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Harvey Hill, Louis-Pierre Sardella, and C. J. T. Talar, *By Those Who Knew Them: French Modernists Left, Right, and Center*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008. 198 pp. \$59.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0-8132-1537-2.

Review by Darrell Jodock, Gustavus Adolphus College.

Between 1890 and 1910 a handful of Roman Catholic theologians in France, and elsewhere in Europe, proposed reforms in the teachings of the church. They advocated a historical study of both the Scriptures and the formation of doctrine. By its very nature, such a study acknowledged change and development over time, and this recognition led them to argue that the basic insights of revelation could be distinguished from their traditional, but historically conditioned, formulations. Hence, those formulations could and should be re-thought. These theologians came to be known as Modernists and were opposed by neo-scholastic theologians who regarded the teachings of the church to be unchanging. For them, the essentials remained constant; only non-essentials changed. Doctrinal formulations were simply an unpacking of the original revelation and a faithful reproduction of that revelation. To suggest changes in the formulations was, in their eyes, to propose that revelation itself be altered or abandoned. The theological debate that emerged was interlaced with other disagreements: about the relationship between modern culture and Catholic teaching, about the authority of the papacy over against the authority of the French bishops, about the church's role in education, and about church-state relations. What made things particularly difficult for the Modernists was the legacy of two nineteenth-century developments: Pope Pius IX's defensive citadel mentality that viewed modernity in general as a threat and Pope Leo XIII's endorsement of scholastic philosophy as a safeguard against the corrosions of modern thought.

Scholars who study the Modernists today usually agree that they were not a theological "school" propounding uniform teachings. They were probing new ways of thinking about theology. While some stayed in touch with each other via letters and journal articles, their contacts yielded intellectual inspiration, ecclesiastical advice, and personal encouragement, not uniformity. It was Pope Pius X who defined and condemned "Modernism" as a system of thought. He did so in his 1907 encyclical, *Pascendi dominici gregis*, which prohibited anyone who espoused Modernist ideas from teaching at a seminary or university and also established "Councils of Vigilance" in each diocese to report to the Vatican any evidence of Modernism. To this Pius X added in 1910 an anti-Modernism oath which was required of every priest and professor of theology. This oath had long-term consequences, effectively shutting down the historical study of the Bible and much theological creativity for the next three decades. Because Pius X's definition of Modernism was not exemplified by the Modernists themselves, it has presented problems for historians. Do they use the term "Modernism" in his sense? Or do they define it in such a way as to be more faithful to the Modernists themselves? If a historian decides to follow the second path, another difficulty emerges: the diversity of outlooks among those considered to be Modernists. Who is to be included and who is not?

The purpose of *By Those Who Knew Them* is to examine several persons considered to be Modernists and to do so through the eyes of persons who knew them. That is, there is a two-fold examination occurring: a profiling of a sample of French Modernists and an assessment of the character, purposes,

and accuracy of their first biographers and others who described them. One person the book examines is Joseph Turmel, a patristics scholar whose works were placed on the Index in 1909 (not excommunicated until 1930), and a biography of him by Félix Sartiaux, a layman, railroad worker, and friend. It goes on to consider Marcel Hébert, a priest, a philosopher, and a teacher at the *École Fénelon* before he left the Church in 1903, and the biography written by his friend and church historian, Albert Houtin. The next to be considered is Pierre Batiffol, a chaplain at a girls' school and then for a time director of the Toulouse Institut catholique, and his biographer Jean Rivière, professor of dogmatic theology at a seminary in Albi and then professor at the Faculté catholique de Strasbourg. Turmel, Hébert, and Batiffol are not as well known as the next person discussed in the book: Alfred Loisy, as seen through the eyes of Albert Houtin and Henri Bremond, spiritual writer and a Jesuit until his resignation in 1904. Loisy's writings were at the center of the controversy until he was excommunicated in 1908. The final figure is Mgr. Eudoxe Irénée Mignot, bishop of Fréjus and archbishop of Albi, as seen through three portraits provided by Abbé Louis de Lacger, Père Lecannet, and Baron Friedrich von Hügel (whose extensive correspondence and progressive ideas earned him a significant role in the Modernist movement).

