

**Saint of Authority and the Saint of the Spirit:
Paul Sabatier's *Vie de S. François d'Assise***

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Men may glorify as discoveries some insignificant trifles that supply little or no evidence and bestow the name of *new documents* on late accounts of doubtful authenticity, [but] there is nothing further to be known concerning St. Francis, and... the Bollandists, Chalippe and Papini, writing more than a century ago, knew as much, more or less, concerning St. Francis as we do to-day. In the interval, although we have accumulated a library of works concerning St. Francis, no new fact, episode, or saying had been added to his life.

Mgr. Faloci (1902)

The criticism of Franciscan origins is still in its infancy.

Paul Sabatier (1901)

The divide separating the two mentalities represented in the epigraph runs like a fault line through latter nineteenth-century Roman Catholicism. On many theological fronts — biblical studies, apologetics, ecclesiastical history — proponents of traditional positions who considered everything of fundamental importance to have been said were confronted by partisans of critical methods who saw themselves mapping out little explored territory. The traditional hagiography was not exempt; it too faced a critical revisionism characterized by methods and a mentality informed by historical criticism.

The often oppositional relations between traditionalists and progressives formed part of the context for Catholic reception of a non-Catholic's biogra-

phy of St. Francis of Assisi. In November of 1893 Paul Sabatier (1858-1928) published at his own expense his *Vie de S. François d'Assise*.¹ Its author was an unknown; he had published nothing previously in Franciscan studies. Yet the book enjoyed an almost instant success; by the following March the biography was translated into English and German. It received sufficient notice from the Vatican to be placed on the Index of Prohibited Books and from the French Academy to be awarded the crown of honor. Even those most opposed to its portrait of Francis acknowledged its influence.²

Both the popularity and the influential character of Sabatier's biography invited comparison with another biography published three decades earlier: Ernest Renan's *Vie de Jésus* (1863).³ It too was prefaced by a critical study of the sources and like Sabatier's effort was suffused with a romanticism that permeated the portrait of its principal subject. While a number of factors have been adduced to account for the success of Sabatier's *Vie de S. François*,⁴ the two that it shares with Renan's *Vie de Jésus* are worth closer consideration here.

On one level, Sabatier's liberal Protestantism appeared more palatable to Catholics than did Renan's overt rationalism. The former's critical conclusions were less extreme, the treatment of his subject more respectful by comparison. But if the application of the method was more restrained, the spirit which informed the method was no more acceptable. On another level, their criticism converged; it naturalized the miraculous and ultimately rationalized the supernatural.

¹"At first he did not find a publisher. *The Vie de S. François* was printed at his own expense (more precisely thanks to his wife's money) with the idea of being a kind of spiritual testament." Maurice Causse, "Le témoignage de Paul Sabatier (1858-1928)" II, *Études théologiques et religieuses*, 66 (1991), 389.

²See *inter alia* Paschal Robinson, *The Real St. Francis of Assisi* (London, 1904), pp. 23-24; Leo L. Dubois, *St. Francis of Assisi, Social Reformer* (New York, 1906), pp. 249-250.

³Renan also had an interest in Francis of Assisi. Less than a decade before the appearance of Sabatier's biography he republished a study on the saint in his *Nouvelles études d'histoire religieuse* (1884) [orig. art. 1866]. Given Renan's stature, his treatment of the life-story of Francis had a wide audience, and Walter Seton credits him with having "an immense influence in starting the examination on modern lines of the half-forgotten documents of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries." "The Rediscovery of St. Francis of Assisi," *St. Francis of Assisi: 1226-1926: Essays in Commemoration*. (London, 1926), p. 251. Renan's influence on Paul Sabatier was more than literary. While a student at the Paris Faculty of Protestant Theology, Sabatier attended Renan's lectures at the Collège de France. He later recounted how he had received from Renan, toward the end of 1884, the mission of studying Francis. See Gabriel Maugain, "Paul Sabatier — Notes biographiques." *Revue d'histoire franciscaine*, 5 (1928), 5-6. For an example of the comparisons that were drawn between Sabatier's biography and Renan's work see Charles Guignebert, Review of Paul Sabatier, *Vie de saint François d'Assise, Le Moyen Age* 7, (1894), 51-52.

⁴Lawrence S. Cunningham, *Saint Francis of Assisi* (Boston, 1976), p. 114.

