

FRENCH CATHOLIC LITERARY REVIVAL: HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL BACKGROUND

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Summary

The article focuses on the background of French Catholic literary revival of the first half of the XXth century. Among the fundamentals of the analysed phenomenon are distinguished three major ones: historical background, theological preconditions and the influence of purely literary predecessors of the XIXth century. The first one is presented through the research of French peculiarities of republican secularisation, its educational reforms and the social-cultural impact of the Dreyfus affair. The ecclesiastical context is described through the challenge of theological modernism and popes' encyclicals as an attempt to deal with them. Specific French Catholic identity's division between Gallicanism and Ultramontanism with its influence on the cultural context is also mentioned. Finally, the return of Christian spirituality and the birth of specific apophatic poetics are observed from symbolism of romanticists Chateaubriand and Lamartine through Baudelaire's aesthetic of sin to decadent poetization of embodied evil and divided human soul of d'Aurervilly and Huysmans. Special emphasis is made on the tradition of political engagement of Catholic writers from J. de Maistre through Ch. Maurras to L. Bloy. Hence, Catholic literary revival is regarded as complex cultural, historical, theological and literary French phenomenon.

Keywords: French literature, modernism, French Catholic renaissance, catholic novel, engaged intellectual, Christianity.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary historical literary studies in broad Western tradition are marked with the return of religious topics that have been marginalized for almost half a century because of predomination of postmodern critical traditions, where the heritage of XXth century engaged Christian writers is analysed as mono-narrative, even highly ideological, thus out of date. Nevertheless, such phenomena of late XX-early XXI centuries as the resurrection of the author (*Compagnon; Vanhoozer, 1998*) and the onto-theological turn in French philosophy, in particular phenomenology, (*Marion; 1977, Lévinas, 1984*), within the general emphasis on ethical-political thinking (*Derrida 1991; 1992*) generated a new wave of critical interest in Christian literary writing. French humanities returned to the problems of such phenomenon as Catholic literary revival in the context of XXth century's interwar French culture as well as its definition, chronological terms, poetical peculiarities and representative circles. For instance, H. Serry in the historical research «*Naissance de l'intellectuel catholique*» (*Serry, 2004*) studies the birth and the development of engaged catholic intellectual in the context of post Dreyfus' secularisation processes of French Republic and particularly focuses on the main journalistic centres that could be regarded as the source of the whole movement of «*Renouveau catholique*» (Catholic revival). However being a historian, he predominantly deals with historical and partially

religious causes while neglecting the pure literary ones. On the other hand, R. Griffiths in his «*Révolution à rebours. Le renouveau catholique dans la littérature française (1870–1914)*» (Griffiths, 2020) diachronically focuses on the preconditions, stylistic peculiarities and presumptive chronological terms of French catholic literary revival, paying less attention to vast cultural and religious background as well as to problematic field of the distinction between the literary predecessors of the movement and its representatives of XXth century. Ultimately, the comparative analysis of B. Sudlow «*Catholic Literature and Secularisation in France and England, 1880–1914*» (Sudlow, 2011) tries to build the bond between two similar yet poetically and causally distinct literary answers to the historical trend of secularisation in the late XIX – early XXth centuries, still shutting the research in the methodological boundaries of sociology. Our article, being based on the cultural-historical diachronical method as well as P. Ricouer's hermeneutics, is to fill the gaps in the analysis of vast movement of French catholic literary revival. More precisely, our tasks are to distinguish the most fundamental historical, religious and purely literal premises that caused the revival of explicitly showed Christian literary and cultural activity in the context of the phenomenon of engaged intellectuals.

2. Historical background: from secularisation to the Dreyfus affair

Among the most representative socio-political processes that during XIXth – early XXth centuries influenced the birth and the development of the Catholic literary identity, two major must be mentioned: the republican secularisation and the Dreyfus affair. During XIXth century (precisely 1789-1914) France is going through a large number of political regimes that finishes with the establishment of the Third Republic in 1871. The Republic, based on the Enlightenment's philosophy and the prevailing trends of positivism and scientism, with the urban bourgeoisie's support declared a vector for democratization, secularisation and the strengthening of liberal values. As a result, the country has been divided into two hostile ideological camps. One fought for the republican idea of political left while the conservative right wing (mostly Catholic) identified themselves with the support of monarchical system.

