

# HARNACK

ANTHONY C. COTTER, S.J.

*Weston College*

AMONG the rationalists of the nineteenth century, Harnack stands with Strauss and Renan near the top of the list. Yet the three manifest marked individual differences. While Strauss and Renan are the arch-rationalists in the popular mind, Harnack's rationalism is that of university circles. To Catholic theologians he is *the* rationalist of modern times. Yet while many of Strauss's and most of Renan's books were placed on the Index, Harnack's name does not appear there.

In this brief account of Harnack, I shall first give some biographical and bibliographical data, then examine more closely the scientific worth of his literary output, and finally sketch his religious attitude.<sup>1</sup>

## BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Adolf von Harnack (1851-1930) was the son of Theodosius Harnack, an orthodox Lutheran and professor of pastoral theology in the University of Dorpat, then Russia. The family moved to Erlangen in Bavaria in 1853, where the mother died (1857). The father then married a second time (1864), and the family returned to Dorpat in 1866. Adolf studied theology at Dorpat and Leipzig (1869-1873), acquiring the doctorate in 1874. While *Privatdozent* for Church history at Leipzig (1874-1879), he made his mark in scientific circles by his scholarly work on the text of the Apostolic Fathers, for which he undertook several trips to Paris and Italy to consult and compare manuscripts.<sup>2</sup> During the same time he taught religion in two girls' schools with great enthusiasm and took his turn at preaching.

In 1879 Harnack accepted a call to Giessen as *ordinarius* of Church history, and at the end of the year married Amalie Thiersch of Munich.

<sup>1</sup> Besides many of Harnack's own writings, I have consulted especially his biography, *Adolf von Harnack* (1936), by his daughter, Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, and De Ghellinck's articles in the *Revue d'histoire ecclésiastique*, XXVI (1930), 962-91, and in the *Gregorianum*, XI (1930), 497-525, which contain an extensive bibliography on Harnack. In the *Stimmen der Zeit*, CXXXI (1936), pp. 20-31, J. Overmans, S.J., compares Harnack with Newman, discussing the question why the same line of studies made of the former a rationalist and brought the latter into the Catholic Church.

<sup>2</sup> *Patrum Apostolicorum Opera*, 3 vols., 1875-77; 5th ed., 1906.

Her mother was Catholic and she herself was baptized Catholic, but as her upbringing was Protestant, the wedding with Harnack was also Protestant.<sup>3</sup> While at Giessen, Harnack began to act as editor of Schürer's *Theologische Literaturzeitung* and continued for almost thirty years (1881–1910). In 1882 he added the editorship of *Texte und Untersuchungen zur altchristlichen Literatur*. At the same time he contributed numerous articles, some of considerable length, to the *Real-Encyclopädie für protestantische Theologie* and to the *Encyclopædia Britannica* (9th ed.). In 1884 President Eliot invited him to Harvard, but Harnack declined, going instead to Marburg (1886).

When soon afterward the chair of Church history became vacant in the University of Berlin, Harnack was regarded as the logical candidate. He was admittedly the most laborious and original historian, of exceptional ability and productivity. His fame as a specialist in early Christian literature already rivaled that of Zahn, Funk, and Lightfoot. An English review called him the outstanding figure among contemporary German theologians. Yet there was no unanimity among officials. A strong conservative tradition still prevailed in Protestant university circles, and the evangelical *Oberkirchenrat*, having scrutinized his writings more carefully as to orthodoxy, were against the appointment. But the faculty of Marburg, where he was *ordinarius*, expressed their appreciation of his services by electing him rector of that university, and the young Kaiser Wilhelm II was won over to his side.

Harnack was appointed to the chair of Church history at Berlin in 1888, and he occupied it till 1921, when the academic age limit obliged him to resign. During these many years, he was not only the acknowledged leader of liberal Protestantism in Germany, but he breathed his spirit into a whole generation of students who flocked to his lectures from all over the world. E. C. Moore, of Harvard, was proud of having been his first American pupil and dedicated to him his *History of Christian Thought since Kant* (1912). By his astounding activity, immense learning, and sincere fairness he undoubtedly earned first place among the scholars of pre-war Germany. And though he was a specialist in Christian antiquity, yet his outlook was universal. His articles, speeches, and conferences touched on almost all the big issues of the day: politics, the social question and social reform, woman

<sup>3</sup> The mother, instructed by Harnack, turned Protestant in 1885.

suffrage, library science, classical education, university studies, modern progress. All the problems that beset Germany before, during, and after World War I he made his own, and offered his solution. Unfortunately, as his youth had been devoid of esthetic influences, he took little interest in the various arts and felt no desire to cultivate them. This may account for the extraordinarily plain get-up of all his books.

His family life was an unusually happy one. He was a true father to his children, taking them out for walks or on longer trips to Bavaria or the Alps or Italy, giving them religious instruction and conducting religious home services on Sunday evening. They were not excluded from his study or his mail, and their piano practices in the next room did not disturb him. The evenings from eight o'clock on always belonged to his family; there was conversation, music, recitals, and card playing.

