

CRITICAL SYMBOLISM: THE THOUGHT OF L. AUGUSTE SABATIER

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Introduction

Louis Auguste Sabatier (1839 – 1901) should not be confused with Paul Sabatier (1858 – 1928). Auguste Sabatier was a professor of reformed dogmatics at Strasbourg and Paris, ending his career as dean of the Theological Faculty of Paris. His philosophy of religion had a great influence on Loisy and other Catholic modernists.

Paul Sabatier made some outstanding contributions to Franciscan scholarship, among them his *Vie de S. Francois d'Assise* (1894). He played a part in Modernism between 1904 – 1914 with his *An Open Letter to His Eminence Cardinal Gibbons* and his *Jewett Lectures on Modernism* (1908). The precise role he played in Modernism has yet to be determined by scholars.

The name “Symbolo-fideism” refers to a tendency in French theology around the turn of the century. It is associated with the names of two professors on the Faculty of Theology at Paris, Auguste Sabatier and Eugene Ménégoz. Our knowledge about “Symbolo-fideism” or the “Parisian School of Theology” derives mainly from two books, *Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion d'après la psychologie et l'histoire* by Auguste Sabatier (1897) and the *Publications diverses sur le fideisme et son application a l'enseignement chrétien traditionnel* by Eugene Ménégoz (1900).⁽¹⁾

The task of critical symbolism is this: to point out the inadequacy and metaphorical character of all religious ideas. Sabatier does this by investigating philosophically the limits of religious knowledge, by investigat-

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1. Bernard Raymond, 'L'École De Paris,' *Études theologiques et religieuses* 52 (1977), p. 374.

ing the relationship between religious knowledge, on the one hand, and scientific knowledge on the other, and attempting to hit upon the essence of religion making use of the historical-psychological method.

Whereas the term, "symbolism," has mainly a critical function, the "fideism" of Ménégoz has a positive note to it, dealing with an elucidation of the Lutheran formula "justification through faith alone." Gustav Lasch puts the matter well when he writes that Sabatier's symbolism concerns the formal principle, that is, basic questions about the limits of religious knowledge, about the essence of religion and revelation. The fideism of Ménégoz, on the other hand, deals with the material principle, questions such as the true meaning of faith, justification and salvation, the traditional Lutheran concerns. Both theories complement each other despite their diverse points of departure.⁽²⁾

This essay has as its focus Sabatier's theory called critical symbolism, omitting a discussion of Ménégoz fideism. In order to get a handle on Sabatier's critical symbolism one must see it within the context of Sabatier's philosophy of religion as found in the *Outlines*.

I. Sabatier's Philosophy of Religion

Sabatier's *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion based on Psychology and History* was written as the personal confession of a mature Christian. It is the source book of critical symbolism, the rich fruit of philosophical and theological reflection, written by a master of French style.

The entire book is written with a certain élan which pulsates throughout. It contains many metaphors and comparisons which make reading it an intellectual feast. At the same time, it is not written very systematically. Sabatier constantly repeats himself, returning again and again to basic themes in the manner of certain liberation theologians such as Gutierrez. This makes it difficult to summarize his thought succinctly.⁽³⁾

The central issue in Sabatier's *Outlines* is this: What is the essence of religion? Sabatier summarily rejects Comte's theory about the three stages through which human thought has passed, the theological stage of primitive times, the metaphysical stage in the Middle Ages, and the positive or scientific stage of modern times. For Sabatier the three stages correspond to three perennial needs of the human soul rather than to three distinct periods of history. Sabatier adds that his basic difficulty with the three stages has to do with the fact that knowledge is not the essence of religion as Comte mistakenly thought. (*Outlines*, p. 8)

2. Gustav Lasch, *Die Theologie der Pariser Schule* (Berlin 1901), p. 4.

3. Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1973).

