

AN ORTHODOX HERESIARCH?

“I SEE so increasingly plainly the triple fault and undermining character of my influence . . . If only I had looked out against the selfishness of leaning on one whom I ought to have propped still for many a day! I have dropped my own child, my first-born, whom God gave me to carry and to guard . . . ”

These words occur in the poignant appeal which Baron von Hügel addressed to his newly-found friend, Father George Tyrrell, S.J., in 1897. The Baron, lonely in his unique intellectual and spiritual greatness, hungry for companionship and understanding, had made his twenty-year-old daughter his confidant and the close sharer of his mental strife. In so doing he had wrecked her health and her faith, and he turned to Father Tyrrell to help her in her need. Tyrrell responded nobly and wisely, and wrote to von Hügel:

You neglect St. Paul’s caution against giving to babies the solid food of adults. The result is indigestion. Things that your formed mind can easily swallow, without any prejudice to simple faith, may really cause much uneasiness in a mind less prepared.

Had Tyrrell himself in later years followed the advice he then gave to the Baroness Gertrud, the tragic story which Miss Petre now unfolds,¹ in publishing the correspondence between Tyrrell and von Hügel, would never have been told. But neither of the two men could then have guessed that Father Tyrrell was himself to fall a victim to the “undermining character” of the saintly Baron’s influence and to the indiscretions of his voracious and inconsiderate appetite for intellectual companionship.

For that is the story which these letters, ably edited and linked together by Miss Petre, go to tell. Doubtless, when it is possible to publish yet more intimate letters of the Tyrrell of those times, it will be seen more clearly that other

¹ *Von Hügel and Tyrrell: The Story of a Friendship* by M. D. Petre, Preface by Canon Lilley (Dent; 7s. 6d.).

factors, still more potent than the Baron's imprudences, were contributing to his final tragedy. But Miss Petre is justly indignant with those who would maintain that it was Tyrrell who misled the Baron and not the Baron who misled Tyrrell, and her book proves beyond quibble that, as a recent BLACKFRIARS contributor has put it, von Hügel was "at times a most imprudent director for adventurous souls who had far less grasp of fundamental truths than himself."² "I should smile," writes Miss Petre, "if it did not make me feel rather angry, when some of von Hügel's admirers suggest that he was drawn into dangerous positions by Tyrrell." The letters show, beyond all doubt, that it was the inconsiderate importunity of von Hügel that drove Tyrrell into studies for which he was totally unequipped intellectually and spiritually.

"Von Hügel's main religious interest was twofold—mysticism and historical criticism. On the first of these subjects he both consulted and advised his friend—they met as equals—but on the second Tyrrell had all to learn from von Hügel, who was eager to make him a sharer in his own studies." (p. 74.) "Eager" is hardly the word; the Baron, profoundly concerned at the official theologians' indifference to the findings and theories of the Biblical criticism of the day, was positively insistent that Tyrrell should get to grips with the problems which it raised. Tyrrell seems to have been fully aware of his incompetence, and refers to "the resolve I made some years ago to turn away from a question so far beyond my ability and leisure, in which I should only be at the mercy of others more expert than myself." (p. 73.) That was in 1898, and again in 1900 he writes: "I am dreadfully deficient in all that matter, because consciousness of its vastness had made me dread to dabble in it." (p. 76.) But von Hügel was adamant; Tyrrell must read and digest the works, not only of Loisy, but still more of the German critics: "I really cannot resign myself, without protest, to your not mastering German." And again, "Work, work away at your German, *mind*, and please!" Tyrrell obeyed,

² *The Faith of Baron von Hügel*, by Aelfric Manson, O.P., BLACKFRIARS, April, 1937, p. 286 ff.

soon got completely out of his depth, and floundered hopelessly. How much he floundered, and how far already he had gone towards Modernism in the most strict and *doctrinal* sense of the word, is revealed in a pathetic and profoundly significant letter of January 3rd, 1902 (pp. 100-102):

Your letter is simply bewildering in the multiplicity and intensity of its interests and I hardly know where to begin. Also I should trespass not merely on your time, but, what is worse, on your attention, were I to launch out on certain oceans of thought which it suggests, in which my wanderings are too rudderless and haphazard to be worth chronicling . . . I have carefully read and studied his (Loisy's) *Etudes*, his *Religion d'Israel*, and his articles in the *Revue d'Histoire* on Genesis and Babylonian myths; whence I draw this principle: Inspiration means the progressive spiritualising and refining of those gross embodiments in which man expresses his own ideas and sentiments about God. Thus the Eucharist is the last refinement of an idea originally gross and superstitious—the idea of sacrifice, partly refined in the Law: further, in prophets, finally in Christ. Christ's whole "revelation" was little else but a further correction of the better sort of religion which he found in Israel. The "Our Father" was not new in words, but He put a new meaning to it . . . The principle is plain but we shrink from its consistent application, because we secretly think the *material* sense is *true*, and the spiritual unreal—the husks appeal to our mental appetite, but the Manna of Angels is thin food for mortal stomachs.

