

Why we Need Maurice Blondel

Maurice Blondel was deeply invested in the Christian Philosophy debates that took place in France in the early 1930's. He touched off the debate with articles on the retrieval of St. Augustine as a Catholic philosopher, rather than just as a theologian, on the occasion of the Fifteenth Centenary of the Saint's death.¹ He contributed to the debate more than anyone else, as can be seen from the table of contents of the recently published collection of articles from the debate, edited and translated by Gregory B. Sadler.² In fact, Blondel was himself at the center of the debate, defending an emphatic idea of Catholic philosophy in opposition, not just to those who were against the very idea of Christian philosophy, but also to those Christians who were willing to allow for a loose idea of Christian philosophy for the Medieval Period, on historical grounds, but only by a denomination extrinsic to the idea of philosophy conceived as a rational discipline. What was at stake in the debate was his own conception of a properly Catholic philosophy, which he was about to lay out in a set of systematic works that would include Three Volumes on *Philosophy and the Christian Spirit*, a conception he had had to defend at the

¹ There were three such articles, all reproduced in *Dialogues avec les philosophes: Descartes, Spinoza, Malebranche, Pascal, St. Augustin* (Paris: Aubier, 1966) Préface H. Gouhier: (1) On the original unity and the permanent life of Augustine's philosophical doctrine, originally published in the *Revue de Métaphysique et Morale* 37 (1930); (2) On the ever renewed fecundity of Augustinian thought, originally published in *Cahiers de la Nouvelle Journée* 17 (1930); and (3) on "The Latent Resources of St. Augustine's Thought," tr. Fr. Léonard, originally published in *A Monument to Augustine: Essays on His Age, Life and Thought* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1930), the only thing by Blondel published in English in his lifetime, an abridged version of which also appeared in French in *Revue Néo-scholastique de Philosophie* 32 (1930).

² See Gregory B. Sadler, *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (Wash., D.C.: CUA Press, 2011).

beginning of his career as a philosopher in the French university system, in a dissertation that had brought the very idea of a supernaturally revealed religion and religious practice to the center of philosophical attention, the idea that was clearly associated with Catholic religion.

In many ways this Christian Philosophy debate came at a pivotal point in his career as a philosopher. He had recently retired from teaching for reasons of deafness and blindness, and he was looking for ways of finishing the systematic works he had been contemplating for years, while still busy with teaching and with administrative work as senior chair holder responsible for the teaching of philosophy in the region of Aix-Marseille. The idea of proposing a Catholic philosophy for any rational agent to entertain, not just as plausible, but even as necessary for the fulfillment of human aspirations, was still uppermost in his mind. In fact it had been bolstered and emboldened by what he had found in his extensive reading of Augustine as a philosopher, no less than Aquinas, rather than just as a man of authority in the Church to whom believers had to defer.

In the essay translated to accompany this article on why we need Blondel, written a year or two before the debates that began in 1930, even though it was not published until after his death, we find him ruminating on this question of the good and the usefulness of studying the Christian mysteries from a philosophical standpoint, as a resumption of work he had begun over thirty years earlier, and that he was still thinking of completing with a more explicit reference to the Christian mysteries. In fact, it was through his reflection on the Gospel mysteries that he came to the idea of rethinking the whole idea of philosophy in terms of action in the

concrete and of human destiny as a whole, as we know from the spiritual diaries he was keeping at the time he was working on his dissertation.³ The later essay is a first draft of what he had in mind to do in his later philosophy and how he intended to proceed, what questions he intended to explore in speaking of what he calls the *Philosophical Exigencies of Christianity*.⁴ It speaks of a certain need to probe philosophically into the Christian Mysteries, even while recognizing that as Mysteries they are beyond the capacity of reason to investigate, to use a phrase from Aquinas, or to penetrate, to use Blondel's word, a need he tries to justify rationally as a philosopher and hermeneutically as a believer in what remains for him in either case a Mystery.

The need in question has to do, not only with bringing new light from the Mysteries into reason and the philosophy of human existence, a light that any philosopher would be able to appreciate, as *intellectum quaerens fidem*, but also with using reason to enhance our human intelligence of the Mysteries, or the articles of faith, as Aquinas thought had to be done in teaching Sacred Doctrine as a science, or as *fides quaerens intellectum*.⁵ This is a need that came to be much appreciated among Catholic intellectuals in the twentieth century, in both philosophy and theology, as well as in other fields of intellectual endeavor, thanks to Maurice Blondel, who had struck on a very good method for meeting the need where it existed, in the minds and hearts of people hesitating between the exigencies of

³ See *Carnets Intimes*, Tome I (1883-1894) (Paris: Cerf, 1961); Tome II (1894-1949) (Paris: Cerf, 1966).

⁴ Cf. Maurice Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), I: Le sens chrétien: Introduction, pp. 3-25.

⁵ See Aquinas's response to the objection against using philosophical science in Sacred Teaching as a science in *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 5, ad 2.

modern critical thinking and those of traditional religious faith. These were people who needed Blondel, as priest friends of his pointed out to him, when urging him to step into the modernist crisis regarding interpretations of the “historical Jesus” in the Gospel, in which Catholic intellectuals were at a loss as to where to turn in this fierce polarization of opinion between rigid traditionalists, whom Blondel characterized as dogmatic extrinsecists, because they took little or no account of history in their interpretation of the Christian fact, and the modernists Blondel called historicists, because they saw nothing in “the historical Jesus” but what could be documented, no less extrinsically, by observation of documents according to the canons of modern historical research.⁶

⁶ The two priests were Jean Wehrlé, who had been a classmate of Blondel at the École Normale before entering the seminary, and Fernand Mourret, who was rector of Saint Sulpice Seminary in Paris, both Catholic intellectuals who were themselves troubled by this modernist crisis within Catholic France. The time when they were advising him was at the height of the crisis between Loisy and authorities in the Church, when they saw themselves and many other Catholic intellectuals being pulled in both directions, that of Loisy and that of dogmatic authorities. At the time, in 1904, Blondel had long since stopped publishing anything on issues of Christian apologetics because of the bad press he kept getting from opponents within the Church, after his famous, or infamous, *Letter*, not so much on Apologetics, as *on the Philosophical Method of studying the Religious Problem* in 1896, depending on where you stood in this looming crisis. Wehrlé and Mourret were urging Blondel to step back into the fray, at the risk of incurring more bad press, for the sake of sincere Catholic intellectuals who were looking for guidance on how and where to take a stand as Catholics in all this turmoil of invective from both sides in the crisis. From this came his article on “History and Dogma” in 1904 published in *La Quinzaine*, a journal for Catholic intellectuals. The article has been reprinted in *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), pp.149-228, and translated by Alexander Dru in *Maurice Blondel: The Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma* (London: Harvill Press; Grand Raids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 220-287. The article probably did more good for resolving the crisis positively in Catholic theology as well as philosophy than any Motu Proprio or Encyclical from Rome at the time. The ironic thing about it is that it came well ahead any of those edicts from officialdom. For more on this episode of reconciliation in Blondel’s

To a certain extent, we can say that Catholic intellectuals today still find themselves in the same kind of crisis regarding faith and reason as Blondel and his contemporaries did, in a world where the secular and the religious, the human and the divine, still seem to be at odds with one another, so that we could say also that we still need Blondel to work through this crisis in our own historical consciousness, without abandoning reason and without losing faith in the Christian Mysteries we live by, but rather by keeping reason and faith together as one in their irreducible and inseparable distinction from one another, as we shall see Blondel tried to do.