In 1904 Harnack paid a visit to the United States, lecturing at the World's Fair in St. Louis, at Harvard and Yale. He found the American pace a bit strenuous, but the warmth of his friends compensated him for the exertion.

Honors were not lacking, though most carried with them new burdens. In 1890 he was elected a member of the Prussian Academy, and a year later entrusted by it with one of the great scientific undertakings of the nineteenth century, the publication of a critical edition of the earliest Greek Fathers. While he had for this a staff of world-renowned scholars at his disposal, yet the work of orientation and organization rested on his shoulders. His it was also to get out the annual report and to write the history of the Academy in four volumes (1899). For nine years (1903-1912) he was president of the Evangelical-Social Congress, and in that capacity worked untiringly to waken a sense of social responsibility in the Lutheran Church. For twelve years (1905-1917) he acted as general director of the Prussian National Library. Finally, he was not only the real founder of the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft* for the advancement of sciences, but also its president from 1910 till his death.

He received two decorations from the government for his history of the Prussian Academy and was raised to the rank of nobility (*von*) in 1914. After the war, the new German government offered him the

post of ambassador at Washington (1921), but he declined, one reason being that he thought his knowledge of English insufficient. On the occasion of his seventieth birthday (also 1921), when university rules obliged him to retire, two volumes were gotten out to do him honor: *Harnack Ehrung*, by old pupils of his seminar in Church history, and *Festgabe Adolf von Harnack*, by his friends and colleagues. On his seventy-eighth birthday (1929), the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft* dedicated a hostelry for foreign students in Berlin, calling it Harnack House.

Harnack died at Heidelberg, where he had gone to superintend a new foundation of the *Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft*, but his body was sent to Berlin and cremated. The ashes were interred in the old cemetery of St. Matthew's Church, where his tombstone bears his favorite motto: "Veni Creator Spiritus."

#### MAJOR PUBLICATIONS

As an author, Harnack was not only extremely popular, but also many-sided and exceedingly prolific. His popularity was due to some outstanding qualities, which were well summed up by William Sanday, the genial English critic: "Apart from his astonishing rapidity, range and power of production, apart from his extreme keenness of insight, brilliance of combination and fertility of ideas, there is something about Harnack's writings that attracts us more than almost any of his countrymen. . . . Harnack has a width and generosity of outlook, a freedom of pedantry, a sympathy and understanding for human weakness that are all his own."<sup>4</sup>

A list of Harnack's works was prepared for his sixtieth birthday in 1911 and bore witness to his amazing diligence and fertility. F. Smend published a new list in 1927, bringing it up to date in 1930.<sup>5</sup> Harnack carried it with him wherever he went. Some 1400 minor titles represent mainly speeches and short essays, many of which are contained in the following five collections: *Reden und Aufsätze*, in two volumes (1904); *Aus Wissenschaft und Leben*, in two volumes (1911); *Aus der Friedens- und Kriegsarbeit* (1916); *Erforschetes und Erlebtes* (1923); *Aus der Werkstatt des Vollendeten* (1930). Some fifty, however, are of greater bulk, of which the following are the major publications.

<sup>4</sup> *Life of Christ in Recent Research* (New York, 1908), p. 162.

<sup>5</sup> *Adolf von Harnack, Verzeichnis seiner Schriften* (Leipzig, 1930).

*History of Dogma.*—While at Giessen, Harnack began to publish his *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, at which he had been working for ten years. It eventually ran to three tomes, the first appearing in 1885, the second in 1887, the third in 1889. Its fifth and final edition of 1914 was reprinted photomechanically in 1931. The English translation was made from the third German edition and ran to seven volumes (1899–1903). A compendium of the first two volumes, *Grundriss der Dogmengeschichte*, appeared in 1889, and of the third volume in 1891; it was done into French, English, and Russian.<sup>6</sup>

The immediate and yet not ephemeral success of the *Lehrbuch* was well deserved. Even one who does not see eye to eye with the author must admire the wealth and originality of ideas, the breath of life which he imparts to the long dead past, the brilliance of exposition and diction, the lapidary or paradoxical mode of fixing conclusions in the reader's mind. L. Koch, S.J., also believes that the work helped Protestants to understand Catholic doctrine better and to judge the Catholic Church more fairly.<sup>7</sup> The twenty pages of the third volume in which he developed the general idea of medieval Scholasticism must have opened the eyes of many to its importance in the history of thought.

Yet the work has serious flaws. It is not a manual, as its title might suggest. The customary relations between text and footnotes are wholly disregarded, the latter being far too bulky and constituting practically a parallel, often contradictory, text. Nor is the mastery of the subject the same everywhere. While it is manifest enough for the first centuries, it wanes rapidly with the succeeding epochs, and turns into dilettantism when the author comes to the middle ages. To the Council of Trent and the subsequent development of dogma he devoted only some fifty pages. The fact is that when he came to write the third volume, he admitted himself that he was no "specialist" on the history of the medieval Church and on the epoch of the Reformation. But then, why wade into deep water?

