*Louis Auguste Sabatier and the Subjective Turn in Theological Education*

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*Introduction:*

The nineteenth century saw seismic shifts of emphasis and consciousness within the field of theology. Developments in other disciplines on the rise in academic authority, such as the natural sciences, history, and psychology, impinged, both consciously and unconsciously, on the study of the sacred arts. No corner of European study of the divine was unaffected by the changes afoot within modern culture. Yet the impact of cultural changes upon the theological task were seldom so stark or dramatic as those experienced in Third Republic France, home of Protestant theologian Louis Auguste Sabatier (1839-1901).

Whereas Victorian British Natural Theology had sought an alliance with science, and valorized external evidences for their potential to give objectivity to theological claims, German and French academic versions of Christian thought turned inward for validation. Sabatier's positions, influenced by German Idealism with its intuitionist ethos, placed science and theology in distinct provinces. Science and theology would need to operate on separate tracks, and only in so doing could the integrity of either be maintained. For Sabatier, this was to preserve an important but greatly chastened and delimited place of value for theology in the academy. Only with hindsight did the cost of this strategy become clearer, namely, the loss of intellectual authority for theology in the public square.

*Educational and Cultural Context:*

Auguste Sabatier is a fascinating case study of one who wrote and taught theology, while simultaneously reducing its claims on objective truth. This was not the posture taken early in his

vocation. According to church historian Kenneth S. Latourette, "he began his career with the orthodox." Yet like many of his generation, "gradually he felt himself constrained to abandon that position and to accept the methods of historical criticism and historical development."[1] Sabatier developed his skills as a lecturer on Reformed Dogmatics while serving as a theologian at Strasbourg along the border with Germany from 1867-1872. Greater heights awaited him when he achieved the feat of aiding in the founding a new Protestant Faculty of Theology at the prestigious University of Paris in 1877.

According to one recent historian, Third Republic France offered Protestant intellectuals a rising level of cultural influence. This account describes such Protestants as ". . . translators, transmitters of ideas and influences, at a crucial time in the modernisation [sic] of their country."[2] Sabatier believed in religious education broad enough to accommodate Protestant ideas, a position unpopular with Catholic clergy among his fellow-countrymen. Conservative Catholics who had chafed under the dismantlement of Catholic schools via the French Revolution, opposed those who pressed for universal secular education beginning in the earliest grades several decades later. Such opposition intensified as reforms were proposed and carried out at all levels amid public debates over education in the 1870s and 80s. For instance, education reformer Jules Ferry (1832-1893), in his June 6, 1889, speech in the Chamber of Deputies urged that: "society owes access to practical knowledge to everybody and to the successive levels of intellectual culture to all those who are capable of assimilating it." In addition to this positive and democratic cultural vision, Ferry inveighed against those who opposed a system of national education. Higher education as the protected province of the elite earned his special ire. "We must not allow people to think that our system of higher education is just a luxurious decoration behind which there are only over-paid professors and imaginary students, that our academic

education is just a factor for the socially inferior, just a vast business . . ..”[3] This anti-elitist strain enfolded not merely considerations of class, but of religious adherence as well.

Educational reformers called for education for all elementary-aged children as part of a democratizing ethos. According to one historian, “Their insistence that this education be secular and based on science, rather than religion, expressed their devotion to progress and modernity and their opposition to the social and political influence of the Catholic church.” After a significant political victory for partisans of republicanism in 1877, the Catholic hierarchy increasingly urged a separatist strategy. Educational reforms known as “The Ferry Laws” included prohibitions on Catholic religious orders having influence in public schools. The icy relations between the church and republican reformers underwent a brief thaw in the early 1890s under Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), who took a more conciliatory tone than had his predecessor Pius IX (1792-1878).[4] Still, on one account, “educated in a separate school system by teachers who warned against the atheistic tendencies of republicanism . . . French Catholics continued to form a world apart, hostile to the political system.”[5] The principles animating educational debates of the era were occasionally addressed by Rome, but their practical policies would play out in the village and the parish.

Given the polarizing trends in education during Sabatier’s most productive years as a professor, Sabatier himself was something of a mediating figure. Though reformist in overall attitude, he was not content with cultural trends toward a wholesale secularization of education. Religious education as he promoted it included modernization and greater tolerance for new ideas. Such adjustments to modernity, in his view, did not constitute a threat to true religion, but an opportunity for its reform and specialization. Both science and religion could carry out distinctive tasks in a state of ultimate harmony.