Drawing philosophy and religion back together after centuries of separation is what Blondel did in his own intellectual life as *philosopher* with regard to the Catholic religion he was practicing with its supernatural overtones surpassing reason. This is a need we still feel when we think of Blondel's great accomplishment as philosopher of Catholic religion, so that it would be good and useful for us to look once again at how he came to experience this intellectual need to reconnect philosophy and religion, reason and faith, at a time when they seemed to be culturally and irrevocably opposed to one another, and to see how he did bring them together in a way that was necessary and beneficial for both religion and philosophy, as he tried to show in 1896 in the third and final part of that long discourse on method, in six installments, entitled *Letter on the Exigencies of Contemporary Thought in Matters of Apologetics and on the Method of Philosophy in*

ardent Catholic life, cf. Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), pp. 190-209.

the Study of the Religious Problem, addressed to the *Annales de Philosophie chrétienne*, a leading Catholic journal at the time.⁷

Maurice Blondel was a Catholic who needed philosophy, and a philosopher who needed Catholicism as a supernatural religion beyond the power of reason to investigate. He saw in philosophy a necessity to raise the question of a supernatural religion, even if it could not be answered within the scope of philosophy or of reason alone, and he saw in his own life of Faith a necessity for philosophy to bring out the transcendence of the gift we have from God, enabling us to join in an action that is at once human and divine, leading us back into the very life of the Trinity as adoptive children of God.

Coming to Philosophy as a Christian

Blondel did not grow up with such ideas in mind, nor did he get them from either the religious education he got at home or in Church, or from the secular education he got in the humanities and philosophy in the French state schools. He came to them more by his own reflection as he became more and more interested in philosophy, following upon his very rich religious upbringing, in a secular school system that had little or no use for religion. What he learned of philosophy in the state schools had little or nothing to do with religion, which in the France of his day meant primarily Catholic religion.

⁷ This *Lettre* was reprinted in *Les Premiers Écrits de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), pp. 5-95, and has been translated by Illtyd Trethowan in *Maurice Blondel: The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, (London: Harvill Press, 1964; Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 1994) pp. 125-208.

What Blondel did see, however, was that philosophy had to do with the life of spirit, his own as well as that of other rational beings, even when that life and that spirit included strong doses of religion such as he had learned early in his life at home and at his parish church, and in his own reading in the Catholic tradition and Scriptures. While others in his day with a similar religious upbringing downplayed their idea of religion as they got deeper into philosophy or the modern scientific way of thinking, in order to deal only with matters within the power of reason to investigate, Blondel took a broader look to include what remained an integral part of his life and spirit, as part of what he had to think of as a philosopher in reflecting on his life. For him the life of faith and the life of reason could not be thought of as two separate lives. Both had to do with a single destiny for any human being as well as for himself, so that neither could do without the other. Whence came his lifelong study of philosophy as philosophy of Catholic or supernatural religion.

Maurice Blondel came from a long line of jurists, lawyers and notaries going all the way back to the Dukes of Burgundy in the 13th century, not nobility, but professionals closely associated to the exercise of power, down to the French Republic after the Revolution. His father was a lawyer as was also his uncle, who was for a time judge under the Republic, until he was deposed for ruling against the Republic in a case having to do with religious freedom. The family was staunchly Catholic, bent not only on holding their own as Catholics against a Republic they referred to as *la gueuse*, the reprobate, but also on leading a profoundly religious life, in keeping with the rich Catholic traditions they had inherited from their

forbears in this the eldest daughter of the Church. They thought of the state and its school system as hostile to their way of thinking rather than as neutral.

In the home there was not just the mother to foster this religious spirit, but also an aunt, a former cloistered nun, who took special care to introduce all the children to the traditional religious practices, especially the Eucharist, and to the works of mercy that were still part of the daily life of Catholic families in mid-nineteenth century France. Maurice was not the least to fall in with the movement of this Christian Spirit that shaped his consciousness and his conscience as a child and as a young man.

When time came for him to start school, he was sent first to a private religious school, where the Christian Spirit continued to shine for him along with the more secular interests that were brought to his attention. But this was for only three years, after which, at age nine, he was sent to the dreaded state Lycée of Dijon, to undergo that grinding course of Classical studies that was still the standard for all who aspired to higher education in the *Grandes Écoles* of the day. There, as he was to say later, Blondel learned to read and write. He started at the Lycée because there was no other place to go to at the time for his higher education. But he stayed on there even after the Jesuits opened a Catholic college in Dijon. He did not switch, as did a cousin of his, who was later admitted to the Polytechnique in Paris and became a renowned physicist in his own right, at the time Maurice would be pursuing his own course of studies in philosophy at the *École Normale Supérieure*. For Maurice, as a young Christian with a mission, it seemed important to become familiar with

the way of thinking of those reputed to be opposed to his way of thinking or contemptuous of it.

Maurice remained at the Lycée for eight years, where, at age seventeen he was awarded the Bachelor of Letters in Rhetoric, having had his first contact with philosophy in his eighth year. He stayed on there for more philosophy in view of a Bachelor of Letters in Philosophy, awarded to him the following year. After the Lycée he matriculated at the Faculty of Letters in Dijon, purportedly to complete his studies in Law, in accordance with the wishes of the family, but he was lured away from Law into Philosophy by the Dean of the Faculty, Henri Joly, a specialist in Leibniz, who would later go on to teach at the Sorbonne and the Collège de France. By July, 1880, while still only eighteen, Blondel had completed the requirements of the License ès Lettres in Philosophy along with those for the Bachelor of Science.

Then began one more year of intense study in Philosophy under the tutelage of Joly in preparation for the competitive examinations for admission to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris. He took the exam in 1881, without ever having attended any of the courses designed for preparing for this exam at the Grands Lycées of Paris, and to the surprise of everyone he was admitted directly “from the Province”, to the School where he knew he would be contending with a host of luminaries in philosophy, many of whom he knew would not be sympathetic with his commitment to the Catholic religion, so much so that he felt the need to consult with his family and his parish priest before accepting the honor, all of whom supported him in his willingness to take on this challenge.

At Normale, Blondel underwent two more years of intense course work in the history of philosophy with the best known professors of the time. He was not the only practicing Catholic at Normale, as it turned out. He became part of a small group who were excused from study hall on Sunday mornings to go to mass, referred to as *les talas* by the other students, short for *ils vont à la messe*, which most of the student body was not interested in doing. Blondel stood out not only for being the Catholic he was, but also for having come directly from the Province. He was recognized as being very intelligent, like the rest of his peers, but he was also asked at one point early on how come such an intelligent boy could still be a Catholic, to which he answered only that he had every intention of continuing to be intelligent in his pursuit of philosophy. From this attitude toward both religion and intelligence came his choice of *Action* as the subject for his doctoral dissertation, to show that, far from being opposed to the supernatural of a Catholic religion, philosophy could be brought to admit the necessity of raising the question of such a religion.