To Catholics the work is wholly unsatisfactory. They reproach Harnack with misinterpreting many dogmas of their faith, with showing no appreciation of the progress of dogma within a living Church,

<sup>6</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 134–44, 152–53, 249–52, 366–68.

<sup>7</sup> *Jesuiten-Lexikon*, s.v. "Harnack."

above all with falsifying the very concept of dogma. Dogmas, Harnack tells us in the first volume, are not something native to the Gospel, but a comparatively late reaction of the Greek mind to the Gospel. To make the Gospel truths palatable to a hellenized world, the Apologists and Origen began molding them to the categories of Greek thought, and after them Councils and theologians continued the work of coining dogmas.

Lutherans, on the other hand, were shocked at Luther's portrait as painted in the third volume. Luther, according to Harnack, was inconsistent. While his call for a return to Christ and the Gospel should have meant the end of all dogmas, he actually restored some of the old dogmas,<sup>8</sup> and while the word of God should have been the only sacrament of Protestantism, he put the Lord's Supper on a par with it.

Truth to tell, the book was a public confession of Harnack's break with positive and dogmatic Christianity. He admitted as much in his correspondence with Loofs and with his sorrowful father; but from then on he never spoke to anyone about his own religious life.<sup>9</sup>

*Early Christian Literature.*—In this field, Harnack's very own, he wrote *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur bis Eusebius*, which O. Bardenhewer called "a monumental work." The first volume of more than a thousand pages is entitled *Die Überlieferung und der Bestand* (1893) and contains all the ante-Nicene documents available for writing on the first Christian centuries. The next two volumes were entitled *Die Chronologie* (1897 and 1904). Their purpose was to settle as far as possible the dates and authorship of the documents listed in the first. A projected fourth volume, which was to describe the nature and development of all this literature, never appeared.

Though there had been signs before Harnack of a return to more traditional views on the genuinity of the earliest Christian literature, yet it was his singular merit to have helped it materially by his painstaking researches and to have shielded it with his undisputed authority as a historian. The preface to the first volume of the *Chronologie*,

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Troeltsch (in *Geschichte der christlichen Religion*, 1909, p. 744) contested Harnack's thesis that the Reformation was meant to put an end to dogma. The Bible with all its contents was taken over as self-evident dogma by the Reformers. The real end of dogma came only with higher criticism.

<sup>9</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 138-43; De Ghellinck, *Gregorianum*, *art. cit.*, pp. 513-22; cf. E. C. Moore, *History of Christian Thought since Kant* (New York, 1912), pp. 141-50.

where he called attention to this turning of the tide, attracted considerable notice, "and nowhere more than in England" (Sanday); for, generally speaking, English scholars had little taste for the radicalism of the average German rationalist.<sup>10</sup> Still, Harnack is sure that none of the four Gospels was written by an apostle; the fourth Gospel is attributed to John the Presbyter, though Harnack subscribes to the "critical heresy" that it and the Apocalypse have the same author. Harnack is also sure that the pastoral Epistles are not Paul's, at least not as we have them; he merely allows that parts of them may go back to the apostle.

Coming down to particular cases, Harnack next turned to Luke's writings and published three revolutionary books: *Lukas der Arzt* (1906); *Die Apostelgeschichte* (1908); *Neue Untersuchungen zur Apostelgeschichte und zur Abfassungszeit der synoptischen Evangelien* (1911). Here, too, Harnack returned to the traditional view that Luke, a physician and companion of Paul, was the author of the third Gospel and of the Acts. His thesis ran counter to the consensus of German critics; but using their favorite method, internal evidence, Harnack advanced three cogent arguments: unity of ideas, unity of style and diction, the medical knowledge displayed in both works. Emil Schürer, co-editor with Harnack of the *Theologische Literaturzeitung*, at once challenged his arguments and conclusions, but the vast majority of scholars were satisfied that Harnack had proved his point.<sup>11</sup>

Naturally enough, Catholic scholars rejoiced at this unexpected turn of events. Still, their joy was not unalloyed. Harnack charges Luke with "faith in magic, enormous credulity and theological superficiality"; he discards the first two chapters of the third Gospel as legends, refuses to accept as historical the miracles narrated in either book, and declares most of the speeches of Peter and Paul in Acts to be fictions of Luke. Let us add here that Harnack is very severe on Mark. Mark, he says, drives one crazy by his contradictions and digressions; he is incapable of distinguishing between what is important and what not, between what is certain and what doubtful; he is a fanatic and believes the wildest stories.

<sup>10</sup> Lagrange, *Évangile selon saint Marc* (Paris, 1929), pp. li-lii; *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, LIII (1897), 449-52, 457-75.

<sup>11</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, p. 365; Jacquier, *Actes des Apôtres* (Paris, 1926), pp. xxvi-xxx; J. Huby (ed.), *Christus* (Paris, 1923), pp. 960-61.