*Religion, Psychology, and History:*

Sabatier's most influential book came late in his career, namely, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History*, both published in French and translated into English in 1897. The title gives evidence of his willingness to ground religion in the findings of modern research in history and psychology rather than solely in traditional biblical exegesis or formal church teaching. He acknowledged that "religious faith is always accompanied by knowledge" but that the intellectual claims of historic Christian doctrine could not serve as a foundation for religion's essence. Doctrines and liturgies could be exchanged with other formulations in the wake of a modern philosophical shift. "Rites and beliefs become obliterated or die out; religion possesses a power of perpetual resurrection, whose principle cannot be exhausted in any external form or in any dogmatic idea,"[6] Sabatier asserted. He embraced fellow-Frenchman Auguste Comte's (1798-1857) three stages of human development (theological, metaphysical, and positive) but he did not conceive of these as historical epochs. Sabatier perceived the stages as simultaneous. External/sociological developments intersected with internal/psychological developments occurring within individual humans. On Sabatier's interpretation, these stages represented three ongoing and lasting needs of the human soul. Writing a generation after Comte's failed program of creating an attractive positive and secular religion, Sabatier invoked a medical analogy. Positive religion was analogous to a phantom limb in the experience of an amputee. Something real (namely, authentic religious experience) had been present in the past and functioned as a vital limb. Modern culture had amputated this limb, but though the limb was gone, its absence still produced lingering effects, including a desire for its retrieval.[7]

During the late nineteenth century theology struggled to establish distinctions between humans and the animal world in the wake of wide acceptance of Charles Darwin's (1809-1882)

*The Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871). Sabatier formulated his own account of the animal-human difference. What distinguished humans from the lower animals was not their physiological features but the higher order of a moral sphere. "It is these moral laws, capable of dominating physical laws and bending them to higher ends that, in the human animal, realise and constitute humanity," Sabatier claimed. If the human does not rise above the brute by obeying a higher impulse, he will fall below the brute by his "very perversion of his higher life."[8] Such moral awareness is not unalloyed with pain, however. Echoing the Apostle Paul, Augustine, and Luther, Sabatier observed: "The more effort I make towards an ideal righteousness, the more that ideal, which I never reach, constitutes me a sinner and strengthens in me the consciousness of sin . . .."

Unlike Comte's optimism in the beneficence of science, for Sabatier, even in its progress science "aggravates and renders mortal the original condition of life." A relentless scientific determinism burdens humanity so "our soul groans and ceases to strive." The "philosophical dualism" of modern thought results in a science that cannot produce an objective morality, and morality therefore cannot be "the object of positive science."[9] Morality, the central province of religion, is thus not reducible to scientific analysis. While this was not an idea original to Sabatier, he was an important figure in taking the fruit of German idealism and planting it in French soil.

For Sabatier, science accentuates the lingering need for religion rather than its abandonment. The resultant "feeling of distress" or contradiction within, occasioned by the scientific disenchantment of the world, becomes the renewed wellspring of religion. This was not an intellectual but a moral principle, analogous to "the instinct of conservation in the physical world." If its core was not intellectual, then such a quality must be rooted in a universal "feeling

of absolute dependence." Here Sabatier clearly reflected the influence of German theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) via his influential 1799 monograph *On Religion*. This feeling is one of "subordination," and forms the "experimental and indestructible basis of the idea of God."[10]

*Refining and Redefining Dogma:*

In Sabatier, objective measures of religious truth ceased to have any force for the modern mind. "The feeling of our dependence is that of the mysterious presence of God in us," Sabatier assured his readers. "Such is the deep source from which the idea of the divine springs up within us irresistibly."[11] Dogma is not foundational to religion, but rather serves as a temporal social bond. On a modern theologian's reading of history, dogma appears "late in the history of religious evolution."[12] Yet unlike his secular colleagues, Sabatier did not see this as a justification for wholesale rejection of dogmas. Without dogmas, he held that the church would be "a sterile plant." But this plant produces seeds which must die to be reborn. "To be fruitful, dogma must be decomposed," Sabatier insisted, and thereafter "it must mix itself unceasingly with the evolution of human thought and die in it." This is not the final word for religion though, as this death becomes the condition of a perpetual resurrection."[13]

The nineteenth century cultural literature is replete with denigrations of the very notion as well as the content of dogmatic beliefs.[14] Yet even one as modern as Sabatier was not satisfied with a simplistic rejection of dogmas *per se*. He confronted three widespread prejudices regarding the topic of dogmas. The immutability of dogma, the death of dogma through criticism, and the assumption that dogmas form the essence of religion. These assumptions rounded out the core positions of the sorts of dogmatists with whom Sabatier took issue. Dogma, however, could in his view be rescued from *dogmatism.* He held that the criticism of dogma