Blondel made this choice early in his career at Normale, but he had some difficulty having *Action* approved as a legitimate subject for a dissertation in philosophy. At the time, the term *action* did not appear in the standard dictionaries of philosophy, as was noted by one of his classmates. He prevailed only because he was one of the two brightest students in his class, and because he got the support of Émile Boutroux, eminent philosopher of mathematics and professor at the Sorbonne, who became the *patron* for the dissertation, much to the annoyance of his colleagues on the faculty and of the administration at the Sorbonne. Blondel was to spend almost ten years working on the dissertation, mostly by himself in his family's

country home outside Dijon, before finally submitting it for a defense in June, 1893, taking his first shot at turning philosophy around on the question of a Catholic supernatural religion.

Thus began a long career in which Blondel kept the question of supernatural religion at the forefront of philosophy in confrontation with those who thought of religion as irrelevant to the autonomous life of reason, or as hostile to it, and even with those who wanted to keep philosophy out of religion, or separate from it, in deference to the supernatural and heterogeneous claims of the Catholic religion. The defense of his dissertation, which drew a sizable audience, took over four hours, before a jury of five who raised many substantial objections to his enterprise. In the end, he was successful in proving that he was a true philosopher. The jury granted him the *Doctorat ès lettres* he was seeking, but not without saying that they refused his conclusions about religion, which later made it difficult for the candidate to obtain the university post he was entitled to by this Doctorate.

At the end of the dissertation of 1893, Blondel argued for the necessity of raising the question of a supernatural gift from God to complement the gift of nature and freedom already granted in the creation of a human being. He had chosen *action* in the concrete of human life as the subject for inquiry in order to get to this question, as no philosophy based only on abstract ideas could do. Action was for him the most fundamental kind of experimentation we perform, in conscience, concerning the ultimate meaning of life or of our ultimate destiny, if we have one. He saw in it what he called a *practical science* that we come to at the end of life, a wisdom that accrues reflectively in one's personal life, handed on from generation

to generation and that had been handed on to him as a child and as a young rational adult, a wisdom which for him included a strong dose of religion by no means incompatible with reason, though surpassing it. The dissertation was to be a reflection on *action* at this critical moment in his life as a philosopher, a *science of practice* in the here and now, or a *critique of life*, to see if and how the problem of life or of action can be resolved speculatively in the present without having to wait for the final solution to come in practice at the end of life.

The Need for Supernatural Religion in Philosophy

In the Science of Practice, then, as a systematic and critical reflection on the Practical Science of life already spoken of, he takes the longest way around, examining different ways that have been proposed for resolving the problem of reconciling freedom and necessity in human action, as in diletantism, pessimism, and scientism, the three of which he finds wanting as solutions, because each one only poses the problem of action anew in its own willing of some action. This brings him back then to examine how we do come to will any action as human beings, starting from a plurality of motives for action given in our consciousness, and going on to free choice of one or the other of these motives, in the pursuit of an end that will be the equal of the infinite power of choosing we start from in our free will.

From this first peak of free will in human action, so to speak, there follow a number of other peaks or stages, as he calls them, starting with the first exterior expansion of willed action in the body, the organism or the individual life of the human subject, and going on from individual action to social action, or coaction with

others, and then to social action as found in the family, in the nation, and in humanity as a whole, all of it leading up to a necessary universal extension of action to the limits of the universe. Each one of these stages is treated as a willed object that human willing must encompass within what Blondel calls the phenomenon of action, that is to say, of action as conceived in human subjectivity and as expanding to the very limits of what we think of as the universe.

Each stage along the way, or each willed object, is seen as satisfying some part of what is willed necessarily in the willing will, but also as leaving something more to be willed for the willed will to equal the willing will, so that when we come to the final stage, at the limit of the phenomenon of action as a whole, there comes a crisis for the free will in the process of liberating itself: what to do with what remains of infinity in the will that has not been used in willing all that it wills freely and necessarily in the universal phenomenon? To continue to look further beyond the phenomenal, or deeper into the infinite power of willing, or to settle on something in the willed phenomenon as if it were the infinite, and thus to give way to superstition in its action, as the last stage we can come to in the immanent order of the phenomenon?

In 1893, at the limit of what he calls the Phenomenon of Action, which comprises the largest part of his original work on *Action*, Blondel does a critique of different forms of superstition, primitive and modern, including those of dilettantism and scientism, nationalism and activism, and above all rationalism, as attempts to take hold of the infinite that fail and that are bound to fail. In his long systematic exploration of the entire phenomenon of action, he had tried to see if the

problem of action could be resolved within this phenomenon, or to see if there might not be some willed object in it that would close the circuit of the willed will as the equal of the willing will. If such a willed object or resolution could have been found in the phenomenon as equal to the infinite power of willing, then there would be no reason for looking further or deeper. But the criticism of superstitious action at the end of this exploration shows two things in this regard: (1) that it remains *necessary* for us to go beyond or deeper than the phenomenon, and yet (2) that it is *impracticable* for us to do so on our own, as every failed effort of superstitious self-sufficiency in action clearly shows. Hence the question of something further and deeper than the phenomenon remains, along with the question of whether anything can resolve this problem of a gap still found in our voluntary action between our willed will and our willing will, the question that eventually leads to the question of God as active in our voluntary action, and the question of whether and how God can or wills to bridge this gap for the sake of bringing our action to a perfect coincidence of our willed will with our willing will.

That is how the question of religion arises necessarily at the end of a philosophy of action for Blondel, as an exigency for something more, something both transcendent and supernatural, when philosophy has gone as far as it can go on its own. Blondel first deals with the question as an issue of coming up against the One Thing Necessary, *l'unique nécessaire*, as somehow the willed object that would be the equal of our infinite power of willing--not an idol, which can only be a finite object, but truly God as truly infinite and ever mysterious. Only God can fill the abyss between a finite willed action and the infinite power of willing we have found

running through the entire phenomenon of action, so that we have to say that what we will ultimately in everything we will in the immanent order of the universe is to be God, Who wills the very being of our willing and of all that is contained in the phenomenon of action.

This is how the idea of God presents itself at the very peak of our action as rational beings. This is how and why we have to think of God in all our action, now conceived as *theandric*, at once human and divine, rather than just as self-enclosed in a willed will that wants to be self-sufficient and ends up as merely superstitious in any form it takes.

