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Defending a contested discipline. Alfred Loisy, historian of religion(s) at the Collège de France

Annelies Lannoy

- 1 On May 3, 1909 Alfred Loisy gave his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France after what had been an arduous election campaign.¹ In a transparent attempt to appease the minds, he offered an expert *captatio benevolentiae* and a masterly piece of strategic self-representation. After numerous dealings with the antimodernist measures of his Catholic superiors up until his excommunication “vitandus” in March 1908, Loisy had acquired the necessary rhetorical skills for both.² Yet, the goal was now not to convince his audience of his orthodoxy. What Loisy wanted to set straight for the many Catholic and anticlerical opponents of his election, was that his plans for the chair of *histoire des religions* were neither anti-religious nor apologetic, but purely scientific. And the surest roads leading to truly scientific knowledge of religion, he asserted, were history and comparison. Underlining the mutual inclusiveness of these two approaches, Loisy implicitly argued that the chair of *histoire des religions* had been rightfully assigned to him, rather than to one of his main rivals, Egyptologist George Foucart, historian of antiquity and archaeologist Jules Toutain, or anthropologist Marcel Mauss, whose names were left unmentioned in the speech.³ In Loisy’s eyes, Toutain knew history, but had no idea of how to develop a solid comparison; Mauss knew how to compare, but lacked a critical sense of history, and Foucart, finally, failed on both accounts.
- 2 Loisy’s election to the Collège de France came at a critical point in the methodological development of the academic study of religion or *histoire des religions*, as prominent scholars such as François Laplanche and Ivan Strenski have abundantly demonstrated.⁴ New methodological approaches from the emerging disciplines of sociology, anthropology, and psychology threatened the hegemony of the historicist paradigm which had been championed by the first two holders of the chair of *histoire des religions*, father and son Albert and Jean Réville. When Loisy came to the chair, the methodological question as to whether or not this kind of History (*sic*) really best

allowed to comprehend religion scientifically was widely discussed. While the act of comparing had become a more or less acquired habit among scholars of religion at that time,⁵ Loisy rightly noted: “Il y a comparaison et comparaison.”⁶ In the existing discipline of *histoire des religions*, it was, so to speak, not so much the comparison (*religions*), as the particular historical approach (*histoire*) that was increasingly contested. The strongly positivist and anti-theoretical dimension of the traditional historicist approach long made epistemological discussions on the methodological, ideological and/or confessional norms and values underlying the process of academic inquiry of religion very difficult, if not impossible. In 1909, after Jean Réville’s sudden and untimely death, these entered the foreground and acquired a hitherto unseen level of prominence.

- 3 Loisy’s election and inaugural lecture took place against the backdrop of the political and religious turbulences of the time: the long-lasting aftershocks of the disintegration of the *Bloc des gauches*, the prominent social question and disturbances under Clemenceau, the continuing controversies over the Separation between Churches and State (1905), and the Modernist crisis in the Catholic Church of which Loisy had been the central pivot. The dominant methodological debates within the secular *histoire des religions* intersected with these pressing political and religious issues in multifarious ways, and a complex set of intricately entangled questions arose as a result: what role, if any, should religion have in a modern French society; should scientific instruction on religion be integrated in the *école laïque*, and, if so, was a historical approach the best way to proceed? The still young *histoire des religions* did not only face internal methodological storms, but throughout the decades following its institutionalization at the Collège de France (1879) and later, the École Pratique des Hautes Études (1886), its legitimacy as an academic discipline remained contested by outsiders: did the academic study of religion really need chairs and departments of its own?
- 4 The present paper offers a concise evaluation of Loisy’s years at the Collège de France and his answers to some of the aforementioned questions. We will turn our attention for the most part to his election because this peculiar episode of institutional history reveals the high scientific and societal stakes of the chair at the Collège de France, and of the very discipline of *histoire des religions* in France. Thereafter follow a concise analysis of his inaugural lecture and an evaluation of roughly his ten first years at the Collège. We conclude with an epilogue on Loisy’s concerns about the fate of the chair after his retirement in 1932.

1. Loisy as “anti-Mauss.” The elections of 1909⁷

- 5 At the time of Jean Réville’s passing, Alfred Loisy had moved to his birth region, resolved to spend the final years of his presumably short life in the peace and quiet of the Champagne countryside.⁸ He was only too well-aware that his past as a Catholic priest stood in the way of obtaining one of the scarce positions dedicated to the academic study of religion.
- 6 Réville had not only been appointed to the chair of *histoire des religions* at the Collège, but also was *directeur d’études* at the 5th section of the École Pratique. Although Loisy was invited to be candidate for a chair of *histoire des origines chrétiennes* at the École Pratique,⁹ he never seriously considered this possibility. In 1904 he had left his position as *conférencier libre* at the École Pratique in rather unclear circumstances. His personal

decision to resign seems to have been related to the ecclesiastical condemnations of his critical studies of the Bible and his subsequent negotiations with the Curia in order to remain in the Church.¹⁰ Presumably, Loisy felt that his position at a secular research institute complicated these negotiations. But whatever the reason may have been, Loisy's later *Mémoires* show that he was disappointed with his former colleagues of the École Pratique, whom he believed should have offered him a permanent position instead of having accepted his resignation.¹¹

- 7 As for the Collège de France, Loisy was positively impressed by the number of professors who urged him to put himself forward as a candidate for the chair and he was also tempted by the prestige of this leading institution. His correspondence reveals that his most prominent supporters were Latinist Louis Havet and historian of medieval literature Joseph Bédier, and somewhat more latently but no less importantly, historian Gabriel Monod, hispanist Alfred Morel-Fatio, and French literature expert Abel Lefranc. Shortly after Réville's passing several of these scholars approached Loisy. Except for Louis Havet, they were all regulars of the *Jeudistes* salon of the Marquise Arconati-Visconti, originally created in defence of Capitaine Dreyfus. Incited by her academic friends, this powerful and eccentric patroness of the Parisian intellectual and artistic scene got actively involved in his campaign, to such an extent that she may be rightfully called its nerve centre and driving force.¹² In June 1908, one month after the passing of Réville, Loisy and Arconati commenced a lively and almost entirely preserved correspondence.¹³ The latter and their respective correspondence with several of the *Jeudistes* shed invaluable light on the motives of Loisy's supporters.
- 8 Loisy entered the campaign from an underdog position. In one of his first letters to Arconati-Visconti, he acknowledged that it would be difficult to convince future voters that he did not come to the chair as either an anticlerical "homme de combat" or as a Catholic in disguise. This letter deserves to be quoted at length, since it not only reveals the ambivalent reception of his candidature, but also the real ambivalence of his own religious identity at this point.