*Marcion and the Canon.*—Harnack had a predilection for Marcion, the heretic of the second century. Besides his doctor's dissertation, he devoted two books to him: *Marcion. Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* (1921), and *Neue Studien zu Marcion* (1923). Of the former, a reconstruction of Marcion's writings, E. Amann says: "Ce travail magistrale laisse loin derrière lui les entreprises analogues."<sup>12</sup> But Harnack also adopted Marcion's iconoclasm and rejected the whole of the Old Testament; for the God of the New Testament is a God of love and of love only, which cannot be said of Yahweh. He also tried to show that Marcion was the real founder of the Catholic Church inasmuch as he established the New Testament canon. On the canon of the New Testament itself, Harnack wrote two books: *Das Neue Testament um das Jahr 200* (1889), and *Die Entstehung des Neuen Testaments und die wichtigsten Folgen der neuen Schöpfung* (1914).

In the Bampton Lectures on "Inspiration" (1893), W. Sanday pointed out that Harnack contradicted himself in the former book, making the formation of the canon first a sudden phenomenon and then a slow process. The latter book contains his definitive stand on the subject. Harnack sees in the New Testament canon merely a reaction to Marcion. Marcion and some of the Gnostics had ascribed to Luke's Gospel and to some (ten) Pauline Epistles the same authority as the Jews had ascribed to the Old Testament. This highhanded procedure forced the Church to draw up a canon of her own. Catholics were not slow in proving that Harnack's account was a total perversion of history. Marcion's heresy led the Fathers to formulate more clearly the general principles underlying Catholic dogma: Scripture and tradition, apostolic succession, the deposit of faith, the importance of the *magisterium*.<sup>13</sup>

*The Early Church.*—Harnack taught Church history all his life, and he was proud of the title of Church historian. But of all the ages of the Church he picked the first centuries for his special province, and in them two phenomena were of particular interest to him: the remarkable expansion of the early Church and its constitution. He wrote two well-known works on them.

<sup>12</sup> *DTC*, s.v. "Marcion," col. 2031.

<sup>13</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 317-18, 510-15; Zarb, *De Historia Canonis* (1934), pp. 506-15; Fliche et Martin, *Histoire ecclésiastique*, II, 26-35; *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, s.v. "Marcion."



*Die Mission und Ausbreitung des Christentums in den drei ersten Jahrhunderten* (1902) has been lauded on all sides as a superb piece of historical research. It is also the easiest to read of all of Harnack's scientific works. He drew the maps for the second edition with his own hands. The book was translated into English, Italian, and Russian, and was brought up to date in 1924 in the fourth and final edition.<sup>14</sup>

But Harnack erred when he claimed to have been the first to treat the subject systematically; a Dominican, Thomas Maria Mamachi, had, in the eighteenth century, published four volumes with very similar contents.<sup>15</sup> Harnack also erred where he looked for the causes of the remarkable spread of Christianity. Like Gibbon, he enumerated only natural causes.

Concerning the Church's early constitution, he wrote, apart from some earlier sketches, *Kirchenverfassung und Kirchenrecht in den zwei ersten Jahrhunderten* (1910). The Introduction furnishes convincing evidence that Harnack well knew what the Catholic Church teaches about her divine origin and constitution. But he sets out to disprove that claim by showing "that the whole historical development of the apostolic and post-apostolic age contradicts it." In the first chapter, while chiding Protestants for underestimating Peter's preeminence among the apostles and in the primitive community, he yet asserts: "The thought that Peter's office could or necessarily must pass to a second and a third occurred to nobody, so far as we know, in the apostolic and post-apostolic age; even in the second century every trace of such an idea is still absent. The actual charismatic primacy of Peter is something which cannot be looked upon as transferable."

But worse is to come as we read on. According to Harnack, the constitution of the Church underwent a complete change ever so often. There was already a break between Christ and the apostles; the apostles had wholly misunderstood their Master's teaching on the kingdom of God, injecting into it their own eschatological notions. Similar breaks occurred between the apostles and succeeding generations. Externally perhaps the changes may not have been so noticeable; the Church

<sup>14</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 358-60.

<sup>15</sup> *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, LXX (1906), 361-62; De Ghellinck, *Gregorianum*, *art. cit.*, p. 511.

may have appeared about the same in 30, 60, 90, 130, 190; but internally she was entirely different. The alterations were so fundamental that the dominant idea of Christ's kingdom of God was lost sight of altogether.<sup>16</sup>

The one Catholic who withstood Harnack on this whole question of the Church's constitution and development, and whom Harnack praised for his truly historical insight, was Msgr. Pierre Batiffol. His book, *L'Eglise naissante et le catholicisme* (1909), is a refutation, point by point, of Harnack's rationalistic positions as well as of Loisy's, Harnack's faithful disciple.