From this perspective of a human action now conceived in philosophy or in the science of practice as properly religious, however, we do not just have to think of the true God, or have God properly in mind, so to speak, rather than some idol of our own choosing. We also have to choose or adopt either one of two alternative attitudes toward God as the principle of our being and of our willing, an attitude *for* Him or an attitude *against* Him. Blondel states the practical alternative we have to face at the highest point of our willing most dramatically: “Man, by himself, cannot be what he already is in spite of himself, what he claims to become voluntarily. Yes or no, will he will to live, even to the point of dying, so to speak, by consenting to be supplanted by God? Or else, will he pretend to be self-sufficient without God, profit by His necessary presence without making it voluntary, borrow from Him the strength to get along without Him, and will infinitely without willing the Infinite?”⁸

⁸ Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, tr. Oliva Blanchette, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), p. 327.

Philosophy still has much to say about the consequences of going with either one of these alternatives, in terms of either the life of action or the death of action, but in speaking of the life of action, as still entailing only substitutes and preparations for perfect action, where willed will and willing will would coincide perfectly, the science of practice comes up with one final question, one final hypothesis: does God grant the necessary aid to bring human action to the perfection it strives for?

This is the point of culmination where philosophy touches on the mystery of supernatural religion in human action. Blondel has shown that philosophy needs religion to answer the ultimate question or questions it is left with in the end of its course. He does not try to answer the question directly in his philosophy of action, nor does he say he could as a philosopher, but he does try to treat the question as a *necessary hypothesis* that has to occur at this summit of the science of practice. Hence the brief philosophy of religion that follows, not just as natural but also as supernatural, with which he ends his philosophy of action in the dissertation of 1893.

This philosophy of the supernatural presupposes the idea of nature and freedom as already given by the Creator, the gift that has already been explored at great length in the philosophy of action up to this point. But insofar as this first gift still leaves us short of closing the gap we find within ourselves or of bringing our action to perfect completion, the *idea* of a second gift that would enable us to bridge the remaining gap and so come to a perfect action that is otherwise impracticable for us does occur *necessarily* as a *hypothesis* that bears examination in a science of

practice intent on following *necessity* wherever it is to be found. Without trying to say whether such a supernatural gift has been offered to the rational creature or not, or even *what* such an additional and free gift might be or look like, the science of practice can still examine under what conditions such a supernatural gift might be found in human action as we know it philosophically.

Such an examination could lead philosophy into an extended examination of the edges where human action, thought, and being touch on the mystery of the Christian faith, as it did for Blondel and as he would explain at greater length later in his life. In the dissertation of 1893, however, designed to be a strictly scientific or academic exercise in keeping with the expectations of examiners in philosophy and not in religion, he chose to speak of only two or three conditions that he thought would be *necessary* for the insertion of a supernatural aid into the drama of human action: a *revelation* for intelligence to take in, a *mediation* between the human and the divine, and a *literal practice* enjoined from on high as a discipline to be enacted in the history. That is as far as he went to show the need of some supernatural religion for philosophy, which in fact was taken to be the Catholic religion by all in attendance. In doing so he was successful in convincing the jury that he was indeed a philosopher worthy of recognition, though he did not entirely convince them that there is such a need or a necessity at the heart of their own action as philosophers.

The Need for Philosophy in Supernatural Religion

Though the religious note sounded by Blondel at the end of his dissertation in 1893 was largely unheard or passed over lightly among philosophers and

scientists in university circles, it did not go unnoticed among religious observers, who were delighted to discover a new champion of Catholic religion within the cadres of the state sponsored university. Religious thinkers were not slow to respond to this new phenomenon in the intellectual life of the nation, which they took to be a form of apologetics for the Christian religion. In September 1895, just as Blondel was about to step into his first appointment as a university professor in Lille, after a two-year delay from the time he had been certified for such a position, a long article on new trends in apologetics appeared in *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne*, a prominent journal of Catholic thought at the time, in which Blondel was featured.

The article was written by the Director of the journal, Abbé Denis, who spoke of Blondel's philosophy as essentially "apologetical," which implied making it subservient to theology, something Blondel was not prepared to accept, even though there was some apologetic intent in his showing the necessity of raising the question of a supernatural religion. Abbé Denis also spoke of Blondel's method as remaining simply in the "psychological sphere", or as restricted to "taking the soul by its intimate needs or with morally and socially fitting reasons", needs and reasons that for Blondel would have led to little more than superstition in the perspective of what he was referring to as the phenomenon of action, not the needs and reasons he was pointing to in action as grounds for the necessary affirmation of the living God and for the necessity of raising the question of a truly supernatural religion.

What Denis was saying in praise of this new Catholic philosophy sounded bells of alarm in the mind of the young Blondel as a philosopher launching a career in philosophical discourse for modern critical thinkers. It was like saying that this new philosophy of religion was not really a philosophy in its own right, but rather a part of theological or religious apologetics, something Blondel had been careful to avoid in what purported to be a critical science of practice and nothing more, even though it led up to a question or the *necessary hypothesis* concerning a supernatural gift considered, not as given in fact, nor even as possible or as something we can conceive naturally or rationally, but rather only as *necessary, if* human action is to be thought of as brought to perfection in a fashion that remains yet to be determined.

As a philosopher addressing only philosophers, Blondel was thinking of a philosophy of religion rather than an apologetic for Christian religion. He found the language of apologetics used by Denis, to describe his method, irrelevant to what he was trying to do as a philosopher. In fact, he found the language of standard apologetics Abbé Denis was using irrelevant and ineffective for reaching “minds like those of our contemporaries nourished in the school of criticism”.⁹ What was needed for such philosophical minds, and what he had tried to provide in his book on *Action*, were arguments of another order that spoke more specifically of the issue of a supernatural religion as understood in Catholicism rather than just some vaguely defined natural “religion” corresponding only to natural, psychological,

⁹ Cf. Blondel’s letter to Abbé Denis preceding the longer one that was to be published as “Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d’apologétique et sur la méthode de la philosophie dans l’étude du problème religieux” as reproduced in *Les premiers écrits de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1956), p. 4.

social or other needs, which was being presupposed as part of the apologetic argument, but which Blondel thought of as verging on the kind of superstition he was criticizing in modern rationalist philosophies stuck in the immanent order of reason and willed action.

Blondel was thinking of his method as strictly philosophical and autonomous, as a discipline of mind and spirit open to all that reason could embrace. He was being drawn into the more presumptuous question of “apologetics” only by some extrinsic denomination that did not fit into what he was thinking of as the problem of religion in philosophy, much less as a possible solution to the problem.. So he asked to exercise his right of reply to the article by Abbé Denis, mainly to set the record straight, not about apologetics as such, but more precisely about “The Exigencies of Contemporary Thought in Matters of Apologetics and on the Method of Philosophy in the Study of the Religious Problem”. From this came the long *Letter* in six installments, explaining the method he thought necessary to bring a “natural” philosophy of spirit and a “supernatural” religion together, without confusing them with one another, much less reducing either one to the other. What this discourse on method would show was that the Christian religion and faith *need* a serious intellectual and critical philosophy, not just to prove some abstract credibility that is anything but the Faith and Hope in a gift from God, but also to open the way for the supernatural light of Faith to penetrate human intelligence and for the supernatural grace of Charity to penetrate the human will. As a philosopher Blondel could not be satisfied with a merely abstract deduction that would only impose facts or dogmas to be believed in blindly and without intelligence, in “a submission without

illumination”, as he would say later on in the essay translated to go with this article.¹⁰ He had rather to show the necessity of assenting to the mysteries of Faith and Charity for the sake of a more perfect intelligence and will even with regard to the mysterious supernatural.