Since 1870-1880s, the Republic has announced a course for secularisation, which object was complete separation of state from church while prime mover – the range of educational reforms. Contemporary sociologist Jose Casanova describes the French model of secularism as such: «*Another direction of secularisation took the form of laïcité, that is, the emancipation of all secular spheres from clerical-ecclesiastical control. In this respect, secularisation is marked by antagonism between the laity and the clergy. In contrast to the Protestant direction, here the separation of religious and secular is strictly preserved, but this boundary is moved to the margins in order to enclose, privatize and marginalize everything religious there, separating it from any presence in the secular public sphere. The paradigm of this direction is France's relationship with Latin Catholicism*» (Casanova, 2017: 127-128). One of the first steps of educational secularisation was Jules Ferry's law of 1881–1882, which made primary education in all French schools compulsory, free and, the most significant, secular. In 1886, the R. Goblet's law, according to which the right to teach in public schools was granted only to secular persons, was adopted. In 1902, secondary education was reformed (réforme du bac). The number of humanitarian subjects that made up the core of pre-revolutionary education reduced while the number of hours devoted to living languages as well as natural sciences increased. This kind of division in conformity with republican educators must have coincided with the needs of the XXth century's secular state. Universities' reforms also took place, although less radically. At the

theological faculties, the chairs were occupied by clergymen themselves. This was the core of conservative Catholics, predominantly monarchists. Therefore, in 1886, in Ecole pratique de haute études the Section of Religious Sciences was established. This academic structure was tend to spread a secular view into religious phenomena, based on the doctrines of Renan and Tain (*Pelletier, 2013*). Another manifestation of the Republic's rebuilt was social policy in 1870-1880s, aimed to renew the state's functionaries based on the principles of meritocracy. Consequently, the access to state management was granted not only to wider circles of French bourgeoisie, but also to Protestant and Jewish elites. The division of identities became clearer year by year. Their printed organs as well. The apogee of 30 years of republican secular policy became 1905, when the law of separation of church and state came into force. This very law caused a sharp controversy in French society and finally divided the country into «two Frances».

Another event that contributed not only to the crystallization of Catholic identity in its opposition to the secular one, but to its social-political manifestation was the Dreyfus affair (1894–1906). The trial and related public debate on the possible espionage of French Army's Jewish officer for the benefit of the German Empire. «Two Frances» publically demonstrated their sides. Monarchist Catholics of the right wing, who devastatingly criticized the Republic and its ideological foundations, mainly chose an anti-Dreyfussarian position, while secular Democrat Republicans as well as the liberal Catholics stood on Dreyfussarian positions. There were few exceptions. Thus, Ch. Péguy – one of the French Catholic literary revival's fundamental writers –publically supported Dreyfus' innocence. Both camps resorted to long and heated discussions on the pages of French newspapers and private magazines. January 13, 1898 on newspaper «L'Aurore», E. Zola comes to the forefront with his article «J'accuse» («I accuse») addressed to the Republic's President. He accuses the state of anti-Semitism, while the military court of insufficient evidence, hence conscious bias. Two thousand copies were sold out in a few hours, the article provoked further debates. The known historian of French literature A. Tribaudet notices: «*for the first time, a piece of paper sold on the street became a call to religious war*» (*Tribaudet, 1936: 386*). On February 5, 1898, the official Jesuit paper «La civiltà cattolica» issued an anti-Dreyfussarian indictment of Jews and Protestants, accusing them of collaboration with Germany, while the Jewish journal «Univers israélite» described the whole Dreyfus affair as a consequence of the church's attack on Reason. As a result, the groups of revisionists and anti-revisionists were formed.

After E. Zola's court verdict on February 24, 1898, begins the period of so-called leagues. «La Ligue des Droits de l'Homme» (League of Human Rights) stands on the Dreyfusarian position. Ch. Péguy is on their side. On the contrary, the anti-Dreyfussarian intellectuals in December 1898 established «La Ligue de la Patrie Française» (League of the motherland France). Such significant names for upcoming French catholic literary revival as P. Bourget, M. Barres, Ch. Maurras are its supporters. On June 20, 1898 the nationalist conservative movement «Action française» (French Action) and the magazine with the same name is organized. Ch. Maurras quickly becomes one of its major ideologues. G. Bernanos – crucial Catholic literary revival's author of the XXth century will be one of its writers. The intellectuals of both Leagues provided implacable struggle against their opponents on the pages of their own journals: the Republic against the Monarchy, left-liberal republicanism against right-wing conservative traditionalism, atheism against Catholicism, secularism against the union of state and church, the prominence of Jewish politicians and intellectuals against anti-Semitism, pacifism against militarism (*Pelletier, 1995*). No previous French generation had the opportunity to publicly identify and discuss the cornerstone ideological contradictions of the era on such a scale. That is how, according to its researcher H. Serry, the phenomenon of «engaged intellectual» was