Vous êtes sans doute mieux informée que moi de ce que devient ma candidature. Peut-être aurait-elle besoin de vaincre à droite et à gauche certains préjugés dont elle ne triomphera pas facilement. Il est assez évident pourtant qu'elle a un caractère purement scientifique, et que je ne suis l'apologiste ni l'adversaire d'aucune religion, à commencer par le catholicisme. Certains ont l'air de me prendre pour un théologien, provisoirement exclu de l'Église par une erreur de Pie X ; d'autres me prêtent les plus noirs desseins contre l'Église qui m'a renié. Les faits sont ce que vous savez. Pie X m'a mis dans la condition d'un savant laïque, et je m'y trouve parfaitement à l'aise ; la conduite du Pape et la mienne ont été, si je l'ose dire, aussi logiques l'une que l'autre, et l'on ne voit pas comment la situation créée par la sentence que le Saint-Office a prononcée contre moi, le 7 mars dernier, pourrait changer. D'autre part, cette sentence [...] ne m'a pas transformé en sectaire ennemi de l'Église à laquelle j'ai appartenu. Je suis tout disposé à étudier avec une bienveillante impartialité toutes les religions, sans en excepter celle que je dirais encore la mienne, si Pie X ne me l'avait défendu.¹⁴

- 9 Loisy's rivals for the chair were by no means easy competition. The following prominent scholars were also candidate: egyptologists Émile Amélineau, Alexandre Moret, Eugène Réville, and the aforementioned George Foucart; historian of Greece Jules Toutain, Old Testament and ancient Israel scholar Maurice Vernes, historian of Christianity Albert Dufourcq, and lastly, Marcel Mauss, who was quite widely considered the favourite because he had been elected second in line after Jean Réville

in the 1907 election.¹⁵ In the letters of Loisy's supporters, Foucart and Mauss received by far the most attention. The former was the son of Paul Foucart, professor of Greek epigraphy at the Collège de France. Although George Foucart was probably not a conservative himself, Loisy's supporters considered him the candidate of the "réactionnaires" due to the active interventions of his influential father, who was a conservative Catholic and, as such, violently opposed to the election of Loisy.¹⁶ Mauss, on the other hand, was generally presented as the preferred candidate of the "left", supported by professors who sympathized with the sociological school of Mauss' uncle Émile Durkheim, and/or with Mauss' overt socialist beliefs. In what follows, we will focus mainly on the rivalry between Loisy and Mauss, because Mauss is by far the most criticized scholar in the letters of Loisy's support team. In itself, this is no surprise. After all, Mauss was top favourite, and Loisy would plausibly have to get his votes from those professors who were likely to vote for Mauss. Even if Loisy himself remained somewhat naive on this point, Arconati and her *Jeudistes* realized perfectly well that there was no chance of convincing the conservative voters to elect the "excommunié".

- 10 If one thing becomes clear from Loisy's correspondence, it is that ideological convictions were as important as scientific considerations, and that both were intimately entangled. Still, it is important to underline that the present account of the election is schematic and based on very fragmentarily preserved sources. We do not have information on the personal motives of all voters, and moreover the nature of epistolary conversation is such that it often bypasses unanimously shared opinions – for instance on the scientific merits of the candidates – to focus on the more contentious, in this case extra-scientific issues. For Loisy's supporters, three factors appear to have played a determining role: their anticlericalism, antisocialism, and hostility, or wariness at the very least, towards Mauss' Jewishness. Again, it should be stressed that these issues did not have equal importance for all of them.

Anticlericalism

- 11 The chair of *histoire des religions* at the Collège was a symbolic chair, created under important Protestant impulse in the early years of the Third Republic, and was firmly embedded in its laicization program.¹⁷ Some thirty years later, after the Separation between Churches and State (1905), it had lost nothing of its emblematic importance. To understand the central role of anticlericalism in the election, we need to turn to the ideological beliefs of Arconati and the aforementioned professors-*Jeudistes*, and thereafter try to identify those of Loisy himself. Aside from Gérard Baal's in-depth studies on the political tribulations of Arconati's salon after the dissolution of the *Bloc des gauches*, research on this network of academics, politicians and leading men of the French administration and on Arconati herself is still ongoing.¹⁸ Arconati was a strong-willed and high-opinionated woman who carefully selected her guests on the basis of ideological compatibility (and social status). While future research will bring further nuance to the ideological commonalities and specificities of the *Jeudistes*, the contours of their shared worldviews are clear.
- 12 The Marquise, born Marie Peyrat, was the daughter of Alphonse Peyrat, one of the founding fathers of the Third Republic and *intimi* of Léon Gambetta. She married Marquis Gianmartino Arconti-Visconti, a friend of her father, and was the sole heir of his family fortune when the Marquis died after only two years of marriage. Since a

young age, the Marquise was imbued with her father's radical republicanism. She was fiercely anticlerical, and at times downright anti-religious, even if several of her most loyal friendships and relations were with Protestants such as Gabriel Monod, Alfred Morel-Fatio, or her life companion, art collector Raoul Duseigneur.¹⁹ Raised in a family of strong political commitment, Arconati took an ardent interest in politics.²⁰ Barred from active political life, she was immensely resourceful in finding ways to propagate her anticlericalism and influence the political scene. Her financial means, talent for strategic thinking, and insightfulness in the hegemonic power of science, art, and culture at large provided fruitful outcomes. To limit ourselves to the scientific world, the Marquise financed a number of institutions for higher education and research, such as the *Université de Paris*,²¹ academic chairs and *cours complémentaires* such as that of Gabriel Monod at the Collège de France,²² scholarly projects such as the edition of Rabelais' collected work by her friend Abel Lefranc, professor of Modern French Language and Literature also at the Collège de France. Many of these projects were carefully selected on the basis of ideological compatibility. As for her influence on political decision making, she regularly financed the campaigns of her political friends, including Joseph Reinach or Émile Combes. Aside from putting her money to strategic use, she also acquired more direct (or less indirect) political power through her excellent networking skills culminating in a salon that was unique in that it united high-profile personalities of both the political and academic world.²³

- 13 Whether Loisy wanted it or not, he was seen by many an anticlerical republican as *the* victim of the antimodernist intransigence of the Catholic Church. Several of the *Jeudistes*, notably Émile Combes and Alfred Dreyfus, regarded his fight for the division between science and religion as parallel to their own belief in the strict separation between State and Churches.²⁴ Given the strong connection between the discipline of *histoire des religions* and the Third Republic, this conflation of interests hardly comes as a surprise. However, the reality behind this regularly drawn parallel was more complicated than the *Jeudistes* wanted to see. To begin, Loisy had not left the Church out of his own will, but was forced to do so (see the letter quoted in full above). Secondly, his historical and exegetical publications were uncompromisingly critical, but in his theological-historical work such as *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy had made clear that he was a Modernist Catholic, but a Catholic nevertheless. Thirdly, Loisy had no political interests whatsoever, and his Republican sympathies long remained unclear.²⁵
- 14 While Arconati and the *Jeudistes* were convinced that Loisy was the right man for the chair, their letters reveal that it was not so for other voters (rarely mentioned by name), whose anticlerical beliefs were an important reason *not* to vote for him. How was it, then, that in spite of his troublesome Catholic past *and* Mauss' pole position, Loisy managed to be elected?

Anti-socialism

- 15 While he didn't have the disadvantage of a clerical past, Mauss had his own battles to fight. The fact that Loisy's support team criticized Mauss much more vehemently than other opponents, was not just simply because he was Loisy's most dangerous rival. We should also refer to the deep-seated anti-socialism of several (though not all) *Jeudistes*. Mauss' socialist sympathies regularly came to the fore in Arconati's correspondence, where they were met with criticism and suspicion. In one of his letters to Arconati, Alfred Morel-Fatio even suggested that Loisy was to be "replaced" if the health issues

from which he was suffering at that particular moment would jeopardize his chances at success.²⁶ As far as we know, this letter is the only one to make this point, but it certainly suggests that some *Jeudistes* may have supported Loisy less because of their scientific or anticlerical sympathy for him than because of their hostility towards “the candidate of a group of anarchists”, to use Morel-Fatio’s words.²⁷

- 16 The overall quite strong hostility to Mauss was both ideological and methodological. For several *Jeudistes* sociology and socialism were basically two sides of the same coin. As Baal explained, several members of Arconati’s salon were wary of socialism, but had momentarily put their reservations aside at the time of the *Bloc des gauches*.²⁸ When the *Bloc* disintegrated after the socialists had withdrawn following Jean Jaurès’s lead, this hostility violently resurged and it reached a new climax in the later 1900s, when there was one labourers’ strike after another, and when Jaurès answered the growing tensions between France and Germany with pacifism, while radical republicans such as Arconati herself urgently called for military action. The ups and downs of the *Jeudistes*’ antisocialism are well documented given that Jaurès visited the salon. Baal’s fine analyses have shown that he was repeatedly denied access due to political dissensions. In 1909, Jaurès supported Mauss for all the reasons Arconati did not support him.