What, then, is the essence of religion? Prayer and piety are the core and rind of religion for Sabatier. Prayer may almost be defined as religion in act. Prayer may be regarded as the movement of the soul putting itself into personal power with the Transcendent, whose presence it feels even before it can be named. Religion is thus at the core of the human heart. It can be removed only by obliterating that which constitutes our very humanity. (*Outlines*, p. 31) Where is Sabatier coming from in this? He seems to be influenced by Pascal. For Pascal piety means that God is sensible to the heart. To speak of religion for Sabatier is to speak of revelation since both these concepts are organically related. (*Outlines*, p. 34)

Religion may be seen as the subjective revelation of God in man whereas revelation is God's response or in Sabatier's own words, revelation is religion objective in God. Religion and revelation are correlative terms. If religion is the subjective element, then human prayer or revelation is the objective element, the response of God. Psychologically speaking, they are identical phenomena.

Sabatier takes to task those scholastic theologians of his day who distinguish three elements in revelation, the object, namely dogma, the form, viz., Scripture, and the proof, namely miracles. The Scholastics are faulted on two counts. First, to make of dogma the object of revelation is tantamount to eliminating from it its religious character. It means, observes Sabatier, to both separate dogma from piety and to put it in perennial conflict with reason. Second, to distinguish between the object, the form, and the proof in revelation is to make artificial and unnecessary constructions. The Scholastics also make insoluble antitheses in distinguishing between natural and supernatural revelation, universal and special revelation and mediate/immediate revelation. (*Outlines*, p. 64)

Sabatier has been accused of interpreting dogmas as simply a symbolical expression of our religious feelings. Such a bold summary statement of Sabatier's views on dogma hardly does justice to his thought. One may distinguish at least two elements in dogma, a properly religious element and an intellectual element. The intellectual or theoretical element may best be regarded as the expression or envelope of the religious experience.⁽⁴⁾

In constructing her dogmas the Church uses ideas taken from the current philosophy and science. To be fruitful dogmas must constantly intermingle with the evolution of human thought. Sabatier sees dogmas as developing and changing. He compares dogmas to language which is modified 1) by disuse, 2) by acquiring new significations, and 3) by the renaissance of old or the creation of new words. (*Outlines*, p. 251)

4. K. Schmitt, "Sabatier, Louis-Auguste", in *LThK IX*, ed. by Josef Höfer-Karl Rahner (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1964), p. 187.

Sabatier believes that dogmas need to be criticized. To criticize a dogma is not to eliminate it or to change its substance. To criticize dogma is to make an appeal to a better understanding of the dogma. Sabatier sees a vast difference between the Catholic and the Protestant understanding of dogma.

Catholics, in their attempt to be orthodox, fail to see the historical and psychologically conditioned character of all doctrines. Instead, they tend to absolutize that which is temporal, failing to see the symbolic character of dogma. Sabatier rejects the Catholic understanding of dogma as anti-historical forgetting that the fundamental principle of Christianity is a religious experience, namely, that of Christ and the Apostles. (*Outline*, p. 267)

How does Sabatier view the Protestant understanding of dogma? He believes that the Reformation substituted the internal principle of Christian experience for the external principle of authority. Not only dogmatic theology but theology *per se* aims to give an account of the religious experience of the Christian Church.

In regard to dogma one must be careful to distinguish between the essence of the faith or the religious substance of doctrine and its historical manifestations. For Sabatier dogmas do change. The very fact that they have a history proves that they change. The language of dogma is often borrowed from philosophy. The substance of a dogma derives from piety or the religious experience of believers. Sabatier sees dogmas as living things, grounded in religious experience. As living, dogmas are in a perpetual state of transformation. When they are no longer discussed, they do, in fact, die. (*Outlines*, p. 231)

Dogmas, for Sabatier, have their taproot in religion. Religion has both an internal element and an external one. The internal element or soul of religion is inward piety; the body or external element of religion is in external forms such as dogmas, codes and institutions. In religion one finds an organic union of both these elements. (*Outlines*, p. 232)

II. Critical Symbolism: An Answer to a Question

How does Sabatier come to his theory of "critical symbolism?" He formulated his theory by trying to differentiate between scientific knowledge which deals with immanent phenomena and religious knowledge which concerns transcendent phenomena. The notions formed in the exact sciences such as physics are adequate to their object whereas none of the notions formed in religious knowledge are adequate to reality. Sabatier writes that the theory of religious knowledge requires for its completion a theory of symbols and symbolism. This he provides.