"frees it from the chains of the past and permits it to manifest its marvelous gift of rejuvenescence and adaptation to circumstances." He noted that it had not solely been the agenda of Protestants to modify dogmas. Catholics such as British scholar John Cardinal Henry Newman (1801-1890) had also in a responsible manner "applied to dogmas the theory of development."[15]

According to John Kent, Sabatier committed himself to a Protestant principle of freedom that extended both to the conscience of the individual and to the scientific investigation of the world. Unlike Catholicism, which upheld the necessity of separate universities to preserve Christian claims, Protestant theology faculties existed in national universities alongside other fields in the humanities. Theological dogmas became reframed to function like scientific laws, and were similarly contingent and subject to historical change and revision. Thus his project was one of "exchanging the method of authority for the method of observation and experiment."[16] Such an account of dogmas, however, necessarily strained relations between the institutional church and the academic faculties whose ties to ecclesiastical priorities were becoming increasingly unstable.

Taking an evolutionary developmental approach to dogma allowed Sabatier to make emotion (often under the banner of "experience" or "intuition"), rather than intellect, the original or core component of religion. When primitive humanity experienced weakness in contrast to the "great spectacles of Nature" their experience had taken the form of trembling with fear and hope. This Sabatier labeled "primitive religious emotion." This in turn led early humanity to distinguish between subject and object, and to translate this relationship intellectually. The proposition "God is great!" became for Sabatier a transition from an emotion to a thought, or the forging of an "expressive image or representation of the emotion." Dogma is "the expression or envelope of the religious experience," but should never be confused with it. Sabatier protested,

against his conservative critics, that he was not denigrating doctrine or the Bible. But to the question of "whether the revelation of God has consisted of doctrines and dogmatic formulas," he set forth his firm answer: "No." For Sabatier, such are sheer human inventions. "That therefore which constitutes revelation," in a normative way, "is the creative and fruitful religious experience which first arose in the souls of the prophets, of Christ, and of His apostles." Dogmas will be modified, but they will not die. In fact, he went on to defend the retention of dogmas, given that the existence of thought is contingent on its incarnation in language. "A religious life which did not express itself would neither know itself nor communicate itself," he contended. "It is therefore perfectly irrational to talk of a religion without dogma and without worship." Here emerged a profound paradox: dogma, to be a living thing, must change and evolve.[17]

Here Sabatier's Protestant commitments began to shine through, for Protestant Dogmatics "substituted the internal principle of Christian experience for the external principle of authority," exchanging a metaphysical construct for a moral life. The longstanding Protestant concept of *semper reformanda* could, by an act of the interpretive imagination, stand as a more conventional phrasing for Sabatier's evolutionary approach to dogma.[18] Science and its new discoveries demanded corresponding changes in religious dogma, via, for example, modern biblical criticism. By shifting its focus to the originating religious experience, theology could be "saved at once from scholasticism and rationalism," and undergo a reconstruction and "build itself up in its own domain by the side of the other sciences without menacing or fearing any of them."[19] Such reassurances were commonplace in liberal and progressive theologies in the transatlantic world of the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Skepticism and opposition toward such soothing reframings of dogma would arise, however, in the Protestant

fundamentalist-modernist controversy, as well as in the actions of the Vatican to combat Catholic modernists within the next decade.

Sabatier distanced religion from philosophy and its metaphysical assumptions. Per Sabatier, "Rational truths not born of religious feeling would be in dogmatics so many dead weights . . . which would lead to the greatest incoherence."[20] He critiqued the philosophies of Plato and Kant as inadequate to giving a true account of the inherently subjective nature of religious faith. He insisted that "the object of religious knowledge only reveals itself in the subject, by the religious phenomena themselves."[21] The way to preserve religion is to insulate it from science as much as its origins demand. "Scientific certitude has at its basis intellectual evidence. Religious certitude has for its foundation the feeling of subjective life, or moral evidence."[22] Sabatier's approach owed much to such insulating trends in continental theology, and specifically to the Idealist tradition and its inward intuitionist turn.