- 17 This troubled background may help us to make sense of an interesting letter Gabriel Monod wrote to Arconati Visconti about his reservations towards Mauss:

À mon avis, il n’a nullement l’envergure nécessaire. Il s’occupe beaucoup plus de socialisme unifié que de science et son oncle Durkheim déplore toujours qu’il ne soit pas plus laborieux scientifiquement. On le dit très intelligent – mais c’est un sociologue beaucoup plus qu’un historien et l’histoire des religions doit être traitée de point de vue historique avant tout. C’est une lapalissade que les sociologues méconnaissent. Je me méfie passablement des sociologues. Ils revêtent d’ordinaire de formules solennelles et pseudoscientifiques d’inutiles lieux communs.²⁹

- 18 When interpreted at face value, Monod’s words suggest that his reluctance to support Mauss was based on purely scientific grounds, and more precisely on a radical methodological opposition between “sociologie” and “histoire”. Mauss’ work was indeed concerned with discovering the social structures of religious phenomena (e.g. sacrifice or magic). But it should immediately be added that his sociological methodology was perfectly compatible with a historical outlook, as Mauss and Hubert themselves had, in fact, repeatedly shown in their work.³⁰ Monod’s opposition between sociology and history only makes sense when considering the underlying ideological gulf between Mauss’ and Monod’s own kind of “histoire.”

- 19 The *histoire historisante* approach, which had been developed by important scholars such as Monod himself, and which was applied to the study of religion by the Révilles or by other scholars such as Jules Toutain, was an exceptional achievement. It firmly established the autonomy of the historical-critical study of religion with regard to theology. This, however, does not imply that it was itself devoid of ideological meaning. The clash between the historicist and sociological paradigms that took place in fin-de-siècle France, was methodological *and* ideological. Ivan Strenski conclusively showed that the positivist historicist paradigm – which was typically developed by liberal Protestants (Monod and the Révilles) – was underpinned by, and itself legitimized a typically Eurocentric, Christian, and individualistic understanding of the world.³¹ The proclaimed universalism of this particular outlook was severely criticized by Marcel Mauss, while Mauss was in turn criticized by his opponents for doing politics instead of science.³²

- 20 A most interesting point about the *Jeudistes*' support for Loisy, is that Loisy himself had, in fact, always been very critical of the predominantly individualistic take on religion of the liberal-Protestant chiefs of the *histoire des religions*, even if his own method definitely falls into the "histoire historisante" approach.³³ Loisy agreed with Monod that "la méthode historique" was *the* key to unearthing the secrets of religion(s), but ideologically speaking, his "history" was not the "history" of Arconati, Monod, and the other *Jeudistes*. Inspired by his own Catholic understanding of religion, Loisy would always remain very much drawn towards the social dimension of religion and especially of ritual, also in the years after his excommunication. In the following part of this paper, we will show that Loisy actively explored the epistemological value of Mauss' sociological method, and in the end came to a critical but altogether nuanced evaluation of it. So, although he was the candidate of an anti-socialist network, scientifically speaking, Loisy maintained his independence.

Antisemitism

- 21 When news spread that Loisy, and not Mauss, was elected to the chair, several newspapers suggested that antisemitic hostility towards Mauss was the culprit behind this unexpected turn of events.³⁴ To what extent can this be confirmed or not by Arconati's correspondence? The question calls for a very nuanced answer.
- 22 While most expressions of animosity to Mauss were motivated by antisocialism, there are a few indications that at least for Arconati herself some antisemitic sentiment was at play. We have not found such instances in the letters of other *Jeudistes* but this, of course, does not necessarily mean that Arconati was the only one to be hostile to Mauss on account of his Jewishness. Aside from the fragmented epistolary sources, the interpretation of this particular issue is further complicated by the fact that Arconati's salon comprised several Jewish members, including Joseph Reinach, Alfred Dreyfus and the lawyer Ferdinand Dreyfus, who were all close friends of the Marquise. As we have explained in more detail elsewhere,³⁵ Arconati's disagreeable evocations of Mauss' Jewish identity were related to her personal disappointment with her friend Salomon Reinach, brother of Joseph and a scholar of religion himself, whom she accused of supporting Mauss instead of Loisy. In her letters to Loisy, she denounced Reinach's purported lack of support for Loisy as a misplaced token of inter-Jewish solidarity – a fact Reinach himself always denied.

Loisy's election

- 23 The course of events during the elections has been amply documented by other scholars.³⁶ In the end, no less than 5 rounds were needed for Loisy to obtain the necessary majority of the votes. And even after he had been elected, his actual appointment to the chair was not a *fait accompli*. According to the usual procedure, the decision by the professors at the Collège de France had to be ratified by the then Minister of Instruction Publique, who consulted the relevant Académie of the Institut de France. The affair of Père Scheil's affair still fresh in mind,³⁷ the *Jeudistes* worried about a similar course of events happening to Loisy, especially now that Georges Clemenceau – who had been one of Scheil's most ardent opponents – led the government. Rather early in his campaign, the *Jeudistes* had organized themselves in

order to procure sufficient political support. Arconati, assisted by Monod, mobilized the politicians of the salon to convince Clemenceau and the then Minister of Education, Gaston Doumergue to support Loisy. This delicate matter was left to Combes and Henri Brisson, who dealt respectively with Doumergue and Clemenceau. In the end, Doumergue likely signed his approval even before the advice of the responsible *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* arrived.³⁸ The advice of the *Académie* was negative. Most probably due to the influence of Paul Foucart, the committee members proposed Foucart and Toutain.

2. The *Leçon inaugurale*

- 24 In his monograph *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism*, Guy Stroumsa rightly emphasizes the remarkable exception that was the French study of religion in the European scholarly landscape.³⁹ Unlike many other European countries where the academic study of religion remained part and parcel of (liberal) theological institutional settings and agendas, the French *histoire des religions* was intimately bound up with the ideal of *laïcité*. Yet, even if the major Protestant, Catholic and Jewish representatives of the French discipline agreed on its strictly non-theological nature, their interpretations of the *laïcité* ideal varied widely, to such an extent that they often accused each other of not heralding it at all. The primary purpose of Loisy's inaugural lecture, then, was to outline the premises of his own interpretation of it. This would have been a necessity for any new appointee to this particular chair, but it was *a fortiori* the case for Loisy, as his endorsement of this principle (and of the Republic) was under severe suspicion. As was Loisy's way, he explained his own position partly by attacking somebody else's.
- 25 At first sight, the two opening sections of the inaugural lecture may read as the customary laudations of the new professor's predecessors, i.e. Albert and Jean Réville.⁴⁰ Loisy appraised their historical-comparative methodology and endorsed their ideal of *impartialité*, which meant that they had stayed clear of both antireligious hardliners and religious apologists.⁴¹ But closer examination quickly reveals how Loisy repeatedly insinuates that the Révilles had actually failed to practice what they preached. In his view, their Protestant take on Christianity and on religion in general unmistakably stood in the way of true impartiality.⁴² It is important to point out how harsh an accusation this was, especially in light of the polemical context, in which the chair at the Collège had been created. To accuse a historian of religions of being a theologian in disguise came down to saying that he was not a historian of religions at all. To soften this blow for his new scientific home, Loisy called upon the memory of Ernest Renan, one of the Collège de France's greatest coryphées in the study of religion. Right at the beginning of the lecture, Loisy had already stated that he was a pupil of Renan, who, as a "maître incomparable",⁴³ had initiated him. This was, in fact, only half of the truth, because Loisy had been very critical of Renan when he attended his lectures as a young Catholic scholar. Although he was an adept of his historical-critical approach, young Loisy had severely criticized Renan's severance of science and religion. More than a decade (and multiple sanctions and excommunications) later, Loisy applauded Renan for this approach. Comparing Albert Réville's *Jésus de Nazareth* with Renan's *Vie de Jésus*, he now concluded that Renan's peculiar, hybrid historical-literary method certainly had its deficiencies but still was historically preferable to Réville's liberal-Protestant one.⁴⁴