There are two distinct orders of knowledge, or two different kinds of consciousness. There is a consciousness of the world and a consciousness of the ego. In regard to the former, the ego is absorbed by the non-ego so that the laws of the non-ego (the object of thought) should become the laws of the ego (the subject). *In re* consciousness of the ego, the object should enter into the subject so that the laws of the subject should become the law of things. (*Outlines*, p. 295)

Sabatier believes that the knowledge of nature is objective. This is the knowledge found in the natural sciences concerned with a simple description of phenomena. In science we have judgements based on sensation. These are judgements of existence bearing on the relation of objects to each other, apart from the subject. Opposed to these are judgements of estimation or dignity in which the category of the good becomes the necessary form of these new judgements. (*Outlines*, p. 299)

Whereas, scientific knowledge is objective, religious knowledge always remains subjective. Religious and moral knowledge are always subjective for their object are not phenomena grasped outside or independently of the knower. God, for example, reveals Himself only in and by piety. For Sabatier, God cannot be known apart from the knowing subject nor is the existence of God a truth demonstrable by logical reasoning.

In sum, religious/moral truths are known by the human heart. Moral evidence forms the basis of moral certitude. Sabatier would say that to know the world religiously means to determine its value in relation to the life of the spirit. (*Outlines*, p. 310)

Is there a conflict between science and religion? Although Scholasticism saw an opposition between faith and science, Sabatier did not. He says that the order of science and the order of religion move on different levels and never meet so as to conflict. If, for instance, my child becomes ill, I call a physician to use his skills to save my child. This is the order of science. On a different level, the religious plane, I pray to God to heal my child. Each order has its own particular kind of certitude. Intellectual evidence forms the basis of scientific certitude; moral evidence for religious certitude. (*Outlines*, p. 312)

It is at this point that Sabatier's theory of critical symbolism comes into play. The hard sciences have as their aim the elimination of the knowing subject. An astronomer, for example, need not be a morally upright woman to convince us of the reality of her discoveries. However, a fundamentally deceitful man will always be a horrible ethics professor. The relationship between scientific and religious knowledge parallels the relationship between a text and its interpretation. One may argue that by its discoveries the hard sciences, such as physics and chemistry, establish the text but

without the exegesis of consciousness the naked text signifies nothing. (*Outlines*, p. 320)

In the exact sciences the notions formed are equivalent or adequate to reality whereas all religious knowledge is symbolical. We use symbols to express the invisible and the spiritual by the sensible and the material. I am able to communicate to you today Sabatier's *Religious-philosophie* only by using words and sounds to express his thoughts. Symbols attest to the royalty and victory of the spirit in a way science could never do. One may say that the exact sciences reveal nature. Correspondingly, symbols make of nature the glorified image of the inner life of spirit. (*Outlines*, p. 324)

For Sabatier, symbols rule the world. They address themselves more to the inner life and emotions than to the naked intellect. Parables, for example, address themselves to the heart. All of the arts from painting to music to architecture are symbolical. Art tries to enshrine the ideal in the real. Using a material form art attempts to give expression to what is inexpressible. The best examples of symbols are speech and writing. (*Outlines*, p. 323)

The theory of critical symbolism functions as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism or "orthodoxy" and rationalism. Roman Catholics try to absolutize dogmas forgetting their historical, psychologically conditioned character. They lose sight of the symbolical character of dogmas so that their understanding of dogma may be termed anti-historical.