To Catholic traditionalists historical criticism appeared to be a means of recreating Jesus or Francis into the critic's own image and likeness. The Lives produced by such critics were less biographical representations of their subjects than presentations of a thesis. As such they took on the character of novels — fictionalized renderings more indebted to authorial imagination than to historical reality. In short, Sabatier, like Renan, had produced a *roman-à-thèse*. Or, more properly, given reactions to the nuanced conclusions of criticism, a *roman-à-hypothèse*.⁵

The spirit which traditionalists detected in these works and which made them uneasy was only partly rooted in historical criticism. That spirit also reflected a romanticism which contributed to the Franciscan revival and was a factor in the popularity of both Renan's and Sabatier's Lives. As C.N.L. Brooke has observed, "the nineteenth-century romantics found (or thought they found) a man after their own heart, a lover of mankind, a lover of animals, an apostle of liberty — a liberal romantic in the thirteenth century."⁶ Like Renan's Jesus, Sabatier's Francis was a man inspired, possessed of a profound originality, and at odds with the traditional status quo. In short, a romantic hero whose charismatic genius institutional authorities sought to routinize.

A rendering of St. Francis in anything resembling liberal Protestant terms placed him far indeed from traditionalist Catholic preoccupations of the time. Sabatier's portrait invites comparison with that of Léon Le Monnier, whose biography of the saint also appeared in English translation in 1894. It was outfitted with an unsurprisingly Ultramontane preface by Cardinal Vaughan,⁷

⁵Characterization of Renan's *Vie de Jésus* as "a miserable novel," and criticism of its author's use of historical critical method and its consequences for the supernatural may be found in Abbé Freppel, *Examen critique de la "Vie de Jésus" de M. Renan* (Paris, 1864). Freppel's study rode the coattails of the popularity of Renan's book to become something of a publishing success in its own right. Freppel's critique may be taken as both representative of ecclesiastical reaction to Renan and influential in Catholic circles. For extensive treatment of Renan's critics see Vytas V. Gaigalas, *Ernest Renan and his French Catholic Critics* (North Quincy, Massachusetts, 1972). The novelistic character of Sabatier's effort was noted by the reviewer in *Polybiblion*, 70 (1894), 509 — who also retrieves Renan's *Vie de Jésus* for comparison. More extensive criticisms along these lines may be found in Robinson, who criticizes Sabatier's book as "a thesis, not a real biography" (*op. cit.*, p. 30; cf. 96-97).

⁶C.N.L. Brooke, "Paul Sabatier and St. Francis of Assisi" in Maurice Sheehan (ed.), *St. Francis of Assisi: Essays in Commemoration, 1982* (St. Bonaventure, 1982), p. 42. See also Bernard M. G. Reardon, *Religion in the Age of Romanticism* (Cambridge, 1985), esp. ch. 9: "Ernest Renan and the Religion of Science."

⁷On Vaughan's Ultramontanism see J. Derek Holmes, *More Roman than Rome* (Shepherdstown, West Virginia, 1978), esp. ch. V. The obverse of Vaughan's Ultramontanism was an inability to appreciate issues raised by liberal Catholics. Still less was he able to fathom the mind-set of Protestants. See J.G. Snead-Cox, *The Life of Cardinal Vaughan* (St. Louis, 1910), II, pp. 398 and

which indicated the tenor of its Francis. The Cardinal took care to point out that

S. Francis, as we might expect, had placed loyal adherence to the Catholic faith and obedience to the Pope in the forefront of his observance, and had made both to be the very Alpha and Omega of his rule. Thus, before asking obedience of his brethren, he begins by himself giving the example of it.⁸

From such a papalist perspective Sabatier's Francis would appear all the more a liberal Protestant placed in a Franciscan habit.

This portrait invites a second comparison, this time with the work of Paul's namesake, Auguste Sabatier. The latter was instrumental in establishing the Faculty of Protestant Theology at Paris after the French defeat in 1870 resulted in the loss of Strasbourg. He later became its dean and gained recognition for his contribution to the theological position termed *symbolofidéisme*.⁹ He had taught Paul (no relation) during the 1880's and when the *Vie de S. François* initially appeared the identity in surname benefitted Paul. As a result of the biography's success, however, by the time Auguste's *Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion* was published in 1897 it was the familiarity of Paul's name in Catholic circles that helped gain recognition for his former professor, especially in Italy.¹⁰ The affinities between the religiosity of Francis in Paul's biography and that of liberal Protestantism in the *Esquisse* and in its posthumous sequel, *Les religions d'autorité et la religion de l'esprit*, will constitute the final portion of this study. A comparison of the religiosity of Paul's Francis with that propagated by Auguste Sabatier in his principal books will throw that portrait into sharper relief, rendering both Catholic and Protestant reception of his life more comprehensible.

415-416.

⁸Léon Le Monnier, *History of S. Francis of Assisi* (London, 1894), pp. viii-ix. The French original was published in 1889.