- 26 Overall, Loisy's appraisal of Albert Réville and subsequently of Jean Réville, whom he reproached an all too individualistic, typically Protestant approach, mostly served to convince his audience that he intended to succeed where his predecessors had failed: his impartiality would be true impartiality, and nobody should *a priori* accuse him of theological bias, for the self-proclaimed impartial Révilles had been crypto-theologians themselves.
- 27 After the ideological first part of the speech, followed a methodological second part, in which Loisy revealed his plans for the chair and the specificities of his comparative method (because "there is comparison and comparison"). This latter part is an important testimony to his scientific development from a Catholic biblical scholar with comparative interests to a historian of religions. The text reveals his stand on the various – often mutually competing – paradigms for studying religions comparatively, from the then already quite outdated method of comparative mythology (à la Friedrich M. Müller) to the new ritualist approaches propounded by anthropologists and sociologists. Although all of these methods received serious evaluation, this part of the text was especially conceived as a reply to Mauss' ideas, on the one hand, and to the recent publication of Salomon Reinach's *Orpheus*, on the other.⁴⁵
- 28 At the time of Loisy's inaugural speech, Reinach's *Orpheus* instigated an enormous controversy among conservative and progressive, Catholic, Protestant, free-thinking and Jewish scholars.⁴⁶ Reinach had written this general history of religions as a manual to be used in the *école laïque*, where any form of instruction on religion (religious or secular) had been banned, much to the dismay of both religious and anti-religious voices. Throughout the first decade of the twentieth century discussions on the instruction on religion within the *école laïque* repeatedly resurged. Just one year after his election, Loisy, too, would engage in these debates, convinced as he was that his new position at the Collège de France demanded his intervention.⁴⁷
- 29 *Orpheus* offered a radically rationalist account of religion which Reinach controversially defined as "un ensemble de scrupules qui font obstacle au libre exercice de nos facultés."⁴⁸ In Reinach's view, instruction in the history of religions was necessary in order to "liberate the human mind." Although Reinach also developed more benign ideas on religion, e.g. as an important source of social cohesion and moral behaviour, the overall picture was a radical attack on organized religion which was very hard to digest for Loisy (and many others). Returning to the key notion of impartiality, Loisy stated against Reinach that the basic attitude of the historian of religions towards his subject of inquiry should be one of benign sympathy. Throughout the inaugural lecture, his own belief that religion was a positive and thus recommendable force in society shimmered through:
- À travers les mythes imaginaires, les cultes bizarres, grossiers, souvent cruels, derrière le fanatisme ardent des religions qui grandissent, la puissance d'inertie de celles qu'a figées une tradition immobile, la résistance irritante de celles qui luttent désespérément contre un progrès qui les menace, il faut savoir, encore et toujours, discerner l'aspiration de l'humanité vers un idéal, vaguement perçu et voulu, de société bonne et de conscience parfaite.⁴⁹
- 30 This passage already hints at the philosophical project on the "Religion de l'humanité", which Loisy would be pursuing alongside his historical studies until the end of his life. His historical research was intimately bound up with the latter, as Loisy was convinced that history naturally shows how religion offers the surest path to true humanism. We

will return to the philosophical-historical hybridity of his work in the following section.

- 31 After setting out the general premises, Loisy turned to his research program, which would consist of a comparative study of each of the constitutive parts of religion. The first central topic of inquiry would be sacrifice, since – Loisy explained – ritual is the primary and most solid part of any religion.⁵⁰ Whoever wants to understand what religion is, should focus on ritual, and not on myth or theology, which are products of religion, but not religion itself. As a Catholic scholar, Loisy had always had a pronounced interest in the cultic aspects of religion. But this theoretical statement on the primary nature of ritual – both in terms of chronology and importance – definitely heralds a new orientation in his thought, in a twofold way. First of all, it shows a scholar who is no longer bound by the traditional teachings of the Church, and secondly, it reveals a genuine shift in thinking. Prior to 1908, Loisy had rejected theoretical statements that claimed universal validity for all religions, arguing that the development of Christianity was under divine control and therefore *sui generis*. His now transparent adoption of the universalizing anthropological theory of myth ritualism shows the new scientific journey on which he was about to embark.
- 32 With his choice of sacrifice as focus of inquiry, Loisy on the one hand intended to compete with Mauss on the latter's own grounds.⁵¹ On the other hand, though, the study of sacrifice also corresponded to a typically Catholic, anti-Protestant approach, since Protestant scholars typically felt uneasy about the study of sacrifice.⁵² Loisy's correspondence of 1908-1909 shows a genuine scientific interest in the work of Mauss and Hubert which was about to intensify in the years to come. Loisy understood the scientific compatibility of the Durkheimian sociological approach with his own (largely Catholic inspired) inclination to favour the cultic-collective aspects of religion over the spiritual-individual dimensions. At the same time, however, he accused the sociological method of being exclusivist and reductionist. In a letter of January 1909, Loisy reported to Arconati on an epistolary exchange he had had with Henri Hubert on exactly this subject. This letter leads us to the crux of his later public critique of the Durkheimians, that is, that according to Loisy, the *raison d'être* of religion could not be the social nature of mankind. Social cohesion was an effect of religion, but not its *essence*.
- J'ai ajouté que, pour ce qui me regardait personnellement, je trouvais la méthode *sociologique* utile en tant que méthode, et que je louais les travaux que Hubert et M. nous ont donnés sur le sacrifice et sur la magie, mais que, si l'on voulait faire de cette méthode un système philosophique absolu et exclusif, le système devenait faux par son exagération, et n'expliquait rien du tout. En effet, dire que la religion est une chose sociale peut être une bonne façon de la décrire historiquement, mais cela ne rend pas compte de sa raison d'être.⁵³
- 33 In his inaugural speech Loisy emphatically explained that it was his ambition to develop a historical-religious method to study religion as *sui generis* phenomenon, which would include insights from comparative philology, anthropology, sociology and psychology, yet without privileging any one of these approaches.⁵⁴ Once again, he thus underlined that he was the perfect consensus figure for the chair, not just from a theological but also from a methodological point of view.