Such an approach may have insulated religion for a while from the "acids of modernity," but at a tremendous intellectual cost. Increasingly the intellectual dimension of religious faith would be shunted to the margins of society. Emotion, under this modernizing trend, was the proper province of religion, while the intellect was no longer situated as to aid in religious faith in any meaningful way. Enlightenment essayist G. E. Lessing's (1729-1781) broad ugly ditch between history and religious teachings had, in Auguste Sabatier, become a canyon.[23]

*Conclusion:*

For Sabatier, what mattered in religion was not so much its substance as its symbolism. He thus became something of a hero to modernists in both Catholic and Protestant circles. His starting point was internal and subjective. In studying other faiths, Sabatier, like Schleiermacher, concluded that Christianity was the most complete in relating the human to God. Sabatier found

his own form of Protestantism to be more highly evolved than Catholicism, and thus more fitted to modern sensibilities, a commonplace conceit among some Protestant theologians. His most controversial ideas, such as criticizing the Christian doctrine of the atonement, or contrasting religions of authority negatively with religions of the spirit, emerged in the books published after his death in 1901.[24]

With the emotional and experiential dimension of human nature at center stage, and abstract dogmatics marginalized, the uniqueness of the human mind and its profoundest thought processes, underwent a deep erosion. The decline of human exceptionalism mirrored shifts away from the dogmatic affirmations and doctrines that had long been the province of theology. The human inner life is a balance of both emotion and intellect, and the shifting of emphasis to the former imperiled the exceptional character of the human mind in its capacity to moderate between both components of conscious awareness. The bitter fruit of anti-intellectualism coupled with the hyper-emotionalism daily evident in contemporary modes of Christianity may be traced, at least in some small part, back to this damaging theological turn. Though he was not alone in promoting such a shift, the role of Louis Auguste Sabatier in the cultivation of the modernist ethos must be acknowledged.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] Kenneth Scott Latourette, *The Nineteenth Century in Europe: The Protestant and Eastern Churches,* in Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, Vol. II (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 230.

[2] Patrick Cabanel, *Les Protestants et la République* (Bruxelles*:* Éditions Complexes, 2000), 59-60; cf. Musée Protestant, "The Third Republic (1871-1940)," online at URL: https://museeprotestant.org/en/notice/the-third-republic/, accessed 12/29/2022.

[3] Cited in William Fortescue, *The Third Republic in France, 1870-1940: Conflicts and Continuities,* Routledge Sources in History (New York: Routledge, 2000), 37. Fortescue, 38, observes that Ferry was highly successful in promoting reforms that forged "a national system of

education that was secular and, at the primary level, free and compulsory." Educational laws passed under Ferry's guidance in the 1880s "were part of a wider assault on the Catholic Church."

[4] Cardinal Lavigerie, Archbishop of Algiers, declared, with the pope's approval, that the Republican mode of social order was not a moral or religious issue. If the people had accepted it, and "the form of its government has nothing contrary to the principles which alone can direct the life of Christian civilized nations," while accepting the Republic serves as a means of securing domestic peace, then Catholic citizens of France should "sacrifice for the safety of the country." By 1891, the pope had publicly ratified this attitude in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. See Roger Henry Soltau, *French Political Thought in the 19th Century* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1959), 328-9.

[5] Jeremy D. Popkin, *A History of Modern* France, 4th ed. (New York: Routledge, 2016), 148, 169.

[6] Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion based on Psychology and History* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1897), 8.

[7] Ibid., 9-10.

[8] Ibid., 14.

[9] Ibid., 18.

[10] Ibid., 19-22. See also Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, trans. John Oman (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1893), 106.

[11] Sabatier, 23.

[12] Ibid., 231.

[13] Ibid., 242.

[14] See Dennis L. Durst, *The Perils of Human Exceptionalism: Elements of a Nineteenth-Century Theological Anthropology* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 87-108 for many examples of this phenomenon.

[15] Sabatier, 244.

[16] John Kent, "Religion and Science," in *Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West*, Vol. III, ed. Ninian Smart, et. al. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 23-4.

[17] Sabatier, 247-50.

[18] Ibid., 254.

[19] Ibid., 270.

[20] Ibid., 273.

[21] Ibid., 308.

[22] Ibid., 312.

[23] Some theologians were pushing back on the claims to metaphysical certitude asserted by some in the name of science during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Examples included Wilhelm Herrmann (1846-1922) and Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933). See Frederick Gregory, "Questioning Scientific Faith in the Late Nineteenth Century," *Zygon* 43 (2008), 651-64. On Lessing's "broad ugly ditch" see Christophe Chalamet, ed., *The Challenge of History: Readings in Modern Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2020), 8.

[24] C. T. McIntyre, "Sabatier, Auguste (1839-1901)," in *The Encyclopedia of Protestantism*, ed. Hans J. Hillerbrand (New York: Routledge, 2004), 4:1633-4. Further insights into his influence among modernist Catholics such as Alfred Loisy, may be gleaned from Guglielmo Forni Rosa, "Myth and Science in the Perspective of Auguste Sabatier," *Religious Science Research* 88 (2000), 347-64. On the central role of symbolism, see Sabatier, 322-34.