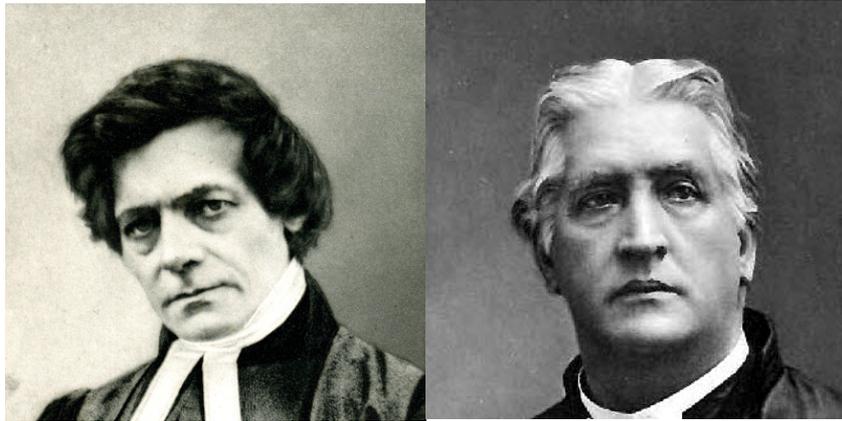


Adolphe Monod and Eugene Bersier



1. Facts

We do not know whether Adolphe Monod and Eugene Bersier have ever met. As a matter of fact, the two men hardly had enough time to meet. Bersier came to Paris at the end of his divinity studies in February 1854 and left for Germany in July. He returned to Paris at the end of the year 1854 or at the beginning of 1855. At that time Monod was already seriously ill and close to giving up his ministry.

We do know, however, that Edmond de Pressensé, a friend and relative by marriage of Eugene Bersier, was one of the pastors who visited Adolphe Monod shortly before his death. The volume *Les Adieux* contains a list of the pastors who chaired the religious services around Monod's deathbed: "Messrs Frédéric Monod, Guillaume Monod, Meyer, Grandpierre, Gauthey, Vaurigaud (of Nantes), Vallette, Armand-Delille, Vermeil, Fisch, Jean Monod, Edmond de Pressensé, Petit, Paumier, Zipperlen, Hocart, Louis Vernes, Boissonnas, and Vulliet"¹. Apparently, Eugene Bersier was not among them – which is hardly surprising.

2. Quotes

Bersier mentions or quotes Monod at least four times in his published sermons. It is clear that he had a great respect for Adolphe, but there is no indication that they had ever met:

- Bersier's sermon "The Ungrateful", has the following annotation: "Just read the last prayer of Adolphe Monod (*cf.* his *Adieux*) and tell us if anyone has ever given a more moved and admirable prayer of thanksgiving in the midst of such cruel pain."
- In his sermon "Discouragement" the sentence "It is the only solution to the terrible challenge of lifting your nature up to the level of the law of God rather than lowering the law of God to the level of your nature that is worthy of both God and yourself." has a footnote referring to Adolphe Monod. We do not know to which text Bersier refers the reader. The expression "worthy of both God and yourself" is also found in the sermon "Lazarus", but without any reference to Monod.

¹ *Les adieux d'Adolphe Monod à ses amis et à l'Eglise*, Meyrueis, Paris, 1856, p. III

- The sermon “The Slave Onesimus” quotes a sentence taken from Monod’s sermon “Saint Paul”: “He made a covenant with normal humanity against fallen humanity, with man as he has to be against man as he is.”
- The sermon “Remember” contains the following passage: “Incredulous and unrepentant souls, nominal Christians walking on forbidden paths, you have to remember today, in order not to have to remember when it will be too late, in order not to have to add, as Adolphe Monod once said, the bitterness of “I could but I did not want!” to the pain of “I cannot any more”. The quote is from Monod’s sermon “Too Late”.

In his response to attacks on behalf of a professor of the faculty of theology of Lausanne, Bersier cites Adolphe Monod as being one of the “excellent, steadfast and godly brothers”² and as worthy of respect as his brother Frederic³.

3. Memories

In her book dedicated to her late husband Marie Bersier mentions Adolphe Monod twice.

The first passage⁴ deals with Adolphe’s death:

“Adolphe Monod had died on April 6, 1856. It is well-known that, during the weeks preceding his death, despite the excruciating pain he suffered, God gave him the grace and the strength to gather around his bed a few of his parishioners, together with his family and his closest friends, every Sunday afternoon. This was his “farewell”⁵.

What a privilege to be invited to hear his last thoughts! It would be blasphemous to consider them from the point of view of eloquence. Oftentimes interrupted by attacks of pain [caused by the cancer] which pursued its work of destruction, the voice of the preacher of the Gospel, broken but nevertheless more admirable than ever before, powerfully manifested the signs of his faith, which certainly already saw the invisible.