3. Loisy's history of religions: between history of religions and philosophy of religion

- 34 Loisy's autobiography shows us that his reasons for studying sacrifice were not just scientific but also personal. Starting on the for him familiar grounds of Israelite sacrifice, and thereafter proceeding to the rites of ancient Babylonia, Egypt, Persia, Greece, Rome, India, China, America, and contemporary indigenous religions of the "non-civilisés", his final point of destination was always meant to be the Eucharist.⁵⁵ As we have argued elsewhere, his comparative study of sacrifice served mutually interdependent historical and philosophical goals.⁵⁶ By historically and comparatively investigating what it was that had made the Eucharist such a durable and appealing part of the Christian cult, Loisy further developed his personal views on the religious future of humanity. His philosophical ideas, however, also shaped and structured his historical analyses. During his first years at the Collège – which were soon to coalesce with some of the darkest pages of twentieth-century history – he developed a twofold, historical and philosophical, research path. First publishing and teaching on the history of ritual sacrifice in the said religions, he began simultaneously to publish his philosophical ideas during WWI. The concept of sacrifice was the connecting thread between his historical and philosophical oeuvre. In Loisy's eyes, ritual sacrifice and moral (self-)sacrifice were part of a religious continuum. Philosophy of religion never was the explicit theme of his courses at the Collège de France, but it did occupy a prominent place in his inaugural lectures of each academic year *and*, we should repeat, it underpinned the content of his "historical courses."
- 35 After the war, Loisy kept his philosophical research interests, but abandoned the domain of the general history of religions. The study of sacrifice now made way for the exegetical studies on which he had started to lecture during the wartime years. The thematic shift from the general history of religions to the origins of Christianity was deeply motivated by the war. The long-lasting controversy between Catholic and Protestant scholars over the birth of Christianity acquired a strong nationalistic significance during the so-called "mobilization of intellect."⁵⁷ Loisy, for his part, felt responsible for underlining the German-Protestant bias in the historical writings of important scholars such as Adolf von Harnack and Adolf Deissmann. His return to the study of Christianity during the wartime years was not, as some have stated, a strategy to escape the general *histoire des religions* in order to return to his preferred research on Christianity. As professor at one of the single most important French research institutes, Loisy regarded his intervention in the field of biblical studies as a patriotic duty.⁵⁸ Moreover, comparison remained a powerful weapon in the exegetical debates between German and French scholars. Adopting a comparative and in his view strictly secular approach, Loisy was convinced that he very much remained within the grounds of his chair, even if his topic of inquiry was the origin of Christianity instead of the general history of religions.⁵⁹
- 36 Returning to Loisy's lectures on sacrifice, it should first be underlined that these were firmly embedded in an evolutionary master narrative on the history of religions of the exact same kind that had been vigorously attacked by Marcel Mauss for its Eurocentrism and Christian bias. Loisy embraced the then popular classification of religions (ancient and modern) according to their "stage of development" on the imaginary axis of the development of the human species, and the underlying

anthropological idea that religions of the same stage could be compared regardless of their chronological or geographical settings.⁶⁰ Dividing religions according to the taxonomy of “primitive cults,” “national religions” or universalizing “économies de salut”, he allowed for a far-reaching kind of comparative research, whereby (Catholic) Christianity nevertheless remained the dominant constituent of his hermeneutical horizon. He consistently applied this tripartite taxonomy throughout his *Essai historique sur le sacrifice* (1920), in which he published the synthesis of his preceding courses. Overall, it is fair to say that Loisy compared in order to uncover by him largely preconceived similarities between the Eucharist and the sacrificial rites of other religions. Drawing an uninterrupted line of development from the most primitive cults of the “non-civilized” up to the Catholic Eucharist, he argued that these sacrificial rites were all based on the same erroneous mechanisms of magical thinking, even though their moral value became more and more sublimated over time.

- 37 In his historical publications of 1909-1914, Christianity is always assigned the privileged position at the climax of the religious development. Still, during that period, Loisy’s frame of interpretation did gradually move away from an apology of (Catholic) Christianity. In his comparative study of pagan mysteries and the Christian mystery, published as a series of articles between 1913 and 1914,⁶¹ he insisted on the similarities between the pagan mystery rites and the Eucharist, but in the end still concluded that Christianity remains incomparable because of its clear universalist dimension and the moral example of Jesus. By contrast, in his later *Essai historique sur le sacrifice*, Christianity is deemed entirely comparable to other religions, with which it shares a magical – in Loisy’s view self-alienating – understanding of religion. Under impact of WWI, Loisy now considered Christianity as a part of the past, as a religion that served national interests and had to be replaced by a truly universal *Religion de l’humanité*. This religion of the future, Loisy believed, should no longer include ritual sacrifices (in whatever form they came), but instead be organized around the moral precept of love which, for Loisy, meant the will to sacrifice oneself for the sake of others.
- 38 It is true that Loisy’s definition of sacrifice as the gift of the self remains deeply inspired by his Catholic past, and that his evolutionary taxonomies were underpinned by a Christian outlook, as other scholars have duly noted.⁶² However, we should be wary of passing all too harsh anachronistic judgements. First of all, Loisy worked at a time when many Christian or formerly Christian scholars were unable to “go all the way” in their comparative research, as Loisy eventually did when he did not only compare early Christianity to neighbouring religions such as the ancient mysteries, but also basically to all religions of both the past and the present. His method and emphasis on similarities and continuities may no longer correspond to those of present-day comparative scholars, they nevertheless were an exception within the Catholic scholarship of religion in its own day, where scholars such as Marie-Joseph Lagrange almost exclusively adopted a discourse of dissimilarity, and did so for apologetic reasons.⁶³ Secondly, Loisy’s research on sacrifice was much more than just implicit Catholic theology. In his philosophical essay *La Religion* (1917), he made a distinction between *religions*, which were transitory, volatile, and sources of both good and harmful practices, and *la Religion* which was the underlying imperishable, positive essence of religions, i.e. mankind’s mystical intuition of higher principles of morality. By means of this conceptual distinction, Loisy was able to give serious consideration to social-scientific theories of religion, such as that of Mauss, which many contemporary scholars of religion considered unworthy of any attention.⁶⁴ Loisy’s endeavour to

reconcile the secular methods of his own day with his belief in the irreducible mystical qualities of religion in a new all-encompassing historical methodology may rightfully be called an original stand within the very polarized history of religions of his day.

Epilogue

- 39 Starting from 1926-27, Loisy was replaced by Jean Baruzi at the Collège de France.⁶⁵ In 1933, the year after his official retirement, he published the two syntheses of his preceding courses on biblical exegesis at the Collège and the École Pratique: *La Naissance du christianisme* and *La Religion d'Israël*.⁶⁶ These two works show Loisy's lifelong interest in studying comparatively ancient Christianity and Judaism within their religious-historical contexts, but as studies of Christianity and Judaism they in fact fell outside of the scope of the research program on the general history of *all* religions, which he himself had announced in 1909.
- 40 Upon Loisy's retirement, the chair of *histoire des religions* was discontinued and the newly available funds were used to create a chair of *histoire de la civilisation moderne* assigned to Lucien Febvre. One year later, in 1933, the chair of *épigraphie et antiquités grecques* was transformed into a new chair of *histoire des religions*, which was now assigned to Loisy's candidate Jean Baruzi. Loisy's correspondence allows us to gain some insight into this strange course of events, as does the report that Charles Andler, holder of the chair of *langues et littératures d'origine germanique*, wrote in defence of the chair of *histoire des religions*.⁶⁷ Aside from the radiance of Lucien Febvre, it certainly seems that these decisions were also related to the very discipline of the history of religions itself and, presumably, to the specific way Loisy, as one of its most prominent French representatives, had interpreted and shaped it during more than two decades.
- 41 In an extensive letter to his Belgian friend Franz Cumont, Loisy explained that several of his colleagues at the Collège de France contested the existence of the history of religions as an autonomous discipline: "D'aucuns même, et de fort considérables, vont presque à dire que l'histoire des religions est une discipline inexistante, l'histoire des religions se confondant avec celle des sociétés et des civilisations."⁶⁸ And a similar accusation can be derived from the report of Charles Andler, who insisted especially on the autonomy of *histoire des religions* vis-à-vis the discipline of *sociologie*:
- On peut dire aussi que cette comparaison des religions se fait déjà ici dans la chaire de *sociologie*. Mais tout d'abord la sociologie n'a atteint à une solidité scientifique que dans l'étude des religions primitives. Il y aura peut-être un jour une sociologie des religions les plus évoluées. Il est permis de penser qu'elle n'est pas encore constituée ; et aussi bien ne pourra-t-elle jamais remplacer l'histoire. La sociologie tâche d'établir les lois les plus générales ; l'Histoire [*sic*] étudie ce qu'on a vu qu'une fois. Les deux études se complètent mais ne se confondront jamais.⁶⁹
- 42 Even if Andler insists on their complementarity, it is clear that more than twenty years after Loisy's election, the waters between the partisans of the disciplines of sociology and the history of religions continued to be deep, not just methodologically but also ideologically and thematically.⁷⁰ The fact that Mauss had been elected to the chair of *sociologie* just one year before Loisy's retirement will definitely have played a role in the decision to transform the chair of *histoire des religions*.
- 43 With the exception of his comparative study of sacrifice, Loisy had continued the research carried out by the Révilles on the history of Christianity (which surely is what

Andler meant by “les religions les plus évoluées”). The focus on Christianity, indeed, seemed to have been another reason for some to contest the chair of *histoire des religions universelles*, since no scholar could possibly have expertise in all religions, and Loisy’s successor would thus almost surely be yet another expert of Christianity.⁷¹ In this respect, Loisy’s decision not to execute his announced comparative thematic study of prayer, priesthood, religious ethics, etc.⁷² after finishing his courses on sacrifice, but instead to turn to biblical exegesis, had definitely confirmed the suspicions of the earlier anticlerical opponents of his election. As we mentioned above, Loisy himself did not see the problem of his (later) focus on Christianity within the disciplinary framework of the history of religions. The episode of the *Jubilé Loisy* conference, which was organized in honour of his 70th birthday in 1927 under the heading of *Congrès d’histoire du christianisme* to avoid competition or confusion with the fifth *Congrès international d’histoire des religions* that was scheduled to take place that same year,⁷³ amply shows that for him the history of religions was first and foremost characterized by its strictly secular goals and its historical-comparative methodology, rather than by the specific themes discussed.⁷⁴

- 44 All in all, the history of religions clearly remained a contested field of study in the 1930s, attacked by the old discipline of theology and newcomers such as sociology. Many years after the Separation of 1905, it also remained a highly symbolic and polarized discipline for which every decision still was interpreted in light of the divide between science and the Churches. In his report Andler insisted that more than any other chair, it was, indeed, the chair of *histoire des religions*, which embodied the very spirit of the Collège de France: “Elle affirme par son existence seule le droit à un enseignement librement scientifique de toutes les religions.”⁷⁵ In a letter to Cumont, Loisy put things somewhat more forcefully. To transform the chair, he explained, did not only correspond to a rejection of his work, it was first and foremost a disavowal of his fight for scientific autonomy against the Church, and, by implication, he added purposefully, this decision would cast doubt on the scientific values of the Collège de France itself:

[P]eut-être comprendra-t-on que le maintien de la chaire importe à l’avancement des études religieuses en France, et que la suppression serait interprétée d’un certain côté comme un désaveu public du dernier titulaire. Ce n’est peut-être pas cela que désirent mes savants collègues. Mais s’ils admettaient réellement que j’ai représenté pendant vingt-trois ans au Collège de France une discipline qui n’existe pas, ils auraient certainement droit à une bénédiction spéciale du Saint Père et du Saint-Office.⁷⁶

- 45 In the end, Loisy’s fears, testimonial of his still ongoing struggle with his Catholic past, turned out to be unfounded.

NOTES

1. This article partially draws on my previously published book *Alfred Loisy and the Making of History of Religions. A Study of the Development of Comparative Religion in the early 20th Century* (Berlin-

Boston, de Gruyter, coll. "Religionsgeschichtliche Versuche und Vorarbeiten, 74", 2020), while also offering new analyses of epistolary sources that were not examined in that book. Loisy's inaugural lecture was published as an individual essay: Alfred Loisy, *Leçon d'ouverture du cours d'histoire des religions au Collège de France*, Paris, Émile Nourry, 1909.

2. For Loisy's role in the Modernist crisis in the Catholic Church, which is beyond the purview of this article, the interested reader may, among many others, turn to the seminal studies of Émile Poulat, *Histoire, dogme et critique dans la crise moderniste* [1962], Paris, Casterman, 1979; Pierre Colin, *L'Audace et le soupçon : la crise moderniste dans le catholicisme français (1893-1914)*, Paris, Desclée de Brouwer, 1997; Charles J.T. Talar, *(Re)reading, Reception, and Rhetoric. Approaches to Roman Catholic Modernism*, New York, Peter Lang, 1999; Émile Goichot, *Alfred Loisy et ses amis*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf, 2002; Harvey Hill, *The Politics of Modernism. Alfred Loisy and the Scientific Study of Religion*, Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, 2002; François Laplanche, *La Crise de l'origine*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2006.

3. Marcel Mauss is very much present implicitly, though. We will make this point in the second part of this article.

4. Ivan Strenski, "The Ironies of Fin-de-Siècle Rebellions against Historicism and Empiricism in the École Pratique des Hautes Études", in Arie L. Molendijk and Peter Pels (eds.), *Religion in the Making. The Emergence of the Sciences of Religion*, Leiden/Boston/Köln, Brill, 1998, p. 159-180; F. Laplanche, "L'histoire des religions en France au début du xx^e siècle", *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome - Italie et Méditerranée modernes et contemporaines*, 1999, t. 111, p. 623-634.

5. On this matter see Jean-François Bert, *Le Courage de comparer. L'anthropologie subversive de Marcel Mauss*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2021.

6. A. Loisy, *Leçon d'ouverture*, op. cit., p. 29.

7. Since 2003, various studies have been published on the elections for the chair of *histoire des religions* of 1909, studies which are based on research carried out in the Archives du Collège de France (cf. *Professeurs. Dossiers personnels - 1790-1957*, Alfred Loisy, 16 CDF 268): Pierre Burger, "Alfred Loisy au Collège de France (1909-1932)" <http://alfred.loisy.free.fr/colloques.htm#histoireverite> (last consulted April 4, 2022); Pierre-Eugène Leroy, "Loisy et le Collège de France. Les conditions de l'élection, les circonstances de la leçon d'ouverture", *Revue de théologie et de philosophie*, t. 142, 2010, p. 105-122; Rafael Faraco Benthien, "Les durkheimiens et le Collège de France (1897-1918)", *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2015, p. 191-218. The analyses presented here are based on Loisy's private correspondence. Loisy also discusses his election in his autobiography, but comparative analysis of this source and his correspondence, reveals that the correspondence offers the most authentic picture. For a more detailed analysis of this correspondence, see also Lannoy, *Alfred Loisy*, op. cit., p. 106-137.

8. A. Loisy, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire religieuse de notre temps*, Paris, Émile Nourry, 1931, t. III, p. 5-6.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 34.

10. For more details on his departure from the École Pratique, see Lannoy, *Alfred Loisy*, op. cit., p. 69-74.

11. In his *Mémoires*, however, Loisy only mentioned financial reasons for not having applied for Réville's position at the École Pratique. See Loisy, *Mémoires*, op. cit., p. 36.

12. Loisy himself, though, explicitly denied her decisive role in his *Mémoires*, and instead insisted that he owed his victory to Bédier and Morel-Fatio. Loisy, *Mémoires*, op. cit., p. 59.

13. The passive correspondence of Arconati-Visconti is kept at the Bibliothèque interuniversitaire de la Sorbonne, and can be consulted online at <https://nubis.univ-paris1.fr/ark:/15733/ffzf>. It includes several hundred letters by Loisy: MSVC 282-284. Arconati's letters to Loisy are kept at the BnF, NAF 15646-15648 (some files are available through Gallica).

14. Loisy to Arconati, 25 June 1908 (erroneously dated 21 June on Nubis), Sorbonne, MSVC 282, f. 4736.

15. R. F. Benthien, "Les durkheimiens et le Collège de France", art. cit., p. 209-210.
16. A. Loisy's later correspondence with the Belgian historian of religions Franz Cumont contains numerous testimonies of Paul Foucart's animosity towards Loisy. See the Index of A. Lannoy, Corinne Bonnet et Danny Praet (eds.), *"Mon cher Mithra"... La correspondance entre Franz Cumont et Alfred Loisy*, Paris, Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2019, t. II.
17. On the institutionalization of the chair at the Collège and later the *Cinquième* at the École Pratique, see É. Poulat, "L'institution des 'sciences religieuses'", in Jean Baubérot (ed.), *Cent ans de sciences religieuses en France*, Paris, Éd. du Cerf, 1987, p. 49-78; Patrick Cabanel, "L'institutionnalisation des 'sciences religieuses' en France (1879-1908). Une entreprise protestante ?", *Bulletin de la Société de l'Histoire du Protestantisme Français*, t. 140, 1994, p. 33-80, here p. 36-44; P. Cabanel, "La création de la section des sciences religieuses", in Patrick Henriet (ed.), *L'École Pratique des Hautes Études. Invention, érudition, innovation de 1886 à nos jours*, Paris, EPHE/Somogy éditions d'art, 2018, p. 103-116, here p. 104.
18. A biography of Arconati by Thérèse Charmasson is currently in progress. On Arconati and her salon see Gérard Baal, "Un salon dreyfusard, des lendemains de l'affaire à la grande guerre : la Marquise Arconati-Visconti et ses amis", *Revue d'histoire moderne et contemporaine*, t. 27, 1981, p. 433-461; Ruth Harris, "Two Salonnières during the Dreyfus Affair: The Marquise Arconati-Visconti and Gyp", in Christopher E. Forth et Elinor Accampo (eds.), *Confronting Modernity in Fin-de-Siècle France. Bodies, minds and gender*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 235-249. Also useful is the personal account of Arconati's friend, Franz Cumont, "La Marquise Arconati-Visconti (1840-1923). Quelques souvenirs", *Gasebeca*, t. 7, 1978, p. 5-42, which was published only posthumously, according to Cumont's own will.
19. On this topic see T. Charmasson, "L'entourage protestant de la marquise Arconati Visconti (1840-1923)", *Revue d'histoire du protestantisme*, vol. 7, no. 4, 2022, p. 517-550. I am grateful to Thérèse Charmasson for this information.
20. In the next subsection we will discuss her political ideas in somewhat more detail.
21. T. Charmasson, "La marquise Arconati-Visconti 'bienfaitrice' de l'université de Paris", in Adeline Gargam (ed.), *Femmes de sciences de l'Antiquité au XIX^e siècle*, Dijon, Éditions universitaires de Dijon, coll. "Histoire et philosophie des sciences", 2014, p. 275-294.
22. The chair was a temporary one and Gabriel Monod was its "chargé de cours". See Yann Potin, "Les fantômes de Gabriel Monod. Papiers et paroles de Jules Michelet, érudit et prophète", *Revue Historique*, vol. 4, no. 664, 2012, p. 803-836, here p. 812-813, notes 48, 49 and 53.
23. See Anne Martin-Fugier, *Les Salons de la III^e République. Art, littérature et politique*, Paris, Perrin, 2003.
24. In numerous letters to Arconati, Dreyfus mentions his support for Loisy. An interesting letter is that of 11 March 1909, Sorbonne, MSVC 274, f. 2806, where Dreyfus discusses Catholic opposition against Loisy's election. Available online through the NUBIS catalogue (see link above). For Combes, see, also among many other letters, his undated letter to Arconati (presumably late January 1909): Sorbonne, MSVC 266, f. 904.
25. Loisy tried to rectify this shortcoming almost immediately after his excommunication in his *Quelques lettres sur des questions actuelles et des événements récents*, Paris, chez l'auteur, 1908, p. 55, where he expressed his support for the Third Republic.
26. See Morel Fatio's letter to Arconati, 10 August 1908, Sorbonne, MSCV 288, f. 6460.
27. *Ibid.*, 22 November 1908, f. 6292.
28. See G. Baal, "Un salon dreyfusard", and *id.*, "Jaurès et les salons", in Madeleine Rebérioux and Gilles Candar (eds.), *Jaurès et les intellectuels*, Paris, Éd. de l'atelier, 1994, p. 96-118.
29. Letter of Gabriel Monod to Arconati, 15 May 1908, Sorbonne, MSVC 286, f. 5911. The quote from Monod's letter was reproduced by Arconati as her own opinion in a later letter to Loisy.
30. For Mauss' tandem research with historian Henri Hubert and the strong historical dimension of their comparative framework see J.-F. Bert, *Le Courage de comparer*, op. cit.

31. See especially I. Strenski, *Theology and the First Theory of Sacrifice*, Leiden/Boston, Brill, 2003.
32. On this matter see also the letter Émile Durkheim wrote to Salomon Reinach (cf. *infra* for Reinach) about rumors spread by Monod: R.-F. Benthien, “Lettres d’Émile Durkheim à Salomon Reinach”, *Durkheimian Studies/Études Durkheimiennes*, t. 16, 2010, p. 19-35, here p. 28-30.
33. For the term “histoire historisante”, see I. Strenski, *Theology and the First Theory of Sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, p. 103 and *passim*.
34. See, for instance, Alfred Détrez, “La candidature de l’abbé Loisy au Collège de France”, *L’Action nationale: organe de la Ligue républicaine d’action nationale*, 1 janvier 1909, p. 211-214, here p. 213.
35. We have discussed this question in more detail in A. Lannoy, *Alfred Loisy*, *op. cit.*, p. 127-138.
36. Benthien, “Les Durkheimiens et le Collège de France”, *art. cit.*, p. 211; P. Burger, “Alfred Loisy au Collège de France”, *art. cit.*, p. 7-8.
37. Mario Roques, “Dernier hommage à la mémoire du regretté père Scheil”, *Comptes rendus des séances de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres*, 1940, p. 372-385 and especially Dominique Charpin, “L’assyriologie à l’École pratique des hautes études et au Collège de France”, in Jean-Luc Fournet (ed.), *Ma grande église & ma petite chapelle. 150 ans d’affinités électives entre le Collège de France et l’École pratique des hautes études*, Paris, Collège de France/EPHE, 2020, p. 119-145. Loisy himself was heavily insulted by the perceived association with Père Scheil, whom as a Dominican, he accused of a complete lack of scientific autonomy.
38. A. Loisy, *Mémoires*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
39. Guy Stroumsa, *The Idea of Semitic Monotheism. The Rise and Fall of a Scholarly Myth*, Oxford, Oxford Univ. Press, 2021, p. 147 sq.
40. On this decision see also his letter to Arconati Visconti of 20 April 1909, Sorbonne, MSVC 282.
41. A. Loisy, *Leçon d’ouverture*, *op. cit.*, p. 6.
42. *Ibid.*, p. 10-12 (Albert Réville); p. 19-20 (Jean Réville).
43. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
44. Loisy, *Leçon d’ouverture*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
45. Neither one of these two scholars is mentioned by name, though.
46. Salomon Reinach, *Orpheus. Histoire générale des religions*, Paris, Picard, 1909. On Reinach, see Perrine Simon-Nahum’s fine analyses in *Les Juifs et la modernité. L’héritage du judaïsme et les Sciences de l’homme en France au XIX^e siècle*, Paris, Albin Michel, 2018.
47. A. Loisy, “De la vulgarisation et de l’enseignement de l’histoire des religions”, *Union pour la Vérité. Correspondance 1909-1910*, 1 février, p. 257-272; 1 mars, p. 209-225; 1 mai, p. 330-342; 1 juin, p. 390-408. Loisy was in favour of instruction in the history of religion in the *école laïque*, but argued for a “soft approach” which would not harm the feelings of religious children (or their parents).
48. S. Reinach, *Orpheus*, *op. cit.*, p. 3.
49. A. Loisy, *Leçon d’ouverture*, *op. cit.*, p. 25.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
51. Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, “Essai sur la nature et la fonction du sacrifice”, *Année sociologique*, t. 2, 1899, p. 29-138.
52. On this topic see the fine analysis of Strenski in *Theology and the first Theory of Sacrifice*, *op. cit.*, p. 69-114.
53. Letter of Loisy to Arconati Visconti, 28 January 1909, Sorbonne, MSVC 282, f. 4777.
54. A. Loisy, *Leçon d’ouverture*, *op. cit.*, p. 37.
55. A. Loisy, *Mémoires*, *op. cit.*, p. 100.
56. On this topic see the analysis in A. Lannoy, *Alfred Loisy*, *op. cit.*, p. 294 and following. Other important analyses of Loisy’s ideas on sacrifice include: Renée Koch-Piettre, “Loisy et ses études sur le sacrifice”, in F. Laplanche, Ilaria Biagioli, Claude Langlois (eds.), *Alfred Loisy cent ans après. Autour d’un petit livre*, Turnhout, EPHE/Brepols, 2007, p. 71-82; Marc Kolakowski, Agnès A. Nagy,

