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MAURICE BLONDEL'S DIAGNOSIS OF EXTRINSICIST "MONOPHORISM": AN ENDURING CRITIQUE OF CHRISTIAN INTEGRALISM

Maurice Blondel's diagnosis of extrinsicist "monophorism": an enduring critique of christian integralism

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Resumo: In the early decades of the twentieth century French Catholics were sharply divided over what strategy the Church should adopt to re-Christianize society. Under the pseudonym "Testis," Maurice Blondel sharply criticized a Catholic alliance with the proto-fascist, nationalist movement of Action Francaise, whose leader was the notorious unbeliever Charles Maurras. This alliance had received a qualified endorsement in a series of articles published by the French Jesuit Pedro Descoqs. In contrast, Blondel defended the Catholic social democrats who sought social justice for the workers. Applying his philosophy of action, Blondel criticized the Catholics Maurrassians on three fundamental grounds, especially their extrinsicist ["monophorist"] understanding of the nature-grace relationship. Balthasar considered Blondel's "Testis" essays to be "the most penetrating analysis of [what is called] Catholic integralism [intégrisme] that . . . represents an ever recurrent temptation for militant Catholics." Blondel's diagnosis of this integralist mentality was also evoked by Yves Congar, O.P., at the close of the Second Vatican Council: "If one had to characterize in a word the Council's approach, I would appeal to the ideal of knowledge that Maurice Blondel proposed and that he defended against what he termed rather strangely 'monophorism', that is a reified conception of knowing." Given the contemporary resurgence of Christian nationalist movements, Blondel's diagnosis has lost none of its relevance.

Palavras-chave: Maurice Blondel, Modernism, Christian Theology, Catholic Church, Integralism, Christian Nationalism, Action Francaise, Nature-Grace Relationship Debates.

Abstract: In the early decades of the twentieth century French Catholics were sharply divided over what strategy the Church should adopt to re-Christianize society. Under the pseudonym "Testis," Maurice Blondel sharply criticized a Catholic alliance with the proto-fascist, nationalist movement of Action Francaise, whose leader was the notorious unbeliever Charles Maurras. This alliance had received a qualified endorsement in a series of articles published by the French Jesuit Pedro Descoqs. In contrast, Blondel defended the Catholic social democrats who sought social justice for the workers. Applying his philosophy of action, Blondel criticized the Catholics Maurrassians on three fundamental grounds, especially their extrinsicist ["monophorist"] understanding of the nature-grace relationship. Balthasar considered Blondel's "Testis" essays to be "the most penetrating analysis of [what is called] Catholic integralism [intégrisme] that . . . represents an ever recurrent temptation for militant Catholics." Blondel's diagnosis of this integralist mentality was also evoked by Yves Congar, O.P., at the close of the Second Vatican Council: "If one had to characterize in a word the Council's approach, I would appeal to the ideal of knowledge that Maurice Blondel proposed and that he defended against what he termed rather strangely 'monophorism', that is a reified conception of knowing." Given the contemporary resurgence of Christian nationalist movements, Blondel's diagnosis has lost none of its relevance.

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1. Introdução

In the early decades of the twentieth century, French Catholics were sharply divided over what strategy the Church should adopt to re-Christianize society. At the height of the Modernist Crisis (1909-1912), Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) engaged in a polemical exchange with the French Jesuit Pedro Descoqs (1877-1946) that still has relevance for understanding contemporary political-ecclesial controversies.

In a series of articles that appeared in the periodical *Études*, Jesuit Pedro Descoqs composed a qualified defense of a Catholic alliance with the proto-fascist, monarchist movement *Action Française* [AF]. Born in the wake of the infamous Dreyfus Affair, AF, under the intellectual leadership of Charles Maurras (1868-1952), promised to restore the historic union between the Roman Catholic Church and the French State that had been abrogated in 1905 by the anti-clerical Third Republic (1870-1940). AF's anti-liberal ideology was very appealing to a generation of Catholics who were alarmed by the Third Republic's secularizing policies.

In contrast, Maurice Blondel was appalled by Catholic-AF collaboration which he considered lethal to the Christian spirit. He defended collaboration between the democratic, social Catholics and the republican government to bring about justice for the workers. When these social Catholics were accused of "social modernism," Blondel published a series of articles under the pseudonym "Testis," Latin for "witness." At the height of the Modernist Crisis, whose epicenter was France, Blondel sought to "witness" to the authentic Christian spirit that he considered under threat by the Catholic Maurrassians defended by Descoqs.

This paper will introduce Blondel and Descoqs, describe their exchange and set out the underlying philosophical and theological factors that continue to be relevant for understanding contemporary arguments over Christian socio-political engagements. The final section of the paper will highlight different understandings of the nature-grace relationship that relate to different socio-political positions. The theology of the nature-grace relationship has important practical consequences¹.