Blondel begins the *Letter* with a long criticism of six apologetic methods in use at the time. One, he says, sounds “philosophical”, but is not truly philosophical in any critical sense. It is pseudo-philosophy that only serves to discredit religion in the eyes of critical thinkers. The second proceeds by an abusive extension of the positive or empirical sciences into the realm of both philosophy and apologetics, as if the positive and empirical sciences were the only ones that count for philosophy and/or religion, when in fact they do not even count for anything of the sort in the mind of the scientists themselves, let alone the mind of critical philosophers either of science or of religion. Blondel is quick to dismiss these two approaches as hardly worth taking into account, except perhaps as misleading for those who are too easily impressed by high sounding language or by the “mysterious secrets” of modern science, thereby falling into what he calls the modern idolatry of “science” that takes the place of both philosophy and religion. Part of his concern in 1893 had been to show the inadequacies of the empirico-mathematical sciences in treating their own object, let alone the *act* of the subject or the scientist presupposed in those sciences.¹¹

The third method to be looked over saw its task as twofold: 1) answering the objections of modern rationalism against the supernatural and 2) considering

¹⁰ *Exigences philosophiques du Christianisme*, p. 13.

¹¹ Cf. *Action (1893)*, Part III, Stage I.

Christianity as a historical fact to be examined according to the canons of modern historical research. While this method speaks more to questions of philosophy and reason as such, as well as to questions of historical facts, it leaves much to be desired as an argument for or against religion of any kind. According to Blondel, there are three difficulties it cannot surmount: 1) the connection presupposed between the two lines of questioning, that of critical thinking and that of historical documentation, is not essentially philosophical; 2) even if the arguments concerning the fact of Christianity have the greatest historical validity, it does not follow, according to either reason or faith that they are apodictic with regard to the order in question, which we can know only as revealed; 3) while philosophy has less to say in the domain of empirical facts, such as date of birth or date of death, not to mention date of resurrection, if anything, it has and can have much more to say in the domain of ideas and rational criticism. This third method says nothing of the *necessity* of inquiring into any the hypothesis of a supernatural aid for the rational being in search of its true destiny or perfection. "It is not enough to establish the *possibility* and the *reality* of the supernatural separately; one must show the *necessity for us* to adhere to this reality of the supernatural".¹²

Blondel makes a lot of this *necessity for us* concerning the question of the supernatural in his own philosophical method. But if apologetics does not make this necessary connection, it will have no bearing on minds that raise the exigencies of the rational philosopher to their legitimate extreme, as will become clear when we

¹² Lettre sur les exigencies, p. 13.

turn to the essential philosophical point to be made about the relation between the natural and the supernatural in human practice.

The fourth method of doing apologetics criticized by the young Blondel was one put in practice by his teacher at the École Normale, Léon Ollé-Laprune, a person of faith very much like Blondel himself. This method had gone a long way in showing a certain connection or a certain affinity between Christianity and the moral nature of man at his best, so that Christianity could appear desirable to the human soul by reason of its beauty or its goodness. This was a method of convergence between two conceptions of an ideal human life that Blondel found very congenial as a man of both faith and of reason. But for him the method still fell short of meeting the exigencies of philosophy. It said too much on the side of faith and too little on the side of philosophy. It did not determine precisely enough the relation between the natural order and the supernatural order as a matter of *necessary* connection in the life of *reason*, rather than just as a matter of harmony between aspirations on one side and the other. Its arguments created a presumption in favor of the Christian religion serving as a complement or as a full satisfaction for the nature essential to the moral being, but according to Blondel they did not provide a properly philosophical apology addressing the question or the claim of necessity for Christianity in the search for perfection in human knowing and willing.

The fifth method to come under the philosopher's critical eye is one Blondel had previously reviewed favorably, but that he now found wanting from the philosophical standpoint. This method went one step further than the method of

convergence he found congenial in his teacher Ollé-Laprune. It started from a soul in search of itself, bereft of any rule of thought or of any direction, in order to show how it is “invincibly” led to recognize that a properly human life cannot be led without the doctrine of life that only Christianity, and more precisely, Catholicism provides. The problem with this method, according to Blondel, is not that it does not go far enough in establishing a necessary connection between the natural and the supernatural, but rather that it goes too far in presenting Catholicism as a natural and human truth rather than as something supernatural. Blondel had been careful to avoid this kind of reduction of the supernatural to something natural in the human being in the dissertation on *Action*. In arguing that Catholicism satisfies all the natural and rational aspirations of the human being, this fifth method can only conclude to the natural and human truth of Catholicism, and in offering this truth as something truly supernatural, it is either stepping beyond the premises of the argument or reducing what is said to be supernatural to something purely natural. This way of making the connection between the natural order of philosophy and the supernatural order of religion is not in keeping with either rational philosophy on one side, or orthodox religious teaching on the other side.

The sixth and final method of apologetics under review by the young Blondel was the one most Catholics deemed most complete and most effective, namely Thomism as it was taught in manuals of both philosophy and theology in Catholic schools and seminaries at the end of the nineteenth century. Blondel had never attended any of these schools or seminaries, but as a student in the secular schools of Dijon and Paris, he had had occasion to review some of these manuals, and found

them quite impressive as both philosophy and theology. He found in them two well articulated systems of thought, one in philosophy and one in theology, brought together for purposes of apologetics before an incredulous world of critical philosophers and scientists. He found the two systems convincing enough as a philosopher, but he did not find in them any clear way of making a connection between the two systems, one supposedly rational and the other supposedly religious and supernatural, much less a way of connecting either system to human *subjects* asking the questions about the ultimate meaning of life and of human action in world history. Both systems presented themselves as objective and separate from one another, as if layered one on top of the other, but without any indication of a living interpenetration between the two or of how a rational subject could find access to either one of them, let alone both of them at the same time.

The problem Blondel saw in this dualistic approach to apologetics was that it was aiming in the wrong direction. "Let us not waste our time rehearsing arguments that are known, offering an object," he wrote, "when it is the subject who is not disposed".¹³ Arguments must be brought to bear, not on the side of divine truth, but on the side of preparation for receiving a revelation and a supernatural gift. This was also a matter of essential and permanent necessity for any rational agent, believer as well as non-believer. The point had to be made philosophically or critically, in keeping with the exigencies of modern thought, rather than just dogmatically apart from any actual thinking about religion as a problem for rational thought. Far from just complaining about the supposed errancies of modern

¹³ Lettre sur les exigencies, p. 28.

thought and the alleged sickness of its reason, Blondel chose rather to seize upon this modern movement of thought to see how it could be brought back to the essential point of a problem it had ceased to be concerned with, the problem of a supernatural religion as an answer to the question of the rational human being's final destiny, the very problem he had already laid out at the end of the dissertation on *Action*.