Amongst the listeners were men who were to remain on the open breach, humble and trembling, having their heart seized by the impression of being abandoned, in view of such a departure. Edmond de Pressensé wrote in the *Revue chrétienne* on April 7:

“This is not the time for trying to determine all that we have lost. The name of Adolphe Monod makes us think of the highest degree of evangelical eloquence, of the holiest life and of the most communicative love. He combined his most radiant gift with austerity and humility, a rare mixture that Vinet had already shown to us. Adolphe Monod put all his heart and all his prayers into his word. When seeing

² Eugène BERSIER, *Mes actes et mes principes. Réponse aux attaques de M. J.-F. Astié*, Paris, Sandoz et Fischbacher, 1877, p. 48

³ *ibid.*, p. 50

⁴ [Marie BERSIER] *Recueil de souvenirs de la vie d’Eugene Bersier*, Paris, Fischbacher, 1911, p. 114-116

⁵ The French original has a double meaning: ‘les adieux’ means ‘farewell’, but “Les Adieux ...” is also the title of the collection containing Adolphe Monod’s last short sermons.

his pale face, we saw that whenever he made his auditory tremble at the idea of God's judgement, he had trembled for them beforehand; also, the sweet fire in his eyes when he told us about God's mercy in his inimitable way of speaking, revealed his own joy and his blessed certainty. I have seen, a few years ago, a manuscript of one of his first sermons. Between two gripping passages he had let his heart cry out, a cry that only God was to hear: 'My God, help me by the blood of your cross!' This cry, is it not revealing? Do you not feel the secret and painful labour of a man who craves to bring souls to the truth? It is hardly surprising that the sermons that were prepared in this way were so powerful! This is how we can understand that, on his deathbed, Adolphe Monod could give his ultimate testimony in a way that was just as powerful and beautiful. ...

We have to bow down in silence before the inscrutable decrees of God who, having taken Verny at the age of 49 and Vinet at the age of 50, now deprives us of Adolphe Monod at the age of 54."

Although this text seems to suggest that Bersier had taken part in the meetings around Adolphe Monod, it does not actually say so.

The second passage⁶ shows that, at least to some extent, the preachers of the Taitbout Chapel wanted to fill the void left by Monod's death:

"... The premature death of Adolphe Monod had left the Reformed Church in a state of consternation; it had left a void that seemed impossible to fill. Nobody has ever replaced him who is still being remembered and cited and who was absolutely unique. But it is true also that God is the repairer of broken walls. When one man succumbs, others arise. At that time we saw more people attend the sermons given at the Taitbout Chapel ..."

4. Comparisons

In his history of protestant preaching published in 1871⁷, Alfred Vincent mentions Monod as one of the preachers of the Awakening, a group he does not appreciate, but he refers to Bersier as one of the orthodox ministers having liberal ideas, which he prefers. However, he does not directly compare Adolphe Monod and Eugene Bersiers as preachers.

Such comparisons are rare, possibly because the two preachers had quite different concerns: Monod was a preacher of the Awakening, seeking the conversion of his audience, whereas Bersier was a moralist.

The monograph of Edmond-Louis Stapfer on Bersier⁸ contains the following statement:

"Eugene Bersier was the greatest French protestant preacher of the second half of the 19th century. Adolphe Monod, who died in 1856, belongs to the first half. And yet, when I say this, I do not really express what I am thinking. Mr Bersier is, in

⁶ [Marie BERSIER] *op.cit.*, p. 146

⁷ Alfred VINCENT, *Histoire de la prédication protestante de langue française au dix-neuvième siècle*, Geneva, Cherbuliez & Cie, 1871, 330 p.

⁸ Edmond-Louis STAPFER, *La prédication d'Eugène Bersier*, Paris, Fischbacher, 1893, p. 8

my opinion, one of the masters of the French pulpit of all times. De Sacy referred to Bersier as follows in the *Journal des Débats* of August 15, 1876: “As a moralist, Mr Bersier is equal to the greatest glories of our old catholic pulpit.” Great praise, or rather, sincere testimony to the truth, which will remain ...”

His brother Paul, who admired Monod on a variety of grounds and dared compare him to Bossuet, wrote a few years later:

“Probably Adolphe Monod can be said to have magnificently brought to an end the tradition of preachers who successfully used the old bugbears. However, it has to be noted that at the time when he still dared to use them, they already were anachronistic, and that when using them, invoking all the cruel texts of the Bible, he had to make a great effort against his own heart. This may explain the malaise that spoils, for the modern reader, the stiff and magnificent masterpieces titled *Too late* or *How miserable the unconverted Christian is before God*. It is undisputable that the preaching of Eugene Bersier or Edmond de Pressensé better meets the spiritual needs of today’s Christians, and it is not sure that in 1850 or in 1830 all the sermons of Adolphe Monod were in line with the contemporary mind.”⁹

⁹ Paul STAPFER, *La grande prédication chrétienne en France. Bossuet, Adolphe Monod*, Paris, Fischbacher, 1898, p. 355s