born. Since then the French writer had no moral right to ignore social-political, philosophical and ideological challenges of the times. That is why almost all the representatives of French Catholic literary revival – from Ch. Péguy to F. Mauriac and G. Bernanos – were also political essayists (*Julliard, 1995*).

3. Theological preconditions: popes' encyclicals and ecclesiastic modernism

For the conservative Catholic circles, the whole XIXth century manifested itself with the variety of theological disputes, which at the end of the century crystallized into a single challenge of ecclesiastical modernism. In French ecclesiastical context, it was primarily a struggle between two movements: Gallicanism (the question of national church, dependent on Rome purely in theological matters) and Ultramontanism (the complete French church's subjugation to the papal throne). The clerical representatives of the first movement after the French Revolution tried not only to build as autonomous church as possible, but also leaned towards liberal values of social progress. In contrast to them, the second branch rooted in the ideas of monarchy and loyalty to Rome, hence received a name of «Eglise intransigeante» (irreconcilable church) (*Pelletier, 2019*). In addition, during the century, the discourses of historicism, positivism, scientism, secularism, Renan's and Tain's religious theories raise the question whether the church is outdated in part of its teachings and if it could be changed. Part of intellectuals, fascinated by philosophical or political discourses of that time eventually come to atheism. The majority of writers who at the end of the XIXth-the beginning of XXth centuries converted to Catholicism lost their faith either because of dominant philosophical system (French Enlightenment, Kantianism, later the philosophy of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and Marx), or their secularized parents turned away from the church (Mauriac, Barres, Huysmans) (*Gugelot, 2002*). The generation of French Catholic literary revival is predominantly the converted generation, who newly discovered the biblical faith for themselves.

Therefore, in 1864, Pope Pius IX issued the encyclical «Syllabus», in which he condemned the popular discourses of that time: pantheism, naturalism, positivism, scientism, socialism, communism, laicism, fideism, rationalism, arguing why each of them could not be combined with Catholicism (*Tribault, 1972*). In order to newly affirm traditional Catholic non-contradiction of faith and reason (*fides et ratio*) in 1874, in the encyclical «Aeterni patris», Pope Leo XIII declared the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas to be the most completed philosophical reflection of Catholic dogmatic faith. Such significant figure for French Catholic literary revival as J. Maritain actualized this scholastic system in his own philosophical neothomistic thought (*Maritain, 1920*). Then in 1891, in the encyclical «Rerum Novarum», Pope Leo XIII deals with the issue of socialism and communism proclaiming the social doctrine of the church. In 1892, in the encyclical «Inter Sollicitudines», addressed primarily to the French episcopate, the Pope called all Catholics for «rallying» to the Republic. In fact, possible reconciliation with the Republic raise a question of tolerance of republican, thus secular, values hence provoked a wave of misunderstanding among conservatives (*Pelletier, 2003*). Subsequently, French Catholic elites once again divided into two leagues: those, who supported ecclesiastic «Ralliement» (Rallying), and those, who were strictly against.

Finally, during the pontificate of Pius X, all the above-mentioned challenges led to global modernist ecclesiastic crisis. Modernism in the Catholic theological context must be understood as an attempt to renew the very principals of church, which means the possible change in traditional dogmatic and moral foundations in the accordance with modern progressive ideas

(*Dictionnaire de la théologie catholique*, 1908). The discussed questions were not external, consequently variable, but rather the status of the creed itself (*depositum fidei*). Doctrinal modernism had its roots in Kantian subjectivism, where God cannot be known by any efforts of human mind, therefore dogmas that claim to be an objective reflection of his revelation are nothing but subjective creations of dubious value. In France, ecclesiastic modernism was primarily embodied in biblical modernism of A. Loisy, who in his book «L'Évangile et l'Église» («The Gospel and the Church») questioned dogmatic judgments on the divinity of Christ, the heaven, the mystical nature of church and its sacramental (*Ibid*, 1908: 2024). After all, in 1907 in the papal decree «Lamentabili sane exitu» officially condemned Loisy's 65 modernist or relativistic thesis and in the following encyclical «Pascendi» called modernism the synthesis of all heresies (*Pelletier*, 2013), while demanding of the entire Catholic clergy to declare an anti-modernist oath. Thus, the modernist crisis (1885-1914) in French Catholic Church manifested fundamental religious division that already existed on political level and contributed to the appearance of theological discussing among engaged intellectuals on the public level, which in accordance with a huge wave of converted writers newly enlightened Christian problematics.