⁹Biographical background on Auguste Sabatier (1839-1901) is given by Jean Réville, "Auguste Sabatier [1839-1901]," in Auguste Sabatier, *The Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit* (London, 1904), pp. v-x. For contemporary assessments of *symbolofidéisme* see J. Dick Fleming, "The New French School of Theology," *Expository Times*, 13 (1902), 57-61; A.C. Zenos, "A New Theological Movement within French Protestantism," *American Journal of Theology*, 6 (1902), 294-304; George B. Stevens, "Auguste Sabatier and the Paris School of Theology," *Hibbert Journal*, 1 (1903), 553-568. More recent critical discussion of Auguste Sabatier's theology may be found in Thomas Silkstone, *Religion, Symbolism and Meaning* (Oxford, 1968); Bernard Reymond, *Auguste Sabatier et le procès théologique de l'autorité* (Lausanne, 1976).

¹⁰Causse, *op. cit.*, III, 511.

Saint of the Spirit

The conservatives of our time who turn to the thirteenth century as to the golden age of authoritative faith make a strange mistake.... There was a genuine attempt at a religious revolution, which, if it had succeeded, would have ended in a universal priesthood, in the proclamation of the rights of the individual conscience.¹¹

Vaughan's preface had left little doubt regarding the Francis that would be found in Le Monnier's biography. Likewise Paul Sabatier's introduction gives notice of the Francis to follow. While romanticism clearly suffuses its pages, most of the introduction is taken up with a critical study of the sources.¹² In addition to a small corpus of Francis's own writings — which Sabatier found neglected by many of his biographers — the early Franciscan movement produced a number of documents bearing on his life and the early history of the Order. Thomas of Celano, who entered the Order around 1215, produced two biographies. The first was written at the express order of Pope Gregory IX shortly after the saint's canonization in 1228. However, there were gaps in Celano's work where he lacked information. By the time he came to write his second biography additional material had come forth. Much of this material is also reflected in the so-called *Legend of the Three Companions*. A letter which prefaces this collection identifies it as the work of three of Francis's closest companions: Leo, Rufino, and Angelo, who have gathered their own reminiscences of the saint and augmented them with those of other friars. When Bonaventure was commissioned to write a new life of St. Francis he was able to draw on these sources. After the Order solemnly approved his work in 1263 the following chapter ordered all primitive legends destroyed, according to Bonaventure's Life a canonical status and banishing all manuscripts which escaped destruction into archival oblivion. They languished there until resurrected by the Bollandists in the eighteenth century.

In the course of the nineteenth century Celano's Lives appeared once more, and editions of the *Three Companions* again were available. To minds formed by historical criticism the age and relation of these source documents became important questions. Were portions of Celano's second biography an abridge-

¹¹Paul Sabatier, *Life of St. Francis of Assisi*, trans. Louise Seymour Houghton (New York, 1902 [1894]), pp. xii-xiii. The English translation has been checked against the French text. Paul Sabatier, *Vie de S. François d'Assise* (Paris, 1894).

¹²Sabatier, *Vie*, pp. xxxvi-cxxvi. The English translation presented this portion of the French original as an appendix.

ment of the *Three Companions*? Or did priority belong to the *Vita Secunda*, with the purported authorship by the three companions being truly legendary, and the work in reality an expansion of Celano by a thirteenth-century forger? A discrepancy between the letter prefacing the *Three Companions*, which described the contents of the work, and the actual work appeared to favor its apocryphal character. Another possible explanation was that the document had been mutilated in the course of its transmission. In this case the lack of agreement between letter and document was to be explained by the disappearance of the greater portion of its original material. This led Sabatier to search for the missing chapters, and in a 16th century compilation of Franciscan material, the *Speculum Vitae*, he thought he found them. The content and style of a large number of chapters of this later work convinced him they were in fact early and belonged together. He used this critical reconstruction as one of the main sources for his *Vie de S. François d'Assise*.¹³ This set Sabatier's biography on a rather different footing than those largely indebted to Celano or Bonaventure as their principal sources. It in part accounts for the rather different portrait of the saint contained there and the influence the book exercised.

In his review of Sabatier's biography A.G. Little termed the section on the critical study of the sources "a model of historical criticism" which illuminated many obscure points.¹⁴ Even reviewers who took exception to the spirit which informed the criticism stressed the necessity of taking source criticism into account. The reviewer in *Polybiblion* observed, "Excepting its spirit, the critical study of the sources must be given to our contemporary hagiographers as a model, given their frequent preoccupation with literary effects and pious considerations over documentation. It would be necessary to bring a proper temperment to both of these elements."¹⁵ Yet while the critical aspects of Sabatier's biography drew a great deal of attention, there remained a sense that other factors were of significance in shaping his presentation of the saint, and

¹³Sabatier's intuitive reconstruction appeared to be confirmed when he later discovered a manuscript of the *Speculum Perfectionis* complete with authorship and date of composition. Of the 118 chapters of his postulated source, 116 were to be found in the *Speculum Perfectionis*, whose author was given as Leo and its date as 1227. The publication of this manuscript touched off further controversy which engaged Sabatier's later career. See Rosalind B. Brooke (ed. and trans.), *The Writings of Leo, Rufino and Angelo, Companions of St. Francis* (Oxford, 1990 [1970]), pp. 4ff. Also Guy Philippart, "Le Bollandiste Francois Van Ortroy et la *Legenda Trium Sociorum*," in *La "Questione Franciscana" dal Sabatier ad Oggi* (Assisi, 1974), pp. 173-197.