The problem as Blondel saw it was to bring philosophy and religion back into contact with one another at the highest reaches of reason and faith without reducing either one to the other, "so that religion will not be only a philosophy, and so that philosophy will not be absorbed in any way into religion".¹⁴ The difficulty with doing just that stems from the fact that, on the one hand there is a claim of complete autonomy on the part of philosophy as expressed by philosophers in the notion of *immanence*, or the idea that nothing can enter into human consciousness that does not somehow come from it or does not somehow correspond to a need of expansion within it, and on the other hand there is the understanding that nothing is Christian or Catholic that is not properly *supernatural*, not just in the metaphysical sense of something imposed on human thought and will with its very being, but also in the more radical sense that it is impossible for human consciousness to draw it from itself.

What is especially jarring for the rational agent about this idea of the supernatural as a gift is not so much that it exceeds anything we could draw from ourselves immanently, but rather that it is advanced as imposed on us as a matter of

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

obligation or necessity for attaining our final end. “It is not the object or the gift that is the obstacle but the form and the fact of it... Not to have it as received and given, but as found and coming from us, is not to have it at all; and that is precisely the scandal of reason”.¹⁵

What is even more scandalous for reason is that, in addition to its being a fact or a truth to be believed in, it is also made out to be a matter of what is or of what ought to be a duty. If we do not enter through this narrow gate of a supernatural gift offered with its own strings attached, so to speak, a gift not from ourselves in any way, we cannot be Christians. Moreover, to enter this door, “we must admit that, incapable of saving ourselves, we are capable of damning ourselves forever; and that the gratuitous gift, free and elective in its source, becomes for the one to whom it is offered inevitable, imposed and obligatory, so that there is apparently no symmetry between the alternatives, since in the end what we cannot do by ourselves becomes imputable personally if we have not done it, and since a gratuitous gift is changed into a strict Debt”.¹⁶ (Letter, 36).

No other apologete of Christianity in Blondel’s day had posed the problem as starkly as this in the face of modern philosophy. One can also wonder whether any opponent of supernatural religion had ever framed the objection as clearly. Yet Blondel saw this claim on the part of supernatural religion as the crucial point for establishing some intelligible communication with a philosophy claiming to be autonomous in its immanence. For in that claim of supernatural religion Blondel found a certain definition of *necessity* in the relation between the natural and the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

supernatural lacking in other methods of apologetics, a necessity that allowed or even required a certain penetration of the supernatural gift or offer into the order of nature or of reason itself. "For if it is true that the exigencies of Revelation are grounded, we cannot say that we are still entirely at home within ourselves; and of this insufficiency, this incapacity, this exigency, there has to be some trace in human being purely as human being as well as some echo in the most autonomous philosophy".¹⁷

Thus a random exposition of a few fragmentary ideas or of one particular dogma or another would not do for a truly Christian apologetic. Neither would a mere exposition of a historically defined teaching about facts and about a significant historical individual such as Jesus as a religious teacher. The problem is not one of objects to be believed in, but rather of believing as such under its formal and integral aspect. "If we do not go to the extremity of the most precise and most challenging exigencies of full Catholicism, we do not have the means even of rationally conceiving the meeting or the coexistence of a religion that is not simply a human construction with a philosophy that is unwilling to abdicate or to be absorbed into the ineffable".¹⁸ It is only at the extremity of these exigencies on the part of both reason and religion that philosophy and mystery can meet without absorbing one another.

Blondel considered himself a philosopher unwilling to abdicate or to be absorbed into the ineffable. In the defense of his dissertation he did not accept being called a mystic. What he thought was necessary, even from the standpoint of

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 37.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 38.

Catholic supernaturalism, was a philosophy leading up to the necessary intersection between philosophy and supernatural religion, without transgressing into the supernatural mystery of religion and faith. What was needed for him was a *method of immanence*, as he called it in the *Letter* of 1896, starting from the very *notion of immanence* that had come to characterize modern philosophy. The point about immanence had been made by another philosopher, Léon Brunschvicg, in his review of *L'Action*. Blondel took the point to heart, but not without adding that philosophy still had a problem about transcendence to address in connection with the question of religion and of human destiny as a whole that had been brought up at the end *Action 1893*. For it was only in addressing the problem of human destiny as a whole that one could come to a clear definition of the difficulty there is in bringing natural philosophy and supernatural religion together in one's outlook on life, and thus come to a clear resolution of the difficulty that would be true to critical philosophy as well as to Catholic dogma.

What made the difficulty so acute from the standpoint of modern critical thought was the very notion of immanence that made it exclusive of the very notion of transcendence and of any supernatural gift conceived as gratuitous from the immanent standpoint of nature and reason, and yet as necessary or obligatory for coming to the completion of action in human nature and reason. The difficulty could not be resolved from the side of the supposed supernatural gift, for that would have meant watering down the notion of transcendence and of the exigency of a supernatural gift as such relative to human nature and reason. It could only be resolved from the side of immanence, where the affirmation of transcendence takes

place and where the hypothesis of a supernatural gift has to be conceived as necessary for the completion of human nature and reason. Hence the necessity of a method of immanence from the side of philosophy to get, not just to the necessity of affirming God as Transcendent in that method, but also to the necessity of raising the question of a supernatural gift that would be necessary for bringing human action to completion in the relation to the Transcendent.

Blondel had elaborated at great length on this method of immanence in his dissertation in what he referred to as the phenomenon of action, where he showed that most of what we have to will necessarily in our action, such as physical effort and social interaction, is in keeping with the exigencies of our immanent free will, much as modern critical philosophy had done for the immanent order of the universe as we find it in our consciousness. In the end, however, he also showed how much of this critical thinking tends to close in on itself and its universe, in much the same way as superstition does, even in its critique of superstition. It finds satisfaction in itself, as superstition finds satisfaction in a finite object, as if there were nothing more to be sought for it to achieve its perfection. It becomes self-sufficient and exclusive, when in fact or in principle there is infinitely more to be desired or willed for coming to a perfect equation of one's willed will with one's willing will. Indeed, superstition takes hold in human action when that infinitely more is taken to be something finite in our experience, an object, a ritual, a cult, even a science or critical thinking itself, or any attitude that will have nothing to do with anything more than itself and its world, however large that may be conceived. In his critique of superstition, Blondel turns modern critical thinking itself against itself as

exclusive of anything transcendent or supernatural and opens the way for a consideration of something more that cannot be reduced to anything purely natural in the immanent order of things and of human affairs, something that can be called true religion in relation to God as truly transcendent creator and giver of gifts, including that of nature or of reason and will.