4. Literary predecessors: from romanticism to decadence

A number of French literature's histories manifest the existence of literary movements that could be considered the literary predecessors of Catholic literary revival of the first half of the XXth century (*Milner*, 1985; *Delon et al*, 2007). Thus, a list of the XIXth century's authors influenced directly Catholic novel's generation. Firstly, Jansenist Port-Royal's theological fideism is worth mentioning and particularly B. Pascal's philosophical system, which became the crucial principle of Catholic revival's poetics, especially those of Mauriac and Bernanos. In 1802, F.-R. de Chateaubriand's «Génie du christianisme» («The Genius of Christianity») (*De Chateaubriand*, 2018) was published. It became the first book in French XIXth century's fiction, which was openly estheticizing Christianity while asserting its artistic and moral superiority over all other religions. «Les Martyres» («Martyrs, or the Triumph of the Christian Faith») appeared in 1809 (*De Chateaubriand*, 1936). One of the first French romanticists, Chateaubriand, uses Christian lexicon and symbolism to elaborate poetical style that, in author's opinion, should testify the unique light of true beauty, which for him is God. French Catholic revival's ideological inspirator – Ch. Maurras wrote, that before Chateaubriand, the word was nothing but abstraction (*Norra*, 2001). Subsequently, Chateaubriand begins a long line of writers, engaged in political writing. Line that goes directly to Barres, Claudel, Mauriac, Bernanos. Moreover, the theorist of traditionalism and activist of French Restoration L. de Bonald with his political pamphlets affects P. Bourget and Ch. Maurras' writing, whereas reactionary, highly metaphorical, even stylistically uncompromising Joseph de Mestre's journalistic writing impacts on the foundation of L. Veuillot's Catholic professional journalism around the periodical «L'Univers» («The Universe») as well as L. Bloy's political emotional pamphlets.

Another romanticist, A. de Lamartine, in his poetry calls the Lord de profundis of the inner self, while using highly symbolic religious language, where the echo of «The Genius of Christianity» is clearly felt. The poet's reflexions are concentrated around human soul, which, on his view, was created by sacrifice. Hence, the very sacrifice of our soul to save the others makes possible adding the individual sacrifice to the Christ's sacrificial gift on behalf of all humanity. Poet elaborates the conception of gradual ascension to God. Apart from broad Christian symbolism, the messianic discourse is clearly audible (*Tarasiuk*, 2014). Moreover,

after 1848 the poet resorts to distinctly reactionary political writing, opposing to republican educational project. A. de Vigny, Lamartine's contemporary, often uses biblical images in his poetry («Moses», «Flood»), however his Catholic feeling is radically different. That is the universe, where God is silent (*De Vigny, 1946*), world sorrow is tragically felt and abandonment by God only sharpens human religious senses («Destinés») («Destined»).

According to A. Tribaudet, an integral part of Ch. Baudelaire's poetics is its inner Christianity, which, in sharp contrast with the romanticist Christian pathos and lyricism, affirms the Christian view of human nature affected by original sin. The original name of Baudelaire's «Fleurs du mal» («Flowers of Evil») was «Limb» (*Baudelaire, 1942*). Depicting the world where evil reigns, where sinful human nature constantly generates and aestheticizes the monstrosity, Baudelaire criticizes the Enlightenment myth about originally innocent, naturally good human. In contrast to Rousseau and the Romanticists, Baudelaire portrays human nature negatively, noticing, that it is not capable of producing anything but crime while affirming that all modern heresies came from one huge heresy of modernity: the rejection of the idea of original sin. (*Tribaudet, 1936*)