¹⁴*English Historical Review*, 9 (1894), 747.

¹⁵*Polybiblion*, 70 (1894), 509.

that the latter often stood in uneasy relation to the criticism. Writing from the perspective of several decades, C.N.L. Brooke judged that Sabatier's romantic faith was not always in "perfect harmony" with his critical study of the sources.¹⁶ Closer to the book's original publication Charles Pfister faulted the handling of the sources themselves. He argued that it was Sabatier's preconceived ideal of what was Franciscan or not that regulated his evaluation of the sources, and not the other way round.¹⁷ Or, to combine this with Brooke's judgment, the romantic element in the biography was more determinative than the critical element.

The introduction which displayed Sabatier the source critic also revealed him as the subjective, imaginative historian. An "objective history in which the author will study the people as a chemist studies a body" is utopian. The perspective and personality of the historian are not incidental to the historical task, for it is necessary to grasp things from the inside. Sabatier's romantic faith finds succinct expression in his statement, "Love is the true key of history."¹⁸ Thus while Sabatier the critic patiently labored to establish the priority of the *Three Companions* and to reconstruct the early material present in the *Speculum Vitae*, Sabatier the romantic freely drew upon the legendary narratives of the *Fioretti*. While straightforwardly admitting their legendary character he goes on to say,

Yet that which gives these stories an inestimable worth is what for want of a better term we may call their atmosphere. They are legendary, worked over, exaggerated, false even, if you please, but they give us with a vivacity and intensity of coloring something that we shall search for in vain elsewhere — the surroundings in which St. Francis lived. More than any other biography the *Fioretti* transport us to Umbria, to the mountains of the March of Ancona; they make us visit the hermitages, and mingle with the life, half childish, half angelic, which was that of their inhabitants.¹⁹

In his review Pfister reproduced this passage and noted the impossibility of demonstrating that the fifteenth-century author of the *Fioretti* had copied some author contemporary to Francis. The historical veracity of the narratives could not be demonstrated, yet they passed into Sabatier's narrative virtually

¹⁶C.N.L. Brooke, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

¹⁷Charles Pfister, Review of Paul Sabatier, *Vie de Saint François d'Assise*, *Revue critique*, 38 (1894) 2: 14-18.

¹⁸Sabatier, *Life*, p. xxxi (my translation), xxxiv. Cf. Renan's statement, "One should never write except upon that which one loves." Ernest Renan, *Recollections of My Youth*, trans. C.B. Pitman (London, 1929), p. xxxvii.

¹⁹Sabatier, *Life*, p. 416.

unaltered.²⁰ Pfister's criticism is indicative: when put to the test, Sabatier's romanticism is often stronger than his criticism.

What picture of Francis emerged from the combination of these two tendencies? Sabatier's use of his reconstructed source toned down many of the miraculous elements found in Celano's and Bonaventure's works. The portrait of Francis is more human, more sober when compared to the traditional hagiography. Yet this portrait also reflects strongly the image of the romantic hero.²¹ In contrast to ordinary members of his society the romantic hero is a person of individual genius, possessed of an originality that sets him in tension with the conservative forces of tradition and community. As Sabatier represents it, Francis's genius was to have grasped the evangelical ideals of poverty and simplicity, seeking to live those out in a lay fraternity. That ideal brought him into tension with members of his own fraternity (most notably Brother Elias) who aspired to a more traditional conception of monastic life. It also brought him into tension with a hierarchical ecclesiastical structure incapable of fundamentally comprehending that ideal, yet quite willing to employ it for its own ends. (In this capacity Cardinal Ugolino — later Gregory IX — is presented as a foil to Francis.) In this routinization of the originality and genius of the Franciscan charisma it became transformed into virtually the opposite of what Francis originally envisioned. As Cunningham summarizes it, "For Sabatier, Francis, especially in the last years of his life, was a man betrayed and thwarted by his confreres and neutralized by the conservative tendencies of the Roman Curia."²²

Certainly all this is very far from the traditional hagiography. Yet there is present a hagiography of a type. Critics have pointed out how uncritical Sabatier was toward Francis. Anything that differed from his hero's aims was suspect, anything that introduced change into Francis's designs devalued. Certain aspects important to the Catholic tradition — and also very important to Francis — remained recessive in the biography. Sabatier's highlighting of poverty threw Francis's devotion to the Eucharist, his stress on obedience, and his insistence on submission to priests and bishops into the shadows.²³ In short, there is a consistent tendency to privilege individual charism over

²⁰Pfister, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

²¹On the romantic hero see Walter L. Reed, *Meditations on the Hero* (New Haven, 1974), Prolegomenon. John Thiel has placed this conception within a theological/ecclesiastical context in his *Imagination & Authority* (Minneapolis, 1991), esp. ch. 3.