A more particular question was taken up by Harnack in *Militia Christi* (1905). What was the attitude of the early Church toward soldiers and war? His thesis was: The Gospel and the early Church were, on principle, opposed to all war and military service. Strange to say, many of his arguments prove just the opposite. But Harnack, grandiosely dispensing himself from a dogmatic evaluation of documents, relies mainly on Tertullian and Marcion, as though theirs was the authentic voice of the early Church.<sup>17</sup>

#### HARNACK AS A SCHOLAR

Though Harnack advanced, in regular German university fashion, from *Privatdozent* to *extraordinarius* to *ordinarius*, he was a truly extraordinary professor all his life. He it was who restored to theology that appeal and dignity which it had lost in the dreary days of the *Aufklärung*. Nor were his interests at all confined to his books and the lecture room. Though seemingly engrossed in one subject, Church history, he was master of the semipopular lecture in the best sense of the word. In his own specialty, too, what a contrast between the dramatic interest of his exposition, his clearness of thought and freshness of diction, and the lumbering style of a Baur or Ritschl or Troeltsch! And innumerable were the articles, conferences, addresses, eulogies in which his versatile mind displayed ever new facets.

In his views, Harnack was original and independent. Even when he took over another's ideas, he never merely copied them. He recast

<sup>16</sup> D. van den Eynde, *Les Normes de l'enseignement chrétien* (1933), pp. xii-xiv; Brillant-Nédoncelle (eds.), *Apologétique* (Paris, 1937), pp. 738-39.

<sup>17</sup> Pirngruber, in *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, LXXI (1906), 269-83.

them in the crucible of his mind and made them his own, developing or clarifying them, placing them in new settings, enriching them with all the resources of his prodigious information. Possibly the greatest service that he rendered to scholarship was that of rescuing early Christian literature from the contempt under which it had languished in Germany since Semler, and from the manhandling it had received in the Tübingen School. He blazed new trails everywhere, opening up new vistas, offering new solutions of old problems, suggesting to scholars new tasks, and preparing them for new undertakings.

Harnack's independence of thought stands out most prominently when we compare him with Ferdinand Christian Baur, his predecessor in the field of Church history, whose ideas had ruled the universities for half a century. For Baur, history had no meaning except as philosophy. The idea was everything, persons and events nothing except as embodiment of the idea evolving itself, by an internal dynamic, from thesis to antithesis to synthesis. Harnack was no philosopher. He applied to history the methods proper to history, a procedure then considered paradoxical. Of course, no historian is without a philosophy, and Harnack had inherited many philosophical prejudices from his predecessors: Schleiermacher, Kant, De Wette, Ritschl, etc. But while he never got rid of them, there were vast fields of research in which they played no role. It was then that his intellectual honesty produced results unsurpassed in their line.

But there was another significant contrast between Baur and Harnack. In Baur's historical constructions, the idea, in spite of all evolving, always retained a fundamental identity. Not so with Harnack's dogma and Christianity. Christianity had indeed changed the world, its life, its feelings, its thought; but in the process Christianity itself became essentially other and departed from the Gospel. Originally adogmatic, it became dogmatic. And as the origin of dogma, so its evolution did not proceed from an internal dynamic, but consisted essentially in the influence of external factors: heretics, marked personalities, the social and political milieu.<sup>18</sup>

It was this aspect of Harnack's historical construction which justi-

<sup>18</sup> De Ghellinck, *Gregorianum*, *art. cit.*, pp. 518-21; E. C. Moore, *History of Christian Thought since Kant*, pp. 142-43; C. C. McCown, *The Search for the Real Jesus* (1940), pp. 233-35.

fied his critics in their judgment that, for him, the history of dogma was the history of the loss of Christianity. And it was his persistent advocacy of an adogmatic Christianity that roused the ire of his Lutheran critics. He could, of course, reply that it was Luther's own principle of private judgment, and they had no answer. Still, it is sad, also for us Catholics, to see orthodox Lutherans robbed of that diminished heritage of faith which they had saved from the wreck of the Reformation.

Need we wonder that Lutheran Church authorities did not trust Harnack and never once appointed him at Berlin as examiner of their candidates for the ministry? He deeply resented this mistrust and deemed it harmful for future ministers. But he and they moved in different worlds.

#### HARNACK'S RELIGIOUS ATTITUDE

Harnack had been brought up in a strictly Lutheran household. Yet his daughter quotes a long letter of his to a friend in Livonia, written in 1883, which contains already the leading ideas of his liberal creed.<sup>19</sup> When his first volume of the *History of Dogma* appeared in 1885, his aged father wrote to him reprovingly: "My son, your view of Our Lord's resurrection is, in my eyes, no longer Christian. To me Christianity stands and falls with the resurrection." Moved perhaps by this complaint, Harnack added a long footnote on the resurrection to the second edition of 1888, which must have proved even less satisfactory to his father.

