a false God.

(c) The argument that the apostolic doctrine of the divinity of Christ cannot be explained except from the teaching of Jesus Himself, is a specimen of specious dialectics which would have disfigured the most hair-splitting Pharisaism. Loisy is only one of many distinguished scholars who find no difficulty in tracing the development of the conception of the divinity of Christ out of the Messianic ideals of the Old Testament. Such a development must have taken place at some time or other, and it is no more difficult to find it in the minds of the apostles after than before the resurrection of Jesus.

The question whether Jesus taught His disciples that He was divine must be answered in the negative, if it can only be sustained by such arguments as these. The most that can be said in the present state of our knowledge is that it is possible that Jesus was conscious of His divinity, and taught it to His disciples toward the close of His life; but it is by no means certain. What right, then, has Bishop Camus to assert that Jesus declared that He was God from the first days of His public life, and that it is heretical to deny it? (p. 123). When has the Catholic

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Church declared such a position heretical? And what shall we say of the statement of Frémont, as given above? There is no sufficient evidence to make it certain that Jesus taught His disciples that He was divine. If, as Frémont maintains, no other evidence is competent, then we are forced to the position that it cannot be established at all; and the divinity of Christ can no longer be held as an essential Christian doctrine. Thus Frémont plays into the hands of Harnack.

It is a most remarkable situation that a Roman Catholic divine should make such a statement as this. He asserts that the authority of the Pope, the authority of the Church in its œcumenical councils, are insufficient to establish the divinity of Christ. He represents that the authority of St. Paul, and the other writers of the New Testament, and apostolic traditions are insufficient. Only the authority of Jesus, and that alone, can convince mankind that He is divine. Christianity in this its essence must be built on the words of Jesus in the Gospels, and on these alone. There have been some recent Protestants who have urged to go back to Christ for genuine Christianity, but their views have been rejected by all sober Protestant scholars. The founders of Protestantism and their successors, the Protestant theologians, have insisted that Christianity must be built on the authority of Holy Scripture, and not on the authority of the Church apart from Holy Scripture. They never thought of building Christianity on the words of Jesus alone. It remains for a Roman Catholic divine at the beginning of the twentieth century to do this.

It needs no evidence to show that such a position cannot be approved at Rome. In this case, as in others, the less apparent though dangerous errors of so-called Conservatives, who are loud in their clamour for traditional opinions, are overlooked and condoned, while the minor errors of pro-

gressive scholars are condemned as dangerous because they come into frank and open conflict with superficial and popular traditions.

2. Loisy has no more doubt of the reality of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead than his opponents. He grounds his convictions differently. Loisy says: "The message of Easter (that is to say, the discovery of the empty tomb, and the appearance of Jesus to His disciples, so far as these facts are taken for physical proofs of the Resurrection) is not an irrefutable argument from which the historian can conclude with entire certainty that the Saviour rose in the body from the dead. The case is not one that can supply complete proof" (p. 131). This careful and accurate statement ought not to be questioned. Yet Frémont insists upon the reality of the physical resurrection of Christ, as so firmly established by the narrative of the Gospels, that it is boundless temerity to question it (p. 38).

My studies of the Gospels convince me of the reality of the resurrection of the body of Jesus,¹ yet I cannot say that the evidence is historically so strong that it is temerity to question it, or that it is of essential importance that the evidence should be historically unimpeachable, or that it is necessary to ground the doctrine on the Gospels alone.

It is not altogether reasonable for Frémont to appeal to St. Paul against Loisy, when he himself regards the testimony of the Gospels as alone sufficient and indubitable. But in fact the appeal to St. Paul does not help him, for St. Paul puts all the appearances of Christ which he mentions in the same class as the appearance to himself. The latter occurred some years after the entombment of Christ, and was a Christophany. The statement of St. Paul is that there were many Christophanic appearances of Jesus to the disciples. He does not expressly say that

¹ See *New Light on the Life of Jesus*, pp. 110 seq.

there was a physical resurrection of Jesus from the tomb. Loisy recognizes that "the apostles, even St. Paul, had no conception of an immortality distinct from bodily resurrection. The message of Easter and the faith of Easter have for them the same object and the same significance" (p. 133). But Loisy very properly distinguishes between the two, and this his critics refuse to do.