²²Cunningham, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

²³C.N.L. Brooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49; Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-49.

institutionalized tradition; a romantic hagiography is present throughout. Not that Sabatier's contemporaries actually identified his rendition of Francis as that of a "romantic hero." Catholic traditionalists were content to charge that the saint had been transformed into a liberal Protestant.²⁴

Saint of Authority

[Francis] always spoke of the Cardinal in terms of respect and admiration. He called him his father, and truly, says Celano, he reposed on the bosom of his clemency as an infant sleeps upon its mother's breast. He professed submission to him in all things. When writing to him about affairs of the Order, he put the prophetic superscription, 'To the very reverend Lord Ugolino, Bishop of the whole world,' as though he were already Sovereign Pontiff. In short, he gave him all that was in his power.²⁵

In 1894 there appeared English translations of both Sabatier's and Le Monnier's Lives of Francis. Ultramontane Catholics disturbed by the former would have been reassured by the latter. Its Francis was poles apart from Sabatier's. In part this was due to Le Monnier's recourse primarily to Celano's work and secondarily to Bonaventure's. For Le Monnier, Thomas of Celano was "honesty itself," "a guarantee of the highest authority," and "worthy of all credence."²⁶ Reliance upon his work, especially the second biography, cast Francis in a more traditional mold, emphasizing the miraculous elements in and surrounding his life. It made Francis's sanctity more evident, even destined. To obtain a better grasp of the character of this biography in relation to its principal source we shall retrieve a later article by Sabatier.²⁷ Written to defend his reconstruction of the sources against the criticisms of the Bollandist François Van Ortroy, it contains textual comparisons of the *Three Companions* and Celano's second biography, together with commentary. Comparison of Sabatier's and Le Monnier's biographies reveals their respective dependence on these sources and how this shaped their depictions of Francis.

Sabatier gives several instances in which textual comparison shows evidence of amplification in service of edification in Celano's version. In the first account given from the *Three Companions* Francis's mother Pica is surrounded by her neighbors who were indicating to her failings in her son's conduct. Her

²⁴Robinson, *op. cit.*, p. 79.

²⁵Le Monnier, *op. cit.*, p. 421.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 10, 6.

²⁷Paul Sabatier, *De l'authenticité de la légende de saint François dite des Trois Compagnons* (Paris, 1901 [orig. *Revue historique*, 75 (1901)]).

response is rather natural, being the kind of reply any mother might have made in a similar situation. They are mistaken; she hopes he will become a child of God ["*filius Dei per gratiam*"]. Sabatier contrasts this with Celano's text, in which neighbors now compliment Pica on her son's good manners and she becomes a sort of prophetess. In another instance a natural remark made by Francis is transformed in Celano's version into a prophetic statement.²⁸

In his comments Sabatier points out as a principle of hagiographical criticism that the role played by the miraculous in a document stands in inverse proportion to the document's age. "A document contemporary to the facts that it narrates contains scarcely the seeds of the miraculous."²⁹ On this principle the *Three Companions* in both of the instances cited is to be preferred to Celano's version.

The relation of sources to respective biographies may be gleaned from a comparison of their presentations of the first of the instances cited by Sabatier in his article. In Sabatier's biography, "when the neighbors told her of Francis's escapades, she would calmly reply, 'What are you thinking about? I am very sure that, if it pleases God, he will become a good Christian.' The words were natural enough from a mother's lips, but later on they were held to have been truly prophetic."³⁰ As Le Monnier recounts it, Francis's parents

provided him with abundant means, and defended him against the neighbours who, astonished at his prodigality, took upon themselves to make the remark that he lived like a prince. 'What is that to you?' replied his mother; 'our son does indeed live like a prince, but have patience, the day will come when he will live like a son of God.' She added that he would be the father of many children for God.³¹

Le Monnier adds that perhaps this was only Pica's maternal love that inspired her statement, or it may have been her recollection of a prediction made by a stranger shortly after Francis's baptism. The man designated the child as one destined to become one of the most perfect of God's servants in this world — and disappeared. Sabatier points out the legendary form this episode has assumed and identifies it as the core of a whole cycle of legends that had gathered around Francis's birth in the fourteenth century.³²

²⁸*Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

²⁹*Ibid.*, p. 5.