Some people may talk of natural religion, but the young Blondel was leery of that notion. As natural, or as conceived in any phenomenology of nature or of action, without the benefit of further enlightenment from the divine, religion could turn out to be just another form of superstition or idolatry. For Blondel, it was of critical importance that true religion be conceived as coming from God as Transcendent, as offered from on high and as having to be accepted freely and responsibly. As merely found or as coming only from us, it would not be the kind of supernatural religion he had in mind as the scandal of reason to be reconciled with reason. That is why Blondel could not stop at just the necessity of affirming God in God's transcendence in his philosophy of action. Recognizing that we do not come to the perfection of action just by affirming God in God's transcendence, he spoke further of a necessary alternative that arises for the rational will in the face of this necessary presence of God in us and in our action: either to accept this necessary presence and go along with its exigencies in keeping with the expanding life of action, or to stifle this necessary presence in a manner that closes in on oneself and frustrates the will in its most fundamental aspiration toward true freedom and perfection. This final alternative that presents itself in relation to accepting or rejecting the presence of God in our action "sums up all the teachings of practice.

Man, by himself, cannot be what he already is in spite of himself, what he claims to become voluntarily. Yes or no, will he will to live, even to the point of dying, so to speak, by consenting to be supplanted by God? Or else, will he pretend to be self-sufficient without God, profit by his necessary presence without making it voluntary, borrow from Him the strength to get along without Him, and will infinitely without willing the Infinite? To will and not to be able, to be able and not to will, that is the very option that presents itself to freedom: ‘to love oneself to the contempt of God, to love God to the contempt of self’.¹⁹

Not every one sees this tragic opposition at the core of human action as clearly as this, but it is the opposition that the science of practice leaves us with in the end, an option toward a higher life for action or an option for what can only be characterized as the death of action in total frustration and self-contradiction. When the terms of the opposition are presented in such a radical way, the question we are left with is: what would it take for us to be able to will the Infinite infinitely if we are not able to will it on our own in a finite willed will? This is where philosophy is once again reunited with some form of supernatural religion in the Catholic sense.

The Call for a Philosophy of the Supernatural in the Catholic Sense

In the original dissertation on *Action* of 1893 Blondel wrote of the supernatural strictly in philosophical terms, without any explicit reference to any Christian dogmas that might have led his examiners to think he was not doing philosophy in speaking of a solution to the problem of religion in human

¹⁹ *Action (1893)*, p. 327.

subjectivity. In his critique of Christian apologetics he chided fellow Catholics for starting from religion and faith rather than from an autonomous and free rational philosophy. “In order to do philosophy without ceasing to be Christian or to be a Christian without ceasing to be a philosopher, one no longer has the right to start secretly from one’s faith in order to make believe one arrives at it and one no longer has the power to put one’s belief discretely to the side of one’s thinking”.²⁰ One has to proceed in the study of Christian religion in the same way as one would in the study of any other religion, as Blondel had begun to do in the philosophy of action with regard to the supernatural, without naming it Christian or Catholic, and without presupposing faith in any Christian mystery, not even faith that there is some mystery to be contemplated. What would follow from such a study of the supernatural in the explicit Christian sense would be a “religious progress of philosophical thought in its entirety and a human progress of religiousness or of the very intelligence of Christianity”,²¹ a Christian philosophy constituted from the Christian idea hidden from sight in modern philosophy to be made explicit in a philosophical contemplation of the Christian mysteries as they relate to human experience in the world.

Such an explicitly Christian philosophy did not exist in the historical consciousness of Christians when the modernist crisis erupted early in his career as a philosopher, but as he had pointed out in the third part of the *Letter on the Philosophical Method in the Study of the Religious Problem*, he had in mind developing such an explicitly Christian philosophy for the mutual renewal of

²⁰ *Lettre sur les exigencies*, p. 53.

²¹ *Ibid.*

perspectives in both philosophy and religion. The problem he had to solve was seen differently from each one of the two sides he had to bring together in this new philosophical venture, that of philosophy itself and that Christian religion. From the side of philosophy, there were those who maintained that it made no sense to speak of a Christian philosophy, not any more than it made sense to speak of Christian mathematics or Christian physics. From the side of Christian religion, there were those who saw no way of relating the incommensurate supernatural order of the Christian mysteries to anything in the natural order of reason and historical consciousness.

Against the recalcitrant philosophers, Blondel had to argue for a much broader conception of philosophy as a total human enterprise than was taken for granted by many in modern rationalism, much as he had argued earlier for a science of subjectivity as transcending the limits of the positive sciences, and for the necessity of raising the question of a supernatural religion against the superstition of a self-satisfied reason. Implied in this argument was the idea of a total incommensurability between the supernatural order of mystery and the natural order open to the inquiry of reason. Blondel took this incommensurability between the supernatural and the natural for granted as a Christian and as a believer, but not entirely in the way other Christians were doing subsequent to modern rationalism. Incommensurability meant for them a separation of the supernatural from a self-enclosed natural order of reason and consciousness, without communication between the two. This idea of separation between the two orders allowed them to think of the supernatural order of Christianity as self-enclosed and as purely

extrinsic to the order of nature and reason, also taken to be self-enclosed in rationalist fashion, without relation of any kind to a supernatural order. What Blondel was calling for was another way of conceiving the relationship between these two incommensurate orders in the experience and in the practice of Christians, by recognizing how the philosophical order is systematically open to the religious order and how faith and practice in the religious order can affect the exercise of reason and will in the concrete order of historical consciousness.

With this new, post-modern, conception of the relation between philosophy and Christian religion, Blondel was able to provide much needed help for Catholic intellectuals during the modernist crisis regarding apologetics and the critique of social conditions in modern society. In his long article on *History and Dogma* in 1904, he was able to point to the living Christian tradition as the way of avoiding the opposite extremes of excessive extrinsecism in dogmatic theology on the one hand, and of excessive historicism on the other in historical research, with regard to Christ as a historical figure at the head of a supernatural religious community whose faith in Him as the Incarnate Word of God goes back to the witnesses of his appearance on earth, his preaching, his suffering and death, and his Resurrection, all taken to be mysterious events as well as historical facts. In his defense of the *Semaines Sociales* in France, a sort of itinerant summer university organized by Catholic laymen to study and to criticize the conditions of the working class in France after the industrial revolution, against those he called *monophorists* (people who saw God as communicating with people only in external way of through formal documents), who were saying that there was no mandate for such an apostolate in Christian

religion, he was able to point to a more interior way God has for communicating with souls through reason and the will for justice and charity, in the supernatural as well as in the natural order.

During that modernist crisis of Catholic apologetics early in the twentieth century, Blondel spent a lot of time accumulating notes for a book on apologetics that would conform to his conception of the relation between philosophy and Christian religion. But that did not go far enough in satisfying his need for a more explicit Christian philosophy. The project for a narrowly conceived apologetics gradually turned into a project for a more broadly conceived Christian philosophy as he had begun to conceive it in the third part of the *Letter* addressed to the *Annales de philosophie Chrétienne* in 1896. This too led to another accumulation of notes that went on during his entire teaching career, which, at the end, he intended to organize, not just as one book, but as a series of books in a systematic philosophy of *Thought, Being and Action*, followed by another series re-examining the enigmas of this philosophy in the light of the Christian mysteries. The rediscovery of Saint Augustine's philosophy of the Christian religion in 1930, which occasioned the debate on Christian philosophy that followed, came just at the right time for revivifying this intent and for Blondel to insist once again on the need for a Catholic philosophy.