Decadent poetics correlates with the Christian worldview similar to Baudelaire. Thus, B. d'Aurervilly (converted to Catholicism in 1846) and J.-K. Huysmans (converted in 1891) elaborate the aesthetic of embodied evil, using directly the image of Satan and demons in their novels «Les Diaboliques» («The She-Devils») and «Là-bas» («Down there»). These authors do not explain the evil neither by social deformation (realism), nor by physiological and psychological determinism (naturalism), needless to say, they are far from the enlightened theory of the original human decency. Depicting and poeticizing the evil, the depth of human fall with both body and soul, they are deeply rooted in the Christian belief in conception of sin. In 1866, in the introduction to his novel «Une vieille maîtresse» («The Old Mistress») d'Aurervilly creates the theory of Catholic novel, arguing that while the Christian worldview strictly divides the Evil and the Good, offers clear identity, it nevertheless gives no limits to the freedom of Catholic author's imagination (*d'Aurervilly, 1851*). Catholic writer must not judge his own characters and their poetical universe, but to depict the eternal human division between God and Satan in all its truth and tragedy. Having read the most decadent novel of the era, «À rebours» («Against Nature») by Huysmans, d'Aurervilly predicted that the author would have to choose between «*the barrel of the gun and the foot of the cross*» (*Tribaudet, 1936*). In after conversion cycle of novels – «En route» («On the road», 1895), «La Cathédrale» («The Cathedral», 1898) and «L'Oblat» («The Oblat», 1903) – Huysmans from the Christian perspective, mostly using the apophatic language of Catholic Rhineland Mystics, presents the images of saints and sinners, explores the intermedial connections between literature and Christian art, music and architecture and elaborates the problems of internal spiritual struggle (*Huysmans, 2019*).

In 1851, in the text «Prophètes du passé» («Prophets of the Past»), d'Aurervilly named the predecessors (de Maistre, Bonald, Chateaubriand, Lamennais) and the successors (l'Isle-Adam, Bloy) of his writing method. Consequently, his literary canon is partly approaching our research of Christian discourse in French literature after 1789 (*D'Aurervilly, 2011*). However, his emphasis on L. Bloy alone could not be sufficient as we analysed above. Similar poetics and Catholic worldview coordinates actualized much broader Christian discourse. Fascinated by passions M. Barres, ideological novelist P. Bourget, the mystical and visionary Ch. Péguy, polemical L. Daudet, finally the flourishing of the Catholic novel and political writing in the first half of XXth century, which is associated with the names of F. Mauriac, P. Claudel, G. Bernanos and J. Green. This younger generation, having absorbed the elements of French

XIXth century literary interpretation of Christianity and having answered to major secular challenges of that time, nevertheless created a qualitatively new poetics, which we call today French Catholic literary revival.

5. Conclusions

Taking all the above-mentioned peculiarities into consideration, it becomes clear that the movement of French Catholic literary revival of the first half of the XXth century did not appear on no foundation. It was a cultural answer to the range of challenges, which came into view during the previous century. We have divided these confronts into three categories in accordance with the nature of these phenomena: historical, theological and purely literary. Among historical premises two fundamental were distinguished. The birth of the Third French Republic within its vector on fast secularisation in all social, predominantly educational, domains and as a result the division of French cultural elites into two hostile camps, each elaborating its own doctrines and forming its own printed organs. Then, the Dreyfus affair – the social-political precedent that formed a new cultural phenomenon of French «engaged intellectual», no matter what side defended. Active political response on the periodicals' pages will be one of the characteristics of all Catholic revival's writers. Yet the ecclesiastic preconditions were of no less significance. The whole XIXth century was the period of multiple Popes' encyclicals that were to react on the philosophical and social currents of that time: from scientism and Kantianism to socialism and communism. The identity of French Catholic writes were much complicated by the permanent movement between Gallicanism and Ultramontanism and the deep modernistic theological crises at the end of the century. Nevertheless, exactly this instability gave the writers the opportunity to elaborate Christian spiritual topics much more freely. The romanticists Chateaubriand and Lamartine initiated the use of biblical allusions and symbols, Baudelaire introduced the problematic of evil and human attraction to it, the decadents Huysmans and d'Aurervilly returned to the theme of original sin and elaborated the whole apothatic Catholic poetics. Without these literary predecessors French Catholic literary revival could not appear. However, the broader background is still to be analysed. For instance, the phenomenon and the reasons of Catholic literary conversions, the role of printed organs as well as cultural circles, the poetical peculiarities and the specific of political engaged writing of both predecessors and representatives of French Catholic literary revival must be studied in our following researches.

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