³⁰Sabatier, *Life*, pp. 7-8.

³¹Le Monnier, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³²Sabatier, *Life*, p. 2n.

In his reply to Van Ortrov Sabatier retrieved another critical principle: along with an amplification of the marvelous there occurs a diminution or disappearance of the purely human. He again gives several examples which would find their resonances in the two biographies.³³

We have seen that, important as Sabatier's criticism was, his romanticism was more determinative of his presentation of his subject. An analogous judgment may be made with respect to Le Monnier's efforts. His Francis is not simply the product of a different choice of sources to privilege. In contrast to the romantic hero, the "apostle of liberty" whose innovating genius is so highly praised by Sabatier, Le Monnier is concerned to present Francis as standing in loyal continuity with the tradition. One can run down the list of criticisms directed against Sabatier by traditionalists and find that those elements recessive or omitted are present and sometimes privileged in Le Monnier's book. Critics who objected to the relative lack of attention accorded the Eucharist and sacramental practice in general in Sabatier's biography found no similar grounds for complaint in Le Monnier's book. Aspects of Catholic devotion such as those surrounding the Incarnation or angels, merely touched on or passed over entirely by Sabatier, are given their share of attention by the Catholic biographer. While Sabatier focuses on poverty Le Monnier gives prominence to obedience. For Sabatier Dominic serves as a foil to Francis; he is solicitous of authority and lacks any deep appreciation of poverty such as Francis exhibits. In Le Monnier's account the two saints are in harmony, one that also extends to Francis's relations with his local bishop, and with other members of the hierarchy. Where differences do emerge, they are harmoniously resolved. There is nothing of the tension and operating at cross purposes that characterizes Francis's relations with the hierarchy in Sabatier's narrative. Above all, the loyal obedience to the pope, pointed out by Vaughan in his preface, is apparent in the biography as characteristic of the saint. The other aspect particularly singled out by Vaughan also needs to be noted: Francis's orthodoxy. For Sabatier the liberal Protestant, the coming of Francis signaled "the end of dogmatism and authority; it is the coming in of individualism and inspiration." While not the creator of the movement he was "its most inspired singer" — a "precursor of religious subjectivism."³⁴ That this touched on a sensitive nerve is evident in Paschal Robinson's contrast between the image set

³³Sabatier, *De l'authenticité*, p. 8. He explicitly comments on Le Monnier's work on pages 41-42, turning a comment made by the priest on Celano's biographies to the advantage of the *Three Companions* as source.

³⁴Sabatier, *Life*, pp. 181, 181n., 335.

forth in Leo XIII's encyclical on St. Francis and "the same Saint whom M. Sabatier holds up as an independent, irresponsible, quasi-heretical fanatic!"³⁵ This serves to indicate yet once again that hagiographical controversy sinks its roots deep into theology. And theology finds a broader context in the two mentalities mentioned at the outset.

In *Imagination & Authority* John Thiel has identified two paradigms of theological responsibility. In the classical paradigm orthodoxy is paramount; emphasis falls on the theologian's representative faithfulness to the Tradition. By contrast, the romantic paradigm values originality and creativity on the theologian's part. It is part of the theologian's task to contribute to the development of the Tradition, to relate that tradition to changing needs of faith in the present. The theologian's responsibility, then, entails not simply faithful representation, but encompasses creative reconstruction. In Thiel's description the romantic paradigm is clearly linked to traits discernible in Sabatier's rendering of Francis:

The romantic paradigm assumed that the theologian exercised vocational responsibility as an author whose individual talent contributed something valuable, and even indispensable, to the normativeness of the Christian tradition.... This conception of theological authorship stands in sharp contrast to the classical paradigm's suspicion of all nonsupernatural authority and sanctions an understanding of theological responsibility that the classical paradigm would have judged ecclesially anomic.³⁶

The point of this is twofold. First, Sabatier's romanticism pervaded his conception of how one did theology. A fuller elaboration of Thiel's description of the romantic paradigm would show, for example, the consonance of critical methods with it. And an exploration of Sabatier's later involvement with Roman Catholic Modernists would further evidence a romantic conception of theology.³⁷ Secondly, with suitable adaptation, Thiel's observations on theological responsibility could be predicated of hagiography. Indeed, the orientation toward Francis in particular and sanctity more generally flows naturally from an underlying theological orientation. The tenor of Paul Sabatier's hagiography has emerged by comparison with Léon Le Monnier's work. A

³⁵Robinson, *op. cit.*, pp. 94-95. The encyclical in question is *Auspicato Concessum* (September 17, 1882). See Claudia Carlen (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals 1878-1903* (Wilmington, North Carolina, 1981), pp. 69-74.