It is well known that the conclusion of Mark's Gospel is a late addition to it, and that the original Gospel, as it has been preserved for us, gives no such precise statements as to a physical resurrection of Jesus from the tomb as the theory of Frémont demands. The statements of the other Gospels are regarded by critics as coming not from the original Gospels of Mark and Matthew, but as due to the authors of the present Gospels. Under these circumstances they cannot be regarded as historically so unquestionable as to matters of fact as they are as to the faith of the writers and their times. Furthermore, the appearances of Jesus as described in the Gospels are extraordinary. He appears to the disciples and disappears at pleasure. He is not recognized even by His most intimate associates until He makes Himself known. He enters and departs from closed rooms without regard to doors or walls. He rises from the earth and disappears in the sky without regard to the laws of gravitation. Granting the historicity of all these statements, they do not describe such a physical human body as is otherwise known to mankind. They tell of a body of entirely different properties from that of Jesus' before it was laid in the tomb. Was it the same body? If so, in what respect was it the same? Can we truly say that these narrations give indubitable evidence as to a physical resurrection of Jesus, and His empty tomb?

The Christian doctrine of the resurrection of Christ implies the resurrection of the same body of Jesus that was

laid in the tomb, and indeed a resurrection of that body as flesh and blood, and not a merely ghostly body. Loisy does not doubt that any more than his opponents. The simple question is, whether the historical evidence of the observation of the witness is sufficient to prove and verify it apart from the faith of the apostles. Here again it is a remarkable situation that a Roman Catholic divine, in a writing approved by two Cardinals, should depreciate the evidential value of faith, and exaggerate that of the observation of the human senses. Frémont makes the whole doctrine of the Resurrection of Christ rest upon the accuracy of the observations of the witnesses of the resurrection. He does not see, even when Loisy suggests it to him, that those witnesses were all of Christophanic appearances of the risen Christ, and that the inspection of His tomb was limited in the original Mark to three women who are amazed by the appearance of an angel (Mark 16. 1-8), and in the later edition either to Peter alone (Luke 24. 12), or Peter and another unnamed disciple (John 20. 3-9), when in great excitement they ran thither on the report of the Magdalene. Their inspection was not made in any such thoroughness as to make it certain that there was an empty tomb, and there were no witnesses at all of the act of resurrection itself. The narrative of Matthew reports a great earthquake and the angel rolling away the stone door of the tomb in the same way as it narrates the other events; this one having therefore the same historical probability as the other, no more and no less.

However much we may regret the situation, we must make the best of it. If the doctrine of the Resurrection of Jesus must rest upon the accuracy of the observation of the act of physical resurrection, it has slight historical support. It is only when, as Loisy says, we add to it the evidence of the faith of the apostles, that the doctrine of the fact can be assured. Palmieri refuses to make this

distinction,¹ and argues as if all Christophanies were evidences of the bodily resurrection of Jesus, and His empty tomb. It is strange indeed that a divine so learned in other respects, so accustomed to make hair-splitting scholastic distinctions, should be unable to see these evident distinctions of historical criticism. It is indeed an additional evidence to the many others that we have had in recent times that however competent a scholar may be in Scholastic Theology, he may not be so competent in Biblical Theology or Biblical Criticism.

The fact of the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead in the same body that was laid in the tomb is in no peril any more than the dogma, unless we persist in insisting that it must rest upon the observation of eye-witnesses, and refuse to take into consideration the evidence of the faith of the apostles. The latter is based upon numerous Christophanic appearances, the essential connection of the resurrection of Christ with the resurrection of mankind, and the implications of other important doctrines of Christianity. What was the precise character of the risen and glorified body of Jesus, as distinguished from His body before it was laid in the grave, is a problem of Theology which has not yet been determined; and it is temerity for dogmatic divines to make rash statements about it.