Scarcely established in his chair at Berlin, he was drawn into a conflict of principles which had been smoldering in the Lutheran Church for over two centuries, and which is known as *Apostolikumstreit*.<sup>20</sup> The events were as follows. In 1892, Christoph Schrempf, a Lutheran pastor in Württemberg, had administered baptism without reciting the Apostles' Creed and had been censured for it by his superiors. Thereupon a committee of students asked Harnack if he would advise petitioning the *Oberkirchenrat* to have the Creed struck from the liturgy. Harnack now delivered a lecture in which he sympathized

<sup>19</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Lex. f. Theol. u. Kirche*, s.v. "Apostolisches Glaubensbekenntnis; Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart", s.v. "Apostolikum III"; O. Bardenheuer, *Patrology* (1908), p. 19.

with those who desired a shorter profession of faith, at least as an alternative for liturgical functions. He contended that some of the clauses of the ancient Creed were denied by many, citing in particular the Virgin Birth, the communion of saints and the resurrection of the body. He refrained from deciding the practical question whether pastors, unable or unwilling to accept the whole Creed, should remain in or withdraw from the ministry and the Church. But he strongly advised his students against agitating for its abolition. In conclusion, he formulated his own briefer, but "truly evangelical" creed.<sup>21</sup>

The lecture caused a storm of protest, both among Lutherans and Catholics. It appeared in book form as *Das apostolische Glaubensbekenntnis* (1892) and ran through twenty-seven editions in three years. But it failed to settle the age-long dispute; the General Synod renewed the obligation of the Apostles' Creed, and several pastors were relieved of their office for disobedience. On the other hand, vehement protests were lodged against Harnack with the Prussian government, but because he was not censured openly, he declined a new offer to come to Harvard where he would find "true freedom of teaching." However, to counteract his now undisguised rationalism in the university, the government founded a new chair of systematic theology and picked for its first incumbent a man of undoubted orthodoxy.<sup>22</sup>

Things did not improve as Harnack grew older. In a lecture given in 1895 before the *Evangelische Bund* under the title "Das Christentum und die Geschichte," Christianity is reduced to belief in the all-saving name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

But if one looks for a brief summary of Harnack's religious beliefs, he will find it in the most famous of his books, *Das Wesen des Christentums*. It is made up of a series of sixteen lectures which he delivered in the winter of 1899-1900 before six hundred students of all faculties of the Berlin University.<sup>23</sup> It went through seventy-one editions, was translated into fifteen languages, and became Harnack's own favorite book.<sup>24</sup> Of the enthusiastic reception abroad two testimonies will

<sup>21</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 195-201.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 201-14; P. Schaff, *Theological Propaedeutic* (New York, 1898), pp. 359-60.

<sup>23</sup> The lectures were repeated during the war winter of 1916-1917.

<sup>24</sup> When Harnack and Gerhard Hauptmann, the famous playwright, met at a summer resort and promised to exchange the book each liked best, Harnack sent him a copy of *The Essence of Christianity*.

suffice. George Tyrrell wrote to Loisy in 1902: "Harnack's book is in English and is swallowed whole by uncritical crowds." Shirley Jackson Case, of Chicago, has this to say of its popularity in America: "Probably it was one of the most generally read and influential books in circulation among moderately liberal-minded Christians during the first decade of the twentieth century. In slightly varying forms and revisions the type of thinking it represented, is widely prevalent even to the present day."<sup>25</sup>

It was otherwise at home. While dailies and periodicals were flooded with arguments pro and con, a violent storm of protest came from the Lutheran Church of old Prussia. Every synod of pastors thought it their plain duty to register a solemn censure; in one of them a vote was taken whether Harnack should be anathematized in accordance with Galatians 1:9: "If anyone preach a gospel to you other than that which you have received, let him be anathema." An article in a magazine carried the motto: "Judas, dost thou betray the Son of Man with a kiss?"<sup>26</sup>

But what is the intrinsic worth of the book? A rabbi once said of it that the content was all right, but that there was something wrong with the title. It should be "The Essence of Judaism," since that was what the author outlined.<sup>27</sup> Be that as it may, the book has justly been described as the gospel of modern liberal Protestantism. Orthodox Lutherans called it the canonical book of Ritschlian heterodoxy. And so it is. For, following in Ritschl's footsteps, Harnack here breaks radically with all dogma. He emphatically declares Christianity to be essentially adogmatic, and censures orthodox Protestants for still adhering to some outworn dogmas. The essence of Christianity is "trust in God and love of the brethren." This is what Christ came to teach us.<sup>28</sup>

It is interesting to watch Harnack come to grips with the Gospel miracles. He begins the lecture on them by boasting of the progress made since the days of Renan, to whom they still were a stumbling-block. Today, he tells his hearers, we are more ready to accept them

<sup>25</sup> *Highways of Christian Doctrine* (Lowell Institute Lectures, 1936), p. 176.

<sup>26</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 245-47.

<sup>27</sup> Lindeskog, *Die Jesusfrage im neuzeitlichen Judentum*, pp. 132-34.

<sup>28</sup> Braun, *Où en est le problème de Jésus?* (Paris, 1932), pp. 43-58; Chr. Pesch, in *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, LX (1901), 48-62, 154-69, 257-73.

as historical. But to avert a panic among his liberal-minded students, he at once draws their attention to two facts: first, that the miracle stories arose in a credulous age, and secondly, that we know little about the forces of nature, especially about psychic forces. Who has measured the influence of soul on soul, or of soul on body? Keeping these two facts in mind, liberal Protestants can approach miracle stories with an open mind.