³⁶Thiel, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

³⁷See Paul Sabatier, *Modernism*, trans. C.A. Miles (New York, 1908).

deeper appreciation of his orientation to theology will emerge from comparing him to his namesake, Auguste Sabatier.

Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit

Nothing could be more mistaken than the conjecture of certain writers, who, apparently anxious to read the Franciscan movement in the light of their own predilections, have sought to give to the work of the Friars a colour of 'undenominationalism,' and to represent the drift of their preaching as not only rather moral than dogmatic, but as one in which the value of dogma and orthodoxy was discounted to make room for a fuller presentment of the precepts of morality.³⁸

Cardinal Vaughan's concern for orthodoxy was cast in the mold of Roman Neo-Scholasticism. This set him poles apart from both Paul and Auguste Sabatier, who shared a liberal Protestantism that regarded dogma as secondary and derivative.

The Sabatiers shared not only a common surname but also a common theological outlook. The identity of surname favored the fortunes of the *Vie de S. François* when it first appeared and its author's reputation remained to be established. The commonality of theological orientation later favored Auguste, particularly in the Italian Catholic circles familiar with Paul's work, after publication of the *Esquisse*.³⁹ This liberal Protestantism and its connection to the "romantic paradigm" bears closer examination.

When theologians of the period used the term "criticism," that essentially meant historical research. But the word doubled as a more or less implicit reference to the Kantian critique of knowledge, as that was then understood in France. In his exegetical work, particularly on Paul, Auguste Sabatier had revealed his competence with historical critical method.⁴⁰ In the final portion of the *Esquisse* he laid bare the Kantian framework of his theology. This effectively closed off the intellect as the major avenue taken to effect contact between God and humanity. The debt to Schleiermacher was openly acknowledged in the recourse to the feeling of dependence. However this engages

³⁸Vaughan in Le Monnier, *op. cit.*, p. viii.

³⁹This is reflected in the enthusiastic reception accorded Auguste Sabatier at the seminary in Perugia in 1899, recounted in Paul Sabatier, *France To-day: Its Religious Orientation*, trans. Henry Bryan Binns (New York, 1913), pp. 202-204. Cf. the excerpt quoted by Causse from a letter of Paul Sabatier to Auguste Sabatier, May 9, 1898, commenting on Italian reception of the *Esquisse*: Causse *op. cit.*, III, 512.

⁴⁰J. Pédézert observed that Auguste Sabatier "had a very remarkable knowledge of the original text of the New Testament...he could have been a professor of exegesis as well as dogmatics." Edouard Rod, "Enquête sur Auguste Sabatier," *Revue chrétienne*, 51 (1904) II, 218.

only the passive side of the religious sentiment; Schleiermacher needs to be completed by adding the active side: "the movement of the soul placing itself in personal relation and contact with the mysterious power whose presence it feels even before it is able to give it a name," i.e., prayer.⁴¹ The essence of religion, then, lies in a conscious and willed relation to that mysterious power on which the soul feels itself and its destiny to depend. And the essence of Christianity resides in the consciousness of the filial relation in which the soul stands in relation to the Father. This was the essential element in the consciousness of Jesus, "the distinctive and original feature of his piety."⁴² To be Christian is to have this filial piety which received its most perfect expression in Jesus reproduced in oneself. In the theology of the *Esquisse* Jesus came to reveal a paradigmatic religious experience. "He promulgates no law or dogma; he founds no official institution. His intention is quite different: he wishes, above all, to awaken the moral life, to rouse the soul from its inertia, to break its chains, to lighten its burden, to make it active, free, and fruitful."⁴³

Liberal Protestantism thus finds its center in interiority — in the inward piety of the believer. Moreover, this subjective piety is not to be viewed as the effect of an objective revelation which is accorded primacy as its cause. The religious phenomenon is conceived as the inner revelation of God which has as its correlative the subjective piety of the person, and which necessarily seeks and comes to expression in historical religious forms: dogmas, rites, and institution. The latter necessarily draws upon the concepts of a given philosophy or the forms available in a particular culture. As such they are contingent: as intellectual systems change and cultural forms undergo development religious expressions such as dogma must likewise be creatively adapted. The theologian's task as one of creative construction of the Tradition to meet changing times clearly flows from this understanding of religion and Christianity. Its tension with the understanding dominant in Catholicism, already apparent in the *Esquisse*, is even more explicit in its sequel: *Les religions d'autorité et la religion de l'esprit*.