There is much more evidence in these pages of how von Hügel's indiscretion damaged Tyrrell's faith. Eventually the Baron himself scents the harm he has done: "I felt how that I had urged too much or too rapidly upon you the Wernle-Troeltsch-Weiss-Loisy contention as to the large element of Hereafter and Non-morality in the First Form of Christianity." But he adds: "I am deeply conscious how that, in my own case, it has been the merciful condescension of God, which has generally given me my spiritual and mental food so piecemeal in such manageable and far-between fragments, which has also by this enabled me to keep and improve and add to, I hope and think, my convictions (and their centre and life-giving power) as to Him, and Our Lord, and His Church." (pp. 111-112.)

Setting aside the devoted hero-worship contained in it, few will wish to dissent from Miss Petre's own estimate of

the responsibility of von Hügel for the tragedy of Tyrrell: "Knowing both men as I did, I regret the Baron's insistent effort to share that particular interest of his own with one whose proper field of action was elsewhere." (p. 120.)

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Had Miss Petre been content with this correction of misapprehensions regarding the Tyrrell-von Hügel friendship, we could have welcomed this tribute of loyalty to her hero without comment. Nor could the most devoted admirer of von Hügel complain at the incidental revelation of his imprudences. But this book runs additional thesis, and one which the letters it contains do little to justify. Not only, the book would have us believe, did the Baron drive Tyrrell out of his depth; he led him there and then, for unworthy motives, left him there to drown while he himself swam for safety.

Miss Petre insists that she wants "not to hit the baron with the stones which some of his friends have aimed at Tyrrell," but such passages as the following indicate her feelings:

The best leaders are led, even while they lead; von Hügel had a place for each one in his scheme, and was apt to sacrifice the man for the scheme. (p. 6.)

Von Hügel's measures were diplomatic and Tyrrell's were, when he saw no other way, militant . . . Tyrrell was a man with an eye for moral as well as intellectual problems; and for that reason I have always regretted his wanderings into the subject of history and criticism. Von Hügel, on the contrary, had a horror of such problems. (p. 8, 9.)

Von Hügel was, as I have said, a born diplomatist, and where Tyrrell sensed a tragedy von Hügel sensed a complication, to be dealt with politically so far as possible . . . He was also a keen strategist, and he soon become anxious lest others should mar his plan of campaign by any impetuous movement. (p. 104.)

Von Hügel was not a man who trusted anything to chance . . . And since the plan of his life was to promote the cause of truth *within the Church*, he was not prepared to give up either the truth or the Church because things were going badly. But in 1904 and onwards this became, given his own conviction as to where the truth lay, extremely difficult. It would have been most easy to incur condemnation, and, indeed, how he managed to escape it has been a puzzle to many ever since.

His very escape shocked some of his friends, but, on the whole,

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they recognized that his reasons were honourable, and that it was not in the interests of self-defence that he seemed to waver.

“Is this man, who has been to me as my own conscience, a coward?” Tyrrell once said to me.

But he said it, not because he thought it, but because he was staggered for the moment. (pp. 145-6.)

Von Hügel had two other definite reasons for caution—one was that, as a married man, he owed something to his wife and his family; the other was that his great life-work on *The Mystical Element of Religion* might easily suffer shipwreck if its author incurred condemnation. (p. 147.)

This is not a pretty picture, and it cannot be denied that colour is given to it by the Baron's inconsistent attitude regarding the continuation of the Modernist review *Rinnovamento* which, Miss Petre says, “has always seemed to me one of the less noble episodes in von Hügel's career.” (p. 165, cf. pp. 166 and 197-8.)