Going more into detail, Harnack then develops his fivefold division of miracle stories, which has since been accepted by more than one rationalist. There are, first of all, those stories in which perfectly natural events have been magnified. Then we have those in which a saying or internal experience of Jesus is projected into the outer world. A third group arose from the desire to see Old Testament prophecies fulfilled in the reputed Messias. A fourth group consists of remarkable cures, brought about by Jesus' psychic or spiritual powers. There remain a few miracles which may be classified as phenomena not yet fully understood. Finally, Jesus' resurrection can be discounted altogether; our Easter faith cannot rest on doubtful stories of an empty tomb and some apparitions.

There was nothing very original about any of these explanations; they had all been proposed by earlier rationalists—and shown to be worthless. But to allay all misgivings, Harnack assured his audience that Christ put no stock in miracles. It was the evangelists who exaggerated their importance out of all proportion, and so they need not detain us in the study of the Gospel.<sup>29</sup>

But who was Christ? Wrede and Wellhausen notwithstanding, Harnack admits that Christ called Himself the Messias and really believed Himself the long-awaited Redeemer. Of course, He was mistaken in this, as events proved. It was a slip, but Harnack is willing to forget it. He declares the question really of no importance. Christ Himself never discussed it. It arose after and because the Christians began to believe in His resurrection. Paul started the discussion, and the Church after him spent all her energy in the further development of his theology. The sad result of these speculations was the loss of Christian unity.

But did not Christ also call Himself the Son of God? Certainly.

<sup>29</sup> G. Marquardt, *Das Wunderproblem*, pp. 61-62, 75-76; *Apologétique*, pp. 402-3.

But only in the sense that He knew God as His Father. By realizing the same truth in us, we can all become sons of God, though perhaps not in the same eminent degree. And so he comes to the sentence which appeared to be the most scandalous of all his sixteen lectures: "Not the Son, but only the Father belongs in the Gospel as preached by Jesus." It was an open denial of the divinity of Christ, a point on which he never wavered. He repeated it again three years later when the Babel-Bible controversy was raging. On that occasion the Kaiser published an open letter in which he came out against Delitzsch: "Christ is God, God in human form." Harnack thought it incumbent on himself to tell His Majesty that all we are historically justified to say is what Paul says: "God was in Christ." But after that the Kaiser, who valued his advice on other matters, would discuss no religious subject with him. In 1916 Harnack severely criticized his friend Loofs for writing that Jesus' life was more than human. In 1925 he thus expressed his own stand in a letter to Söderblom and the World Conference which was to meet at Stockholm: Let every Christian profess his belief in the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost and in the Incarnation, but also let every Christian be free to understand these terms in his own way.<sup>30</sup> Harnack's own personal faith suffered accordingly, and in later years he confessed that the supernatural conveyed no idea to him.

But the essential ambiguity of Harnack's liberal Protestantism was revealed shortly before the war, when he was at the zenith of his fame as scholar, organizer, and man of the world. The occasion was a heresy trial in the Lutheran Church of old Prussia. There the *Spruchkollegium* had been instituted in 1910 as an ecclesiastical court before which pastors could be summoned for deviating too far from Lutheran standards. In 1911 the court proceeded against Pastor Jatho of Cologne, who was found guilty and deprived of his pastorate. To the amazement of his friends, Harnack approved not only of the court, but also of its decision in this case. Whereupon Jatho upbraided him for his unmanly stand, saying that he had merely drawn the conclusions from Harnack's theology. Harnack defended himself with the plea that it would be unwise to rush the change from orthodox to liberal Protestantism. But he shifted his stand the next year when

<sup>30</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 342-46, 538-42.



another pastor was deprived of his office because of his violent attacks on the former decision of the *Spruchkollegium*. Harnack took it upon himself to clarify matters now by denying the authority of the court and the justice of its present decision. Traub, the deposed pastor, thanked him effusively.<sup>31</sup>

#### HARNACK AND CATHOLICS

Harnack never seems to have had much contact with Catholics. He met them, of course, and did his best to be impartial and to rise above mere prejudice. He spent many summers in the Catholic Tyrol and was a frequent visitor at the Cistercian abbey of Stams near Innsbruck. He devoted much thought to the problem of a reunion between Catholics and Protestants, and opposed excluding Catholic theology from German universities, which many had advocated after the encyclical *Pascendi*. He made himself many enemies when he publicly supported, in 1925, the candidacy of Marx, a Catholic, against Hindenburg for president of Germany. Also toward the Jesuits he wanted to play the role of the "impartial historian," and, like Leibnitz, admitted that some of them were honest and wide-awake; in fact, in his *History of Dogma*, he praised the work done by Jesuits so highly that all non-Jesuit theologians since the Council of Trent became a negligible quantity.