Rationalism, the other extreme, empties religion of its real content, namely, religious experience. Rationalism, mistaken as to the soul of religion, winds up killing faith. In contradistinction to Roman Catholic orthodoxy on the one hand, and rationalism, on the other, Sabatier's theory of critical symbolism permits believers to combine veneration for traditional symbols with perfect independence of spirit by leaving to believers the right to assimilate them and adapt them to their own experience. (*Outlines*, p. 342)

III. Discussion

In his theory of critical symbolism Sabatier gives primacy to the religious experience of the believer. Compared to this primordial datum, the dogmas of Christianity are but secondary and transient symbols of this central religious experience. Dogmas are human and inadequate attempts to express the eternal by the temporal, the invisible by the visible.⁵⁾

5. Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines*, p. 323. Cf. John Weiss, "Sabatier, Auguste," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. by Paul Edwards. (New York: Macmillan & The Free Press, 1967), p. 274. See Gabriel Daly, "Catholicism and Modernity," *JAAR* 53 No. 4 (December, 1985), p. 783.

To the Scholastic authors of his day, Sabatier's views on dogma were anathema. The Scholastics saw dogmas as immutable, unchanging, absolute.⁶ There is a larger element involved in all of this and it has to do with the relationship between Christianity and the modern world.

There are two opposing forces or kingdoms in the world. The reign of autonomy to which secular reason aspires and that of "heteronomy" the form and principle of the religions of authority. Sabatier sees his generation as marching between two fronts, modern science with its rigorous methods and the church with her customs and dogmas. Sabatier himself tries to find a *via media* between these two camps.⁷

Modern culture has "autonomy" as its principle of being. Autonomy refers to the unconquerable assurance of the mind that it has within itself the norm of its thought and of its life, plus the deep-seated desire to realize itself by obeying its own law. For Sabatier, autonomy is a global term referring to the unity of principle which covers all the general manifestations of the modern spirit in every department.⁸

The reign of autonomy begins with Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (1637) and the effort made by the mind to look into itself and to take immediate cognizance of itself in the initial phenomena of consciousness. With the methodical doubt, says Sabatier, comes the rejection of external, traditional authorities such as the Church and of the ideas based solely on custom or the words of a master, be he ever a Pope.⁹

With the Cartesian doubt what we have is the recognition that reason is a king unto itself, the autonomy of the mind. Concomitant with the exaltation of reason is the rise of the natural or experimental sciences. The latter are, says Sabatier, a practical demonstration of the mind's autonomy. We see the same thing, *mutatis mutandis*, in regard to the use of the historical critical method, which is simply a continuation of the mind's autonomy.¹⁰

Sabatier held that Catholicism and modern culture were completely at loggerheads. There was open hostility between them particularly in France. Because of this opposition an impossible gulf has been formed between sacred and profane, the clergy and the laity. On the one hand, we have in modern culture a system of free inquiry and of perpetual discussion where

6. Michael Richards, "The Historical Background to the Rise of Modernism," *Clergy Review* 70 (June, 1975), No. 6, p. 207. As opposed to the Scholastic, Sabatier repeatedly insists on the fact that dogmas have to be understood historically. He believes that the advent of the historical method is the third intellectual evolution in his own day. Cf. *Outline*, p. 256.

7. John Weiss, "Sabatier, Auguste," p. 274.

8. Auguste Sabatier, *Religion and Modern Culture* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), p. 169.

9. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 170.

10. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 172.

everything in science rests upon evidence alone. On the other, in the Church we have an intellectual and moral system in which everything rests upon the authority of the past and tends to be a denial of the mind's autonomy.⁽¹¹⁾

In Protestantism the opposition between religion and modern culture was relative and changing instead of remaining absolute as in Catholicism. Here the center of gravity in religion was removed from without to within, from a hierarchy to the sanctuary of the conscience.⁽¹²⁾

Sabatier himself wanted a mutual penetration of religion and modern culture. In order to remain healthy, human culture has need of religion. Religion regenerates everything from art to science to politics. Civilization bows beneath its own weight when religion weakens. Religion is indeed the salt of the earth of which Jesus spoke.⁽¹³⁾