1. Maurice Blondel

Maurice Blondel has been called the most important Catholic philosopher of the last two centuries. Born in Dijon in 1861, even as an adolescent, Maurice Blondel had a keen sense of the cultural crisis and intellectual malaise that was gripping his society. He felt called to serve as a philosophical apologist for Christian truth that was disparaged by the university and cultural intelligentsia. Having matriculated at the prestigious *École Normale Supérieure*, Blondel conceived of a strictly philosophical project that would show the illegitimacy of the reigning "separated" philosophy, which considered the spiritual Transcendent as utterly superfluous to self-sufficient reason's claim to understand reality. This project came to fruition in his doctoral dissertation *L'Action* [Action].²

Blondel's seminal insight was to conceive of "action" as the link between thought and being. The term "action" was not even an entry in the standard philosophical dictionary of the period. Blondel's genius was to elaborate a meticulous phenomenology that set out the "logic of action" in human life so as to disclose its ultimate insufficiency. In studying action, Blondel addressed the problem which dominates all human existence:

¹ For a book length treatment of this dispute, see BERNARDI, Peter J. *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française: the Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernity Era*. Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press of America, 2009.

² *L'Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique* [henceforth, *L'Action*]. Paris: Alcan, 1893. ET: *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* [henceforth, *Action*], trans. Oliva Blanchette. Notre Dame: Univ. of N.D. Press, 1984.

"Yes or no, does life have a meaning and does man have a destiny?"³, Michael Kerlin explains:

[Blondel] wants to show that our acts themselves imply the solution. We cannot avoid acting, and every attempt to limit the scope and interpretation of our actions will push us beyond itself until finally we are faced with the question of the supernatural, a question that we can neither properly pose nor answer without going beyond our own resources.⁴

Blondel grounded the progressive and ineluctable expansion of action in the dialectic of human willing that futilely seeks to equate its specific and concrete expressions with its inexhaustible, aboriginal élan. This dialectic is the expression of the inevitable disproportion between what Blondel termed the "willing will" (*volonté voulante*) and the "willed will" (*volonté voulue*). The "willing will" is the inexhaustible aspiration to attain the infinite that is never fully quenched by the "willed will," namely, the specific, concrete instances of willing. James Le Grys epitomized Blondel's primordial insight: "The life of action is marked by the constant struggle to equal ourselves caused by the presence of the infinite within us, not the serenity of an emancipation through speculation."⁵

Blondel argued that fidelity to the logic of action must lead to this "doubly imperious conclusion":

It is impossible not to recognize the insufficiency of the natural order in its totality and not to feel an ulterior need; it is impossible to find within oneself something to satisfy this religious need. *It is necessary, and it is impracticable.*⁶

The "it" refers to the supernatural that Blondel's secular university contemporaries dismissed.

Absolutely impossible and absolutely necessary for man, that is properly the notion of the supernatural. Man's action goes beyond man; and all the effort of his reason is to see that he cannot, that he must not restrict himself to it. A deeply felt expectation of an unknown messiah; a baptism of desire, which human science lacks the power to evoke, because this need itself is a gift. Science can show its necessity, it cannot give it birth.⁷

Having disclosed the necessity of a supernatural completion of the natural order, Blondel's "transcendental" analysis claimed to show that only the option for what he termed the "one thing necessary" (*Unique nécessaire*) could give ultimate meaning and coherence to the human project.⁸

Charles Taylor's magisterial study of modernity *A Secular Age* limns the cultural background for Blondel's philosophical project.⁹ Taylor clarifies why unbelief has become so prevalent in modern Western culture. He analyzes what he terms the "immanent frame"

³ *Action*, p. 3.

⁴ KERWIN, Michael. "Blondel, Maurice." IN: *Augustine through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*, general ed. Allan D. Fitzgerald, O.S.A. Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge, U.K.: Eerdmans, 1999, pp. 103-5, at p. 104.

⁵ LE GRYS, James. "The Christianization of Modern Philosophy according to Maurice Blondel." IN: *Theological Studies* 54 (Sept., 1993), p. 480.

⁶ *Action*, p. 297.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 357.

⁸ Blondel's analysis is "transcendental" in the sense that he discloses the necessary conditions for the possibility of human fulfillment. He establishes the necessity of the option for God, the "*Unique nécessaire*" in Part Four of *Action*, in Part Five (most of which was added for the sale version), he argued that only an option for the specifically Christian revelation fulfills human action. See BOUILLARD, Henri, S.J. *Blondel and Christianity*. Trans. James M. Somerville. Washington, D.C.: Corpus Books, 1969. The phrase "*Unique nécessaire*" is an implicit reference to the Lucan gospel story about Jesus' visit to the home of Martha and Mary. Jesus says to the preoccupied Martha: "There is need of only one thing" (Luke 10:42, RSV).

⁹ Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University, 2007. See especially chapter 15 "The Immanent Frame," pp. 539-593.

that characterizes the modern age and the associated rise of an exclusive humanism that dismisses the reality of the supernatural order to which the Christian faith attests. Blondel aimed to construct a compelling philosophical argument to show that the immanent order is not self-sufficient and that it requires the supernatural order for its completion.

2. Pedro Descoqs

Born in Normandy, France, Pedro Descoqs entered the Paris Province of the Society of Jesus in 1895.¹⁰ His generation was forced to complete their studies outside of France because of measures enacted by the anti-clerical Third Republic. Descoqs was schooled in the Baroque scholastic philosophy of Francisco Suárez, S.J., considered the normative interpreter of St. Thomas Aquinas within the Jesuit order. He is remembered as an indefatigable worker and an ardent polemicist, who waged an incessant battle against the new philosophical trends, including neo-Thomism, transcendental Thomism, and Blondel's philosophy of action. Having resided in Paris during the years of the Nazi occupation, Descoqs died of typhoid at Mongré (outside of Lyon) in 1946.

Descