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Review of *Religious Modernism in the Low Countries*

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Religious Modernism in the Low Countries (Leo Kenis and Ernestine Van Der Wall, eds.)

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In 1970, when I began to immerse myself in a study of Roman Catholic Modernism, the publishing world was not yet flush with works on the topic of religious modernism. The vast majority of works on the topic dealt with modernisms that concerned primarily culture, literature, the arts, and philosophy. Essentially these modernisms were all somehow reacting to Enlightenment rationalism. Around 1970, the Vatican archives began to open their doors to researchers of the period covering Roman Catholic Modernism (then up to 1903; today through the pontificate of Pius XI), and publications on it began to flow. I recall that, particularly in England, the primary geographical location of my own interest in George Tyrrell and friends, Roman Catholic Modernists were engaged in correspondence and conferences with scholars and an educated elite of other faiths who found common interest in overlapping issues. I pored over, e.g., the Canon Alfred Leslie Lilley Papers at the University of St. Andrews, looking for materials pertinent to Tyrrell—the two men had corresponded at some length. My research showed that, while Catholic and non-Catholic “modernists” shared some common concerns, their differences were such that I simply tabled research on Protestant fellow travelers.

The volume reviewed here, edited by Leo Kenis and Ernestine van der Wall, with its rich bibliography, indicates that interest in religious modernism, particularly Protestant modernism, is on the rise. So I read the volume with great interest. I wanted to see what current researchers were discovering about the “modernist period” (essentially, the pre-World War I period), and particularly about the relationship between Roman Catholic and other religious modernisms. While I was delighted to see the great variety of the essays (15, 13 by authors from Belgium and The Netherlands), and while I was intrigued to learn about how scholars in the Low Countries engaged modernist issues, I was disappointed that I did not see more light on the issues of common concern.

The collection's salient value is that it helps fill in a historical period whose coverage has heretofore been scant, namely, religious modernism in the Low Countries. I learned that in these countries, particularly among Protestants, the primary issue of concern was how the Enlightenment impacted biblical studies and thus the Protestant churches and practice of Christianity in these countries. The period covered begins with the publications of Ernest Renan (mid-19th century) and runs to the eve of World War II, thus a much broader period than that covered by the typical study of Roman Catholic Modernism, which was a rather circumscribed period ending with papal condemnations in 1907 and 1910, though its effects remain to this day, notably via its extension in *la nouvelle théologie*. The contributions of various Protestant scholars and churches that faced the challenge of the Enlightenment's effect on biblical studies and belief systems, at least in the Low Countries, greatly enhanced my understanding of the modernist period, especially its complexity.

The challenge of a comparative study such as this, however, is to delineate what exactly is compared, and to do this in a way that all the contributors to the study subscribe to it and address it with a shared understanding. The editors, in their excellent introduction, rightly point out what scholars from the beginning of the modernist period were well aware of, namely, that modernists came in all stripes—the editors quote a saying commonly attributed to Loisy: “il y a autant de modernismes que de moderniste” (there are as many modernisms as there are modernists) (9). The many faces of modernism was a major problem for the Vatican when their

antimodernists decided, beginning with Pius X's advisers, that they had to rein in propagators of novitates: who counted as a "modernist" and who did not? As Roman Catholic scholars have pointed out from the beginning, the Vatican-inspired antimodernists solved the problem by themselves defining what counted as "modernism." This they did with Pius X's syllabus *Lamentabili sane exitu* (July 3, 1907) and encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (September 8, 1907), followed by his *motu proprio Sacrorum antistitum* (September 1, 1910) mandating an oath against modernism as a condition for ordination, advancement, and academic appointment for philosophers and theologians in Roman Catholic colleges and seminaries. Never mind that virtually all Roman Catholic "modernists" did not recognize themselves in the Vatican documents of condemnation.

So what exactly is common to Protestant and Roman Catholic modernisms, such that it can make sense to compare and contrast them? The editors appropriately raise this question in their introduction, but only rarely do the other contributors address it. The editors signal the problem when they observe, "It would appear that religious modernism in the Netherlands was and remained a Protestant affair" (20); and that the problem with modernism in Belgium was that the population was so predominantly Catholic that very few Catholics and still fewer Protestants identified themselves as modernists. This leaves not much to compare.

Collections typically struggle with methodological consistency. The editors attempted to meet this problem with CJT Talar's erudite "The Matrix of Modernism" (23-43) that establishes a "matrix" within which to coherently fit both Roman Catholic and Protestant modernisms. Subsequent contributors to the volume, however, do not refer to this matrix. This omission is unfortunate. Ultimately it means that the volume's admirable goal is not reached, at least not clearly and cogently. The result is that while each contribution displays competent, original, and enlightening research, it is difficult to see how each contributes to the discussion, except in a "siloed" way that leaves it up to readers to do their own comparing and contrasting. This is not entirely a bad thing. Indeed, I can see how this text could be very profitably used with graduate students whose assignment would be to do the comparing and contrasting that the text itself does not do but leaves open.

As I noted, each essay displays competent and original research. The presentations, however, are very uneven. I applaud the decision to publish all the essays in English so as to reach a broader audience, but the quality of writing and editing leaves much to be desired. Beautifully written essays lie side by side with others that suffer by comparison. Still, the content of all the essays is accessible and makes a valuable contribution to the field. This volume belongs in all academic libraries.

Leo Kenis and Ernestine van der Wall, eds., *Religious Modernism in the Low Countries* [*Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium* 255]. Peeters, Leuven–Paris—Walpole, MA, 2013. Pp. 278 + viii. ISBN 9789042927414. \$102.