In fact, Blondel thought he had found in Augustine just the kind of philosophy he was calling for, one that was systematic and resolutely Catholic at the same time. He wrote on the original unity and permanent life of this philosophy, on its ever renewed fecundity, and the latent resources in it for a rejuvenated philosophy of

religion. He chided historians of philosophy like Etienne Gilson for presenting Augustine only as a man of faith, with his deep religious experience, rather than as a philosopher as well, as if Christian philosophy had not begun with Augustine in the west, before the injection of Aristotle into it by Aquinas and later forms of Thomism. He took issue with Gilson for merely juxtaposing the religious method of Augustinianism and the philosophical method of Aristotelianism, as if there were connection between the two in what he was willing to call the Christian philosophy of the middle ages. He saw in this a failure to understand how each side was trying to bring religion together in a synthetic way, not just as theologians, but more precisely as Christian philosophers, Aquinas with his idea of a natural desire to see God, Augustine with his idea of divine illumination in reason as well as in faith.

The idea that Aquinas was indeed a philosopher in the Catholic tradition coming down from Augustine was well entrenched at the time Blondel was writing these articles on Augustine, even though his idea of a natural desire for something supernatural like seeing God was less well known and seldom taken into account in distinguishing between the two orders as incommensurate and heterogeneous to one another. Blondel had no difficulty accepting this idea of heterogeneity and incommensurability between the natural order and the supernatural order. In fact, he insisted on it at great length in his philosophy of the supernatural as unnaturalizable, but not in a way that kept them separate from one another as if by a wall that could not be penetrated from either side. Blondel made a point of showing how Augustine was philosophical and systematic in the search that led him from the world to his soul, and from his soul to God as the light of his intelligence

and as the object of his most fundamental desire, even if there was no formal distinction made between the natural and the supernatural in that intelligence and in that desire. He recognized in Augustine a tendency to think less of what nature can do by itself, or of what reason can achieve by its own light, without the supernatural light of faith and the supernatural power of grace. But there was, nevertheless, a clear philosophy of illumination from Truth itself and of restless human aspiration toward the Divine as transcendent and supernatural, from which one could derive the idea of a supernatural gift added to nature, and a philosophy of the human experience that follows from accepting such a gift, a philosophy, not of the divine life itself, which only God can have and which remains everywhere incommensurate to human reason and will, but of the effect this divine life can have in human life, when its truth is freely accepted and ratified within one's spirit, a philosophy that Augustine could speak of as "universal and catholic" relative to any rational individual concerned about destiny and about finding rest in God..

This was for Blondel the kind of philosophy he had begun to speak of as a "religious progress of philosophical thought in its entirety and a human progress of religious consciousness or of the intelligence of Christianity" in the methodological *Letter* of 1896. It was a philosophy still in the making in his own mind, but one that had to be thought of as Catholic from the inside out, and not merely as an imposition from the outside in. There were still philosophers at the time who would not accept any idea of a Catholic philosophy any more than they would accept the idea of Catholic mathematics or Catholic physics. For them Blondel had to argue for a broader conception of philosophy and of science much as he had done earlier in his

career as a philosopher, by demonstrating the necessity for a philosophy of action, or for what he called a science of practice, and by then demonstrating the necessity for reason to inquire further than what it could conceive within the phenomenon of action, much as Augustine had done in going *ab exterioribus ad interiora et ab inferioribus ad superiora*. What was left open to further debate among Catholics who thought of themselves as philosophers was how to conceive the task of philosophy as part of their Catholic consciousness.

On one side there were those who thought of philosophy as self-contained in its own natural order, separate from any religious order, and without any need or necessity of a supernatural aid to it to bring it to its completion as rational and voluntary. If these Catholics accepted the idea of Christian philosophy for the middle ages, it was only in a loose and undefined sense that said nothing about how a rational philosophy could come together with a supernatural religion in the pursuit of a single human destiny, or about how faith in the Christian mysteries could bring new light in the resolution of enigmas that remained for philosophy when it has come as far as it can in what Blondel was calling a *transnatural* order of historical existence. What Blondel saw in the idea of Christian philosophy among Neo-Thomists was little more than an abstract concordism that did justice neither to reason in its historical state nor to faith in the historical mysteries of Christianity, much as earlier modern methods of Christian apologetics had failed to do.

On his side Blondel did no longer said anything about how to interpret the idea of Christian philosophy as he found it in the middle ages, the idea that Gilson had come to accept as the name for the Thomism he took to be more philosophical

or Aristotelian than religious or Augustinian. Blondel argued rather for the necessity of a more integral philosophy that would recognize its insufficiency in dealing with the problem of religion and human destiny as requiring the aid of some supernatural light and grace, which human reason and will have to accept, or reject, but freely, in order to get beyond any sort of self-centered superstition or rationalism. This is the philosophy he was thinking of as both rational and Catholic at the same time in the strict sense of both terms, not in a sectarian sense, as philosophers feared when they heard the term Catholic, or as Catholics feared when they heard the term rational, but in a *universal* sense germane to reason in its highest reaches in the human being and to the mystery of Catholic religion revealing itself and coming to the aid of human reason and free will.

This was the philosophy he was still intending to set forth in his own systematic works as a Trilogy on *Thought*,²² *Being*,²³ and *Action*,²⁴ each showing a systematic openness to the Transcendent and the Divine at their highest culmination, followed by another trilogy on *Philosophy and the Christian Spirit*,²⁵ re-examining the enigmatic conclusions of his philosophy in the light of the Christian mysteries. In the title of his final work he relented about using the term Catholic in

²² *La Pensée*, Tome I: *La genèse de la pensée et les paliers de son ascension spontanée*; Tome II: *La responsabilité de la pensée et la possibilité de son achèvement* (Paris: Alcan, 1934).

²³ *L'Être et les êtres. Essai d'ontologie concrète et intégrale* (Paris, Alcan, 1935).

²⁴ *L'Action*, Tome I: *Le problème des causes secondes et le pur agir* (Paris: Alcan, 1936); Tome II: *L'Action humaine et les conditions de son aboutissement* (Paris: Alcan, 1936).

²⁵ *La Philosophie et l'Esprit chrétien*, Tome I: *Autonomie essentielle et connexion indéclinable* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1944); Tome II: *Conditions de la symbiose seule normale et salutaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946). Tome III was left unfinished at Blondel's death in 1949.

strict conjunction with the term Philosophy, as he had done in the 1930's debate over Christian philosophy, but in the work itself he was doing philosophy as only a Catholic could, probing the mysteries of the Christian faith to shed new light on the enigmas of human existence that remain after philosophy has run its course, or after reason has come to the end of its power to investigate. These are works we still have a lot to learn from as Catholic Philosophers or as Philosopher Catholics.

Oliva Blanchette
Department of Philosophy
Boston College