The book makes at least two claims. The first is that "an understanding of Modernism, which entails an understanding of historical consciousness and pluralism—dominant issues over the twentieth century—is necessary for any measured appreciation of Vatican II, in terms of the issues it addressed and the places where it was creatively innovative as well as where it remained in strong continuity with the past" (p. 3). The second is that "the Modernist Crisis...stemmed not only from divergent interpretations of the Bible and the Christian tradition, but also from the particular personalities involved" (p. 4). Not only does the book focus on personalities, but it also allows us to see those personalities through the eyes of others. The reader gains a glimpse of the complex network of relationships at work in Catholic France and the divergent or overlapping judgments that affected the development of Modernist thought. What divided one thinker from another is as revealing as what they had in common.

Professors Talar (St. Mary's Seminary) and Hill (Berry College) describe Modernism as a "call for reform: intellectual reform in philosophy (especially as that bore upon apologetics); academic reform in biblical and historical studies (utilizing the historical critical method), with implications for the understanding of dogma and its development; and structural reform insofar as Catholicism needed to come to terms with democratic forms of organization" (pp. 1-2). They go on to identify both what unites and what distinguishes those Modernists who are considered in this book. The French Modernists, Talar and Hill say, "shared a common question, which was certainly characteristic of Modernism more generally: How should one relate the findings of modern scholarship, especially critical history, to the inherited doctrine and theology of the Church" (p. 5)? United by this common question, the group under consideration in this book can be divided into three tendencies: left, right, and center. Those on the left (Houtin, Turmel, and Hébert) "accorded full authority to critical history and insisted that it discredited Catholic theology" (p. 6). Those on the right (Pierre Batiffol and Jean Rivière) "believed in the possibility of reconciling history and theological orthodoxy in a way that did not require the radical reformulation of Catholic teaching" (p. 9). For them orthodox doctrine provided limits for the results of critical historical study, thereby protecting certain traditional teachings from reform. In the center was Alfred Loisy during the years while he was still a Catholic. He, Mignot, and Bremond "rejected the notion shared by Modernists to their left and their right that critical history and Catholic theology in its contemporary form had to agree.... [T]hey looked to a future theology informed by—indeed reformed by—modern critical scholarship as the best grounds for their loyalty to the Church" (p. 11).

This way of characterizing the French Modernists under consideration provides a helpful way to organize the book. Talar and Hill clearly define what unites and what separates the three groups of Modernists. However, when all three groups are called "Modernists," a problematic conception of

“Modernism” is at work. The book’s operative definition is that Modernism affirmed the importance of modern scholarship. The problem, first of all, is that this includes those on the left, who reject Catholic theology and revealed religion altogether. They endorsed secular modern culture at the expense of Catholic theology and were thus cultural modernists (with a small “m”) but not theological Modernists (with a capital “M”). They were rationalists (p. 5) and freethinkers. In the name of intellectual honesty, they insisted on the incompatibility of modern thought and Catholic theology and rejected the very possibility of theological reform. In effect, they continued to assume that neo-scholastic theology had correctly formulated Catholic teaching, and when historical study rendered it untenable, they gave up on the faith. In their eyes those who claimed to retain their faith were either naïve or deceptive. One can understand how those on the left arrived at this position, but should they be called “Modernists”? I think not. In my view, whatever else Modernism was, it was a *theological* movement, and as such its members affirmed the Catholic faith and desired to work out a revised version of Catholic teaching. Their reform-oriented task was theological through and through. To abandon the desire to reform theology was to cease to be a Modernist. The book’s delineation of the Modernists is thus too broad. By including those on the left, one essential feature of Modernism has been obscured. A reviewer could also object to the inclusion of those on the right. They too remained loyal to neo-scholastic theology. But here the problem is slightly less serious. Though their probing were more cautious, these theologians were still doing theology.