Still, his Lutheran upbringing and his later rationalism were too much for him and colored his judgment regarding Catholics and things Catholic. Converts to Catholicism he pitied as having sunk to a lower grade of religious life.<sup>32</sup> While still at Giessen, he published an essay on monasticism under the title *Das Mönchtum, seine Ideale und Geschichte* (1880). Von Soden, who wrote the article on Harnack for the second edition of *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (1928), thought that the essay showed Harnack's ability of understanding a mode of life wholly foreign to him. Catholics will say that it rather showed a complete misunderstanding of the ideals and history of monasticism, and Fr. Denifle, Harnack's stoutest opponent, more than once pointed out its shortcomings.<sup>33</sup> Another proof of his bias as well as his wholly adogmatic Christianity was the lecture which he delivered

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 391-406.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 239.

<sup>33</sup> *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, LXX-LXXI (1906).

in 1891 under the catchy title, "Was wir von der römischen Kirche lernen und nicht lernen sollen." There we read "An allen wirklichen Problemen muss die römische Kirche vorübergehen, und das, was heute Geschichte, Kritik und philosophische Kenntnis heisst, darf für sie nicht existieren."<sup>34</sup> Though spoken in 1891, that remained Harnack's idea of the relation between the Catholic Church and modern science.<sup>35</sup> His solution of the problem of reunion, which he proposed on the occasion of the Kaiser's birthday in 1907, met with cold reception on the part of his Protestant audience, and, of course, was wholly unacceptable to Catholics.<sup>36</sup> The first volume of *Aus Wissenschaft und Leben* (1911) contains seven articles on things Catholic: the origin of the papacy, Protestantism and Catholicism in Germany, the encyclical *Pascendi*, the encyclical on St. Charles Borromeo, etc.; also a review of the biographies of Luther by Weiss and Grisar. But a Catholic reading them will often enough catch his breath and wonder how a man of Harnack's ability can be guilty of such misinterpretations of Catholic doctrines and institutions.

Also Harnack's praise of Jesuit theologians is rather a left-handed compliment. Since he regards Catholic theology as wholly erroneous, Jesuits can take little pride in being singled out as its greatest champions. And if a few Jesuits are declared to be honest and wide-awake, this is only another way of saying that the majority are crooks and old fossils. But apart from that, Harnack blamed the Jesuits explicitly for teaching three things: the primacy and infallibility of the Pope, the Immaculate Conception, and probabilism in moral theology. He was also sure that Jesuits are incapable of writing history because they cling to a rigid concept of the Church.<sup>37</sup>

But I have reserved for the end a remarkable passage from the fourth edition of Harnack's *History of Dogma*. My translation is not literal, but I am sure it does not distort the sense.

That the Catholic Church has a right to exist, cannot well be denied. If we take men as they are and as they will be for many generations to come, we cannot doubt the value of this world-wide institution. The Catholic Church has

<sup>34</sup> *Reden und Aufsätze*, II, 260.

<sup>35</sup> Haan, in *Stimmen aus Maria-Laach*, LXXIV (1908), 125-38.

<sup>36</sup> Zahn-Harnack, *op. cit.*, pp. 409-15.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 406-21; L. Koch, *Jesuiten-Lexikon*, s.v. "Harnack."

never ceased to produce saints, and yet teaches religion to all as the common man wants it and has always taken it. What more do you wish? The virtues necessary for social intercourse and the restraining of the lower passions are not the result of algebraic equations or chemical experiments, and there is no prospect that they will ever be. But if that is so, one must admit the necessity and wisdom of an institution which can put restraints on the ordinary man and yet give to more tender consciences what they yearn for, above all of an institution which can guarantee itself as a supernatural creation. . . . What a contrast with the evangelical churches! After four hundred years of probation, can we say that they have fulfilled expectations and proved themselves indispensable? Do they not appear to be half-baked (*halbschlüchtig*) and really superfluous, because they cannot do the work of the Catholic Church and do not lead to higher aspirations? They certainly do not come up to ordinary expectations, or do so no longer if they ever did; our statesmen and our social experts are at one on that. And as for higher aspirations, loud complaints are heard about their backwardness, and not a few are of the opinion that their whole plan was faulty from the start.<sup>38</sup>

We know that Harnack thought the Catholic Church guilty of a "double morality," and one might see a hint of it in the first part of the quotation; but the whole is certainly a remarkable tribute to the moral superiority of the Catholic Church.

#### CONCLUSION

In some ways Harnack outlived himself. By the time he was fifty years old, the higher critics had initiated new movements which took their course independently of him and for which he felt no sympathy. One was Sabatier's philosophy of religion, which based all religion on personal experience; another was the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule*; a third was Gunkel's *Gattungsforschung*, which later turned into form criticism. Harnack realized himself that for a man of his age it was difficult, if not impossible, to compete in the race with younger critics. Which means, of course, that his work is dated.

But an impartial appraisal of his literary heritage will distinguish between his historical work and his a priori constructions. His work on early Christian literature and Church history marks, in many instances, a return to traditional views and belongs to the necessary tools of every scholar in that field. His theology, however, if such we may call it, which underlies all his works, is unacceptable to every honest Christian.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. Straub, *De Ecclesia Christi* (1912), pp. 867-68.