⁴¹ Auguste Sabatier, *Esquisse d'une philosophie de la religion d'après la psychologie et l'histoire* (Paris, 1901 [1897]), p. 24. An English translation of the *Esquisse* appeared as *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History* (1897). Entire sections of the French original have been omitted, often without indication, and other liberties have been taken with the French text. Accordingly, the French edition has been used as the basis for this section. See William Adams Brown, Review of *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion Based on Psychology and History*, in *American Journal of Theology*, 3 (1899), 626-627.

⁴² *Esquisse*, p. 184.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

To express the relationship between the mystical or interior element in dogma and its external, intellectual expression Auguste Sabatier drew upon the analogue of thought finding its necessary expression in language.⁴⁴ Dogma requires yet a third element, however: that of authority. In the first two portions of the sequel he explored the two major expressions of Christianity as religion of authority: Catholicism and Protestantism. Each in its own way invests something external with a supernatural authority. In the case of Protestantism authority is vested in a book. It seeks to contain authority in the words of Scripture through the doctrine of plenary inspiration of the two Testaments. In Catholicism authority is vested in the Church, and ultimately in the Papacy. The doctrine of papal infallibility is but the logical working out of this principle and the counterpart of the Protestant doctrine of plenary inspiration. Any attempt to vest some external agency with final authority is ultimately deformative of a mature Christianity. In concluding his observations on Catholicism, Sabatier remarks, "A supernatural authority in the exterior order necessarily becomes first a political authority, and afterward an oppressive authority.... The same supernatural element stiffens the system of authority, exaggerates it, and forbids its reformation."⁴⁵

By contrast, religion of the spirit is founded upon interiority, for the Christian upon the normative and seminal experience of the consciousness of God in the spirit of Jesus. Religious symbols are the always intrinsically inadequate means of communicating that experience. They derive their authority from the ability to successfully do so. If they are no longer capable of doing so they lose their living character and must yield their place to symbols which are able to function adequately. Thus, on the one hand, the task of theology is a critical one: to discern what is living and what is dead in the expressions of religion. On the other, the task is a creative one: to create new forms for the gospel to bring it into more immediate contact with the consciences of people in modern society.⁴⁶ In short, this is a conception of theology that accords well with the spirit of romanticism.

It also accords well with the spirit that pervaded the *Vie de S. François*. The prominence of the moral element that is evident in Auguste Sabatier's work and that so disturbed Vaughan is paramount in the early Franciscan preaching.

⁴⁴"As it is impossible for thought not to manifest itself instrumentally by gesture and language, so it is impossible for religion not to express itself via rites and doctrines." *Ibid.*, p. 293. cf. pp. 308-309.

⁴⁵*Religions of Authority and the Religion of the Spirit*, p. 144.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 357-362.

It was characterized there as "simple and purely ethical" — free of the "undergrowth of dogma and scholasticism."⁴⁷ This flows from Francis's interiority, his piety which "proceeds from the secret union of his soul with the divine by prayer."⁴⁸ The tension between the external authority of ecclesiastical office and the interior authority of individual conscience that Sabatier found throughout Francis's life, he finds re-expressed in the saint's Will:

The individual conscience here proclaims its sovereign authority.... When a man has once spoken thus, submission to the Church has been singularly encroached upon. We may love her, hearken to her, venerate her, but we feel ourselves, perhaps without daring to avow it, superior to her.⁴⁹

These indications must suffice to convey something of the many affinities and outright parallels between the work of Paul and Auguste Sabatier. They should also suffice to indicate that the charge that Francis had been presented in liberal Protestant guise was not entirely off the mark. At the time of the biography's appearance its author could state with some justice that he had not represented Francis as a sort of proto-Protestant. For he agreed with Auguste Sabatier that the Reformation had led to the substitution of one external authority for another. This was clearly contrary to Francis the apostle of liberty. Subsequently he came to see that the criticism of his having presented Francis as a liberal Protestant was more difficult to fend off. In an address given in 1908 he said that if he had indeed Protestantized Francis he regretted it, and would try to repair the fault. But if he was ready to re-examine his portrait of Francis and to alter it if necessary, his basic theological commitments remained unshaken. For he immediately continued, "Let us hope that the simplicity that I put to this *mea culpa* will induce my honorable critics to show an equal good will, and that they will cease in good time to believe that they do great honor to St. Francis in representing him as a sort of passive instrument in the hands of the ecclesiastical hierarchy."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Sabatier, *Life*, p. 129 (my translation).

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194. In doing so, Francis was actualizing in himself what Christ had perfectly actualized in his own life. "The really new thing that Jesus brought into the world was that, feeling himself in perfect union with the heavenly Father, he called all men to unite themselves to him and through him to God" (p. 293).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁵⁰ Paul Sabatier, "The Originality of St. Francis of Assisi" in Sheehan (ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 33.