There is a second problem with the book’s operative definition. We have already indicated that the definition of Modernism propounded by Pius X did not describe the Modernists. The one group that came closest to fitting Pius’ definition was those said here to be on the left. If the papal definition described one group (those on the left) and not the other (those in the center), then calling both groups by the same name (Modernists) continues the conceptual confusion introduced by Pius’ encyclical. Moreover, doing so also seems to make plausible Pius X’s claim that Modernism, as espoused by those in the center, was inherently unstable and would lead inevitably to atheism—a claim that seems adequately refuted by the many non-neo-scholastic mainline Catholic theologies that have been developed since the 1940s. Those on the left and the anti-Modernists appear to have understood Catholic teaching in the same way—only in one case affirming it and in the other rejecting it. Both agreed that Loisy and Modernists in the center were “treacherous Catholics inspired by a perversity of mind that stemmed from excessive curiosity and especially from pride” (p. 121). It is hard to see why those on the left should be called Modernists. It seems to perpetuate the confusion brought about by competing definitions.

However my judgments about a workable definition of “Modernism” may differ from those of the authors, this is a valuable book. Though the book contains the writing of three authors, it coheres remarkably well, almost as if written by one. The chapters are easy to follow. They provide multiple perspectives on the personalities under discussion. Sufficient attention is given to the ideas of the historical figures to understand what was at stake in the controversies. We learn much. It is no discredit to this volume to observe that, if a reader is looking for a scholarly treatment of the philosophical and theological ideas at stake or the technical details involved in the controversy, it may not be the first place to look. But it is a good place to uncover how deeply embedded some of those ideas were in the personal experiences and inter-personal interactions of the French Modernists.

One of the interesting themes that runs through the book is the question of sincerity. When assessing these figures, much rides on the question of who was sincere and who was not and how important sincerity was. Joseph Turmel continued to function as a priest even though he had lost his faith and was writing pseudonymous articles to campaign against Catholic doctrine. When challenged, he denied doing so. Uncovering the truth about the vacuousness of Catholic teaching, he thought, was more important than admitting his own convictions to the Catholic authorities. Albert Houtin accused Loisy of merely pretending for twenty years prior to his excommunication to be committed to the Church—something that Loisy denied. Harvey Hill finds no reason to doubt Loisy’s sincerity. The charges and

counter-charges are frequent and illustrate the complexity of the personal stories and personal relationships already mentioned.

Given the quality of work found in this volume, it is perhaps a little “greedy” to want still more. But one thing that deserves more attention is a fuller description of the historical context of the biographies. Most seem to have been written between about 1925 and 1933. Two questions arise. How did the official anti-Modernism then in place affect what was said? For example, a reader can surmise how the context prompted some of the biographers shield themselves via claims to give an objective account, but what other influences did it have? Was there something about this particular time that prompted books about the Modernists to be written? If so, how did this motivation influence their portraits? In 1976, a Roman Catholic Modernism Group was formed within the American Academy of Religion. Over the next 22 years a fairly consistent core membership shared the results of their research and debated the scholarly issues related to understanding and interpreting the Modernists and anti-Modernists. These members included historians, philosophers, biblical scholars, and theologians. In the early years what motivated many of the participants was the sense that the decisions of Vatican Council II were an outgrowth of what the Modernists put into motion. The Modernists had, in that sense, been rehabilitated. As the work of the Group matured, the Group gave more and more attention to the role of the Modernists in their own historical context. I would guess that the “state of affairs” in the Church around 1925-33 made it very difficult to consider the role of the Modernists in their own day without a watchful eye on the constraints imposed by subsequent official decisions. This book gives some attention to that difficulty and its effects, but I am left wishing for still more. Perhaps my wish is a compliment to the accomplishments of this volume; it invites the reader to explore questions that move one step beyond its own boundaries.

#### LIST OF ESSAYS

C. J. T. Talar and Harvey Hill, “Introduction”

##### Part One: The Left

C. J. T. Talar, “The Morality of Apostasy: Félix Sartiaux’s Biography of Joseph Turmel”

C. J. T. Talar, “An Ideal Modernist: Marcel Hébert”

##### Part Two: The Right

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Harvey Hill, “Houtin’s Loisy: The Construction of a Modernist”

Harvey Hill, “In Defense of Loisy’s Mysticism: Bremond’s Modernist Confession”

Louis-Pierre Sardella, “Mgr. Mignot, the ‘Ultimate Modernist’?”

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