Yet, is the picture fair? Is there not another and less unworthy explanation of the facts? Is it not at least possible that the Baron was not a Modernist in the sense in which Tyrrell was, and that his persistence on remaining within the Church was due to some consideration higher than those here suggested?—that, convinced as he was of his mission to harmonize what he believed to be the certain results of contemporary science with the Faith, and to do all he could for that end, he did not deem it (as does Miss Petre) “heroism” to prefer his most sacred private convictions to the definitive utterance of the Church? May it not be true that, whereas (as is here made clear) Tyrrell was prepared for schism from the Church so soon as he reached his own wild and fantastic conclusions from his study of historical criticism, von Hügel was never so prepared were matters to come to that final dilemma? These letters, taken by themselves, will not shake the conviction of many of us that, for all his imprudences and intellectual daring, von Hügel never ceased to be a humble and faithful Catholic at heart. They also make it clear that Tyrrell had demolished the very foundations of his faith at least as early as January, 1902—the letter we have already quoted is sufficient evidence.

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Was von Hügel a Modernist? It is in answering this question that Miss Petre is least satisfactory, and we suggest that it is her failure to see the answer to it that leads her to paint so disagreeable picture of the Baron. She writes:

The question has been raised, and re-raised, as to whether von Hügel was a Modernist. I am quite willing to admit that he was *not*, provided I may add the rider, in accordance with what I have already said, that there was no such thing as a Modernist. Modernism—yes; Modernist—no! Modernism was a movement, and a movement is not a sect. The differences in beginning, course, and issue of the different movers in this movement is proof of what I say. An “ist” implies a definite character, and, in the case of religion, a sectarian one. None of them were sectarian, but as to the movement—well, if von Hügel did not have a part in it, who did? (pp. 8-9.)

And of what Modernism was, Miss Petre had already written:

Modernism, in the Roman Catholic Church, was a movement, at the end of the last and the beginning of the present century, amongst certain members thereof, in favour of fuller recognition, on the part of the Church, of the social, historical and scientific demands of the modern mind. (pp. 1-2.)

If this be so, and this be all, then of course von Hügel was a Modernist, and most of us would be proud to be called such. But it was not this that was condemned by the official voice of the Church in the Decree *Lamentabili*, in the Encyclical *Pascendi* and the *Motu Proprio Sacrorum Antistitum*. Modernism, as finally condemned by the Church, was not a movement but a *doctrine*, or rather a system of doctrines which struck at the very foundations of Christianity and of all revealed religion. Tyrrell, Loisy and the rest were condemned not because they sought a “fuller recognition on the part of the Church of the social, historical and scientific demands of the modern mind,” but because they reached and held tenaciously to doctrines which falsified the inmost meaning of the Christian Scriptures and Creeds. A movement, indeed, Modernism was, but it was a movement that led some of its participants into error from which others escaped. It is this essential point that Miss Petre has missed.

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That Tyrrell was, in this most strict and *doctrinal* sense of the word, a Modernist, there can be no denying, and these letters bring additional evidence as to how early he laid in his own mind the basis of a distinctive Modernist creed. If it is to be shown that von Hügel was likewise a Modernist, it must be shown that he too held pertinaciously, (and did not merely toy inconsistently with,) the same disastrous doctrines. There is little or no evidence in these letters that he did so. Rather do they indicate that he himself was never in the "darkness" into which his inconsiderateness had helped to drive his friend. (cf. p. 112.)

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In these days of crisis and anxiety men have tired of the God without Thunder of the Liberals, and the hollowness even of the Weiss eschatologism with which some of the Modernists hoped to provide a link between German criticism and Catholic supernaturalism is patently evident. In Protestantism itself the emptiness of any form of immanentism has been ruthlessly exposed by men like Barth and Brunner, and the preoccupations of the Modernists seems strangely remote and unreal. But Miss Petre would seem to have us believe that the spiritual and intellectual revival in contemporary Catholicism is the lineal descendant and inheritor of Loisy and Tyrrell. It is rather the ruthless extermination of the naturalistic philosophy of religion which they substituted for supernatural theology which has made this revival possible. With her, we cannot but regret the sordid pettiness which heralded and accompanied that extermination, and the much avoidable anguish which it occasioned. But still more must we regret that there was anything to need such extermination.

Von Hügel, however preoccupied he was with the peculiar problems of his epoch, nevertheless transcended them. It is this, together with his determination not to put his own judgment before the definitive judgment of the Church, which give his work a greatness and a permanency which must be denied to that of George Tyrrell.

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