To remain vibrant and living, religion needs to stay in close contact with human culture. This culture obliges religion to exercise a critical function. Far from borrowing from culture that which constitutes the efficacy of its own action, religion sloughs off everything that does not really belong to it. By shedding antiquated forms, religion returns to its religious/moral principles from which it draws its strength.⁽¹⁴⁾

The relationship between religion and culture, for Sabatier, may be summed up by saying that modern culture acts upon the forms of religion by its criticism, and religion, in turn, purifies and elevates criticism by its spirit. This twofold operation deepens and broadens the faith. How so? Faith separates itself from the forms of religion, turning to that which constitutes its essence. By losing its external material support faith is made to become an internal and exclusively moral act.⁽¹⁵⁾

IV. Sabatier and The Modernists

First, some general comments will be made about the points on which the thought of Sabatier and that of the Modernists coincide. Then, there follows a short note on the influence of Sabatier's thought on Alfred Loisy.

There are at least three areas in which the thought of Sabatier and that of the Modernists coincides. First, we have the dislike for Scholasticism and the use of Scholastic method for getting at the truth in theology and religion. Both Sabatier and the Modernists were aware of the limitations of the Scholastic method.⁽¹⁶⁾

11. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 190.

12. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 195.

13. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 217.

14. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 218.

15. Sabatier, *Religion*, p. 226.

16. Lester R. Kurtz, *The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p. 60.

Second, they recognized the limits of Scholasticism because of their historical consciousness. Throughout his philosophy of religion as contained in the *Outlines*, Sabatier makes constant recourse to history. The same kind of historical consciousness is to be found, for example, in Loisy as the work of Ronald Burke and others points out.⁽¹⁷⁾

The nineteenth century Scholastics thought of revelation as the discovery of eternal truths thought of as so many objective realities which, so they believed, could be translated into dogmatic formulas. The formulas were thought to be immutable. Sabatier and the Modernists, on the other hand, recognized the historical dimension of revealed truth, anticipating the Second Vatican Council.⁽¹⁸⁾

Third, both Sabatier and the Modernists firmly believed in the possibility of a synthesis between the essential truth of Christianity and the essential truth modernity. This may also help to explain why the Modernists and the anti-Modernists went for each other's jugular vein. To say that there should be some kind of accommodation between Christianity and the modern world implied the possibility of a synthesis between good and evil, light and darkness, belief and disbelief.⁽¹⁹⁾

Moreover, to insist on an absolute separation between Christianity and the modern world implied fidelity to the Catholic position. To relativize the opposition between Christianity and the modern world was to make overtures to the Protestant position. At the turn of the century there was no ecumenical movements *per se*. Catholics look upon Protestants as outright heretics. Polemicism best sums up the attitude present between Protestants and Catholics.

The reason why L. Auguste Sabatier is not considered a Modernist *in sensu stricto* revolves around the fact that he was already a Protestant and thus not a direct threat to the Catholic Church as were the insiders within her own bosom, men such as Loisy, Tyrell and von Hugel.⁽²⁰⁾

Of all the Modernists, no one was more deeply influenced by Auguste Sabatier than was Alfred Loisy. The latter's "Firmin" articles are an attack on both Harnack and Sabatier but by the same token they show how

17. Ronald Burke, "Loisy's Faith: Landshift in Catholic Thought," *Journal of Religion*, 60, No. 2 (April, 1980), p. 145.

18. Robert Coffy, "The Magisterium and Theology," *Readings in Moral Theology No. 3: The Magisterium and Morality*, ed. by Charles E. Curran - Richard A. McCormick, S.J., (New York: Paulist, 1982), p. 215.

19. Daniel L. Donovan, "Church and Theology in the Modernist Crisis," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985), p. 150.