3. Loisy affirms that the Church was founded by the apostles under the authority of Jesus Christ, but he denies that Jesus Himself founded the Church prior to His resurrection. Frémont, on the other hand, asserts that Christ Himself instituted and founded the Church before His resurrection. "It existed from the moment when Jesus, master of the future as of the present, said, 'Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church'" (p. 96). "Behold the words, express and imperishable, which have founded the Church" (p. 97). So Camus: "It is exegeti-

¹ *Esame*, p. 23.

cally false to say that the Church was not directly founded by Him, with its first organization, its government, and the principles of authority necessary to its development in the world" (p. 124). So virtually, though more cautiously, Palmieri.¹

Frémont is obliged to admit that the Church did not enter into the exercise of its functions until after the ascension of Christ, that Jesus must remain until then the only direct and formal chief of His Church, but insists that St. Peter's appointment as the primate of the Church was the real institution of the Church, even though he did not in fact become its direct and formal chief until the ascension. Surely this is a playing with words. The promise to St. Peter is one thing, the fulfilment of that promise is another. Jesus said, "Upon this rock I *will* build my Church." He did not say, "Upon this rock I *do now* build my Church," which could not have been said in fact before Pentecost. The question is whether Jesus proposed to establish His Church after His resurrection, or whether He in fact established it before His resurrection. Surely there can be but one answer to this question, and that the answer of Loisy, and not that of his critics.

Here again we meet with the same fault that we have found already in this remarkable book, namely, the un-historical and the uncatholic position, that it is necessary to establish the principles of Christianity in the immediate teachings and institutions of Jesus Christ Himself. Granted that Jesus saw in St. Peter the entire system of the papal constitution of the Church; in the Twelve, the entire historical hierarchy; in the gift of the keys, the entire government and discipline of historical Christianity; what matters it, one might say, whether Jesus Himself began to realize His programme by instituting the Church Himself, or whether He instructed His disciples to organize it after

¹ *Esame*, p. 124.

His resurrection? What matters it? It matters much. The former position, that of Frémont and Palmieri, ignores Pentecost, dishonours the work of the Divine Spirit in the apostolic Church, and makes the institution of the Church rest upon Jesus Himself. The latter position, that of Loisy, recognizes the importance of Pentecost, accredits the work of the Divine Spirit in the Church from that time onward, and affirms that the teachings and institutions of the Divine Spirit are as truly those of the risen and glorified Christ, the ever living King and Head of the Church, as the teachings and institutions of the Master before His enthronement were those of the historic Christ.

4. Loisy holds a very special and somewhat peculiar position with reference to the Fourth Gospel, when he asserts that it is altogether allegorical and mystic in its narratives as well as in its discourses. But those who, like Camus and Frémont, insist upon the superficial, traditional theory of the Gospels which the Church has never officially approved, and demand that all study of the Gospels shall be in subordination to that theory, and claim in accordance therewith that the entire Gospel of St. John was written by the Apostle, and that its teachings are to be put on the same level of historicity as those of the Synoptic Gospels—such men as these, laden with antiquated notions, ignoring the investigations of a multitude of scholars for more than a century, are not sufficiently accredited to make a successful exposition of Loisy's errors.

The Fourth Gospel is the most difficult writing in the New Testament. Scholars are greatly perplexed with its problems, and there is no consensus among them. Was this Gospel written by St. John in his old age, or by a disciple under his direction, or by one or more disciples after his death, or can we distinguish an original John underlying the present work of his disciples? I myself

hold the last of these opinions, but I am about as isolated in it as Loisy is in his opinion.

Notwithstanding all this discord as to authorship, there is general consensus in one thing, namely, that the discourses of Jesus as given in the Fourth Gospel are not, either in form or doctrinal substance, exactly those of Jesus Himself. It is commonly recognized that there are strong mystic, allegorical and didactical elements which did not come from the Master. How far do these elements extend? That is the only question. Loisy pushes the allegorical element to such an extreme that few will agree with him. But even so, he is nearer to the facts of the case than those few reactionaries who deny the allegorical element altogether.

Loisy does not deny that this Gospel gives us a true and reliable statement of the faith of the apostolic Church at the close of the first century. He does not deny that its teaching was inspired by the Divine Spirit, or that it interprets correctly the mind of the risen and glorified Lord. What he denies is that Jesus Himself during His earthly life uttered those discourses. However serious the fault of Loisy may be, it is not so serious, or so perilous to Christianity, as that of Camus and Frémont, who insist upon the equal historicity of the Fourth Gospel with the Synoptic Gospels, and thus force them into such irreconcilable conflict that they become mutually destructive.

One can hardly believe that such a serious, able and scholarly piece of work as that of Abbé Loisy has been condemned, even if there are minor errors contained in it, when such a writing as that of Frémont, superficial, unscholarly and abounding in serious errors, which undermine and imperil the common faith of the Protestant and Catholic world alike, has been approved by two Cardinal prelates of France, and allowed to appear in a seventh edition without the rebuke of its author by the higher powers.