Francesca Prescendi, “L’Essai historique sur le sacrifice d’Alfred Loisy : la confession de foi d’un humaniste”, in Frédéric Amsler (ed.), “Dossier : Quelle place pour Alfred Loisy dans l’histoire de la recherche en exégèse biblique et en science des religions?”, *Mythos. Rivista della Storia delle Religioni*, t. 7, 2013, p. 97-110.

57. See, among others, Andrew Mein, Nathan MacDonalds, Matthew A. Collins (eds.), *The First World War and the Mobilization of Biblical Scholarship*, London, Bloomsbury, T & T Clark, 2019.

58. See also Loisy’s anti-Protestant rescue actions with regard to the “Apostle of Protestantism”: A. Lannoy, “Paul, otage de la guerre. Science, religion et nationalisme dans les écrits de guerre d’Alfred Loisy sur S. Paul”, in F. Amsler and Maria Paiano (eds.), “Dossier : Autour d’Alfred Loisy et de l’exégèse en temps de guerre”, *Modernism. Rivista annuale di storia del riformismo religioso in età contemporanea*, 2021, p. 14-41.

59. We will return to this point in the epilogue of this paper.

60. See also Danny Praet and A. Lannoy, “Alfred Loisy’s comparative method in *Les Mystères païens et le mystère chrétien*”, *Numen. International Review for the History of Religions*, t. 64, no. 1, 2017, p. 69-96.

61. The articles were published in Loisy’s *Revue d’histoire et de littérature religieuses* and later compiled in his volume *Les Mystères païens et le mystère chrétien* (Paris, Émile Nourry, 1919). The volume was published with a delay due to the war.

62. See the analyses of R. Koch-Piettre and M. Kolakowski, A. A. Nagy, and F. Prescendi mentioned in note 56 above.

63. See J.-F. Bert’s fine analyses in *Le courage de comparer* (*op. cit.*), for the remarkable exception of Marcel Mauss in this early twentieth-century landscape of comparative religious studies, and, by the same author, “L’impossible comparatisme de Marcel Mauss au Collège de France. Deux candidatures, deux échecs frappants: 1907 et 1909” in this volume.

64. In this regard, Loisy’s attitude may usefully be compared to that of his Belgian friend, Franz Cumont (or that of Gabriel Monod, as mentioned in the first section of this paper). See Cumont’s letter on sociology of religion to Loisy: A. Lannoy, C. Bonnet, D. Praet (eds.), “*Mon cher Mithra*”, I, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

65. On Baruzi, see A. Lannoy, C. Bonnet, D. Praet, *Mon cher Mithra*, II, *op. cit.*, p. 517.

66. Both volumes were published by Nourry. *La Religion d’Israël* was the revised third edition of a volume which Loisy first published during the Modernist crisis.

67. “Rapport sur le maintien de la chaire d’histoire des religions au Collège de France, par M. Charles Andler”, 1932, Archives du Collège de France, *Rapports de présentation*, 2 AP 13, p. 327.

68. A. Lannoy, C. Bonnet, D. Praet, *Mon cher Mithra*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 411.

69. “Rapport sur le maintien de la chaire d’histoire des religions, au Collège de France par M. Charles Andler”, f. 327.

70. One may note that in contrast to *sociologie*, Andler writes *histoire* with capital, just as Arconati and Monod had done in their letters of 1908-1909.

71. For Andler’s reaction to this argument, see “Rapport sur le maintien de la chaire d’histoire des religions, au Collège de France par M. Charles Andler”, f. 326.

72. See, Loisy, *Leçon d’ouverture*, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

73. In the end, it only took place in 1929.

74. On this topic see A. Lannoy, “Le Jubilé Loisy de 1927 : entre histoire des religions et histoire du christianisme”, *Revue de l’histoire des religions*, t. 229, 2012, p. 503-526.

75. “Rapport sur le maintien de la chaire d’histoire des religions au Collège de France, par M. Charles Andler”, 1932, *op. cit.*, p. 326.

76. A. Lannoy, C. Bonnet, D. Praet, *Mon cher Mithra*, I, *op. cit.*, p. 413.

ABSTRACTS

Le 7 mars 1908, lorsque le prêtre moderniste et exégète Alfred Loisy se voit frappé de l'excommunication « vitandus », il vit retiré dans le calme de sa région champenoise natale. Il réalise que son passé de prêtre catholique pourrait lui interdire d'obtenir l'une des chaires destinées à la science laïque des religions durant les années polarisées qui entourent la Séparation des Églises et de l'État. C'est pourtant exactement ce qui arriva en mars 1909, lorsque Loisy fut nommé à la chaire d'histoire des religions au Collège de France, l'emportant sur le candidat élu en seconde ligne à peine un an auparavant, Marcel Mauss. Grâce à un dépouillement de la correspondance entre Loisy et les partisans de son élection, cette contribution démontrera que sa nomination fut le résultat d'une campagne stratégique, dirigée dans les coulisses par un réseau politico-académique influent. En quête des raisons profondes de cette élection inattendue, nous porterons notre attention sur les liens qui unissent les facteurs idéologiques, tels que l'antisocialisme et l'anticléricalisme, et les divergences méthodologiques, c'est-à-dire le fossé infranchissable entre les approches historico-historisantes de candidats comme Maurice Vernes et Jules Toutain d'une part, et l'école durkheimienne représentée par Mauss, d'autre part. La première moitié de ce chapitre est consacrée à la nomination de Loisy ; la deuxième essaie de reconstruire sa contribution souvent oubliée à l'histoire des religions, et la manière infatigable dont il a défendu une discipline qui ne fut pas seulement confrontée à des fractures internes, mais dont l'existence même a aussi continué à être contestée à droite et à gauche.

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