20. Vidler believes that one should speak of modernists rather than modernism. To speak of modernism is to exaggerate the extent to which the modernists agreed with one another and so to distort the character of the movement. Cf. *A Variety of Catholic Modernists*, (Cambridge: University Press, 1970), p. 18.

extensively Loisy was influenced by both of them. For example, in his fourth "Firmin" article Loisy writes that revelation makes the divine accessible by humanization, while man communicates the original experience using symbols which are a kind of "algebraic notation" representing ineffable quantities. Sabatier uses the very same words in his *Outlines* when he writes that our ideas are simply "algebraic notations" of our impressions and movements.⁽²¹⁾

In his *Mémoires* (I, p. 454f) Loisy notes that although his presentation of salvation history had points in common with the views of M. Blondel and Ollé-Laprune, his ideas on the relative value of religious symbols had a greater affinity with those of Auguste Sabatier, as G. Daly observes.⁽²²⁾

Gabriel Daly makes another astute observation about Sabatier's influence on Loisy. In *L'Évangile et l'Église*, Loisy chose Harnack rather than Sabatier as his adversary because the latter's influence on Loisy was too great for him to achieve a convincing discrimination between them.⁽²³⁾

Joseph Lemius, the author of *Pascendi*, thought that Loisy was more deeply influenced by Sabatier than Loisy was prepared to admit. Lemius could see the influence of Sabatier on Loisy since the surviving notes and papers of Lemius show that he had carefully read both Loisy and Sabatier's *Outlines*.

In his lecture "Sur les doctrines de Loisy," given on May 14, 1905, Joseph Lemius begins by stating that Loisy has learned from L. Auguste Sabatier how to combine an atheistic intellect with a religious and believing heart.

Another area in which we get some idea of the influence of L. Auguste Sabatier on Modernism comes from the encyclical, *Pascendi*. The understanding or "immanence" in *Pascendi* may be attributed first to Joseph Lemius, second, to L. Auguste Sabatier and third to Loisy and Laberthonnière.⁽²⁴⁾

V. Some Observations

1. Recent research on Modernism during the past twenty years has had a ripple effect in terms of our understanding of L. Auguste Sabatier. Just as the Roman Catholic Modernists were ahead of their time because of their historical consciousness so too, *a fortiori*, was Sabatier. Recent research on Modernism puts Sabatier in a new light so that Loisy's words may be

21. Sabatier, *Outlines*, p. 276.

22. Gabriel Daly, *Transcendence And Immanence: A Study of Catholic Modernism and Integralism*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), p. 66.

23. Daly, *Transcendence*, p. 66.

24. Daly, *Transcendence*, p. 199.

applied to Sabatier. "The heresies of today are part of the orthodoxies of tomorrow."⁽²⁵⁾

2. Sabatier's distinction between the objectivity of scientific knowledge vis à vis the subjectivity of religious knowledge appears, at times, to be facile. One cannot say with Sabatier that the knowledge of nature is objective not with W. Heisenberg's discovery of the uncertainty principle in physics. At best one could say that scientific knowledge has objectivity as its ideal.

Sabatier tends, on occasion, to incline toward "objectivism" understood as the belief that what science discovers can be separated from the intervention and intentionality of the knowing subject. In objectivism the knowing subject is rendered irrelevant to the pursuit of knowledge, replaceable by any dispassionate observer such as the computer, the camera or the objective eye.⁽²⁶⁾

3. Sabatier saw quite clearly the importance of personal experience in the religious enterprise. On this particular score his work found resonance in the existential theologians of the twentieth century. In a similar vein, his theory of critical symbolism presages the work of Paul Tillich, Paul Ricoeur, Mary Gerhart and Sally McFague on symbolism and metaphorical theology.⁽²⁷⁾

25. Alfred Loisy, *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire religieuse de notre temps I*, (Paris, 1930 – 1), p. 35.

26. Phillip Lewin, "Instrumental Reason and the Crisis in the Humanities," in *The Crisis in the Humanities: Interdisciplinary Responses*, ed. by Sara Putzell-Korab – Robert Detweiler, (Potomac, Maryland: Studia Humanitatis, 1983), p. 11.

27. See Sally McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) and Mary Gerhart – A. Russell, *Metaphoric Process: The Creation of Scientific and Religious Understanding*, (Fort Worth: Texas University Press, 1984).