5. There is one other question in this debate that we cannot ignore, namely, whether Jesus grew in knowledge during His earthly life, and whether He did not know the day or hour of His advent to judgment as Loisy maintains; or whether Jesus from the beginning of His earthly life was omniscient in His human mind, as Palmieri and Billot contend. This question seems to have been determined by the Gospels themselves in favour of Loisy, when they say, "Jesus advanced in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men" (Luke 2. 52); and, "But of that day or that hour knoweth no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13. 32). And yet Billot does not hesitate to pronounce the views of Loisy heretical, and to insist that the true Catholic doctrine is, that the human mind of Jesus was omniscient from the beginning.¹ He and Palmieri agree that Jesus knew the day and hour of His advent, but that His knowledge was not one that He could communicate to His disciples, and therefore He said to them that He did not know. Thus these Jesuit divines save the omniscience of Christ, but at the expense of His veracity! Loisy's views seem to them to lead to Nestorianism. They are altogether unconscious of the fact that their own views tend still more decidedly towards Monophysitism; for when they make the human mind of Jesus omniscient from the beginning, it differs from the Divine mind not in content, but only in form and in name, and the life of Jesus becomes really a Divine life on earth, of which His human nature is nothing more than a passive vehicle.

The questions in debate between Loisy and His critics are questions in which the entire Christian world is interested. They were raised by Harnack, the chief Church historian of Germany, and they will not be put down. They must be determined in the fair field of scholarly dis-

¹ *De Verbo incarnato*, p. 233 seq.

cussion ; they cannot be determined by an appeal to floating traditions which may be the common opinion and the common teaching of theologians, but have not been verified and endorsed by the Catholic Church.

The solution that Harnack gives is destructive to historic Christianity. He gives a Christianity, as his German critics rightly say, without Christ. He gives a Christianity to which a Jew, or a Mohammedan, or any monotheistic Oriental would find little difficulty in subscribing. Loisy defends against him the rights of faith and of the authority of the Church, at the same time advocating the rights of historical criticism. He endeavours to reconcile them, and give them their legitimate position and relation the one to the other. For this he deserves the thanks of the Christian world. The Church is not to be blamed for refusing to be responsible for many of the positions which he has taken in the course of his frank and searching investigations of the most difficult problems of our age.

The placing of his books on the Index, however mistaken it may be, does not mean anything more than this. It is not a condemnation of Historical Criticism and its methods, and a re-affirmation of the authority of common tradition, as Billot, Palmieri, Frémont and Camus would have it. At the same time, it would be extremely dangerous to the future of Christianity if the Catholic Church should become compromised by an apparent discrediting of his main position in his argument against Harnack, and if the position of his critics should seem to be approved or even condoned. For Christian scholars, Catholic and Protestant alike, are asking such questions as these : Is there no place in the Catholic Church for historic criticism ? Has the common opinion of the Church, in matters that have not been officially defined, to rule in all questions of exegesis and criticism ? Must a Catholic accept the entire tradition as to the authorship, dates and literary characteristics

of the Biblical Books? Is it necessary to hold that the human mind of Jesus was omniscient from birth, and must we hold that opinion even at the cost of recognizing that Jesus was insincere with His Apostle? Is it essential to faith in the divinity of Christ that He should have declared His divinity to His apostles? Must the resurrection of Jesus be based on the testimony of eye-witnesses alone? Does the institution and Divine authority of the Church depend on its immediate institution by Christ Himself before His resurrection? Modern Biblical and historical scholarship answers all these questions in the negative. Roman Catholic scholars in France and Germany, in England and America and in Rome, agree in this respect with Protestant scholars. To answer them in the affirmative, as do the critics of Loisy, forces them into irreconcilable conflict with the best results of modern thought, which are sure to prevail, whatever reactionary theologians, Roman Catholic or Protestant, may say about them. If Loisy's views are destructive, those of his critics are still more so. Loisy's views are destructive of those accretions of error which the common tradition of the Church ever spreads over the substantial verities of Christianity, and they bring out more distinctly the tradition of the original deposit of truth and fact. The theories of his critics are destructive of Christianity itself, because they mingle in the tradition the true and false, and lay such stress upon the false that they imperil the stability of the structure, and make it appear to those scholars and people who are not well grounded in Christian faith that the whole fabric of Christianity is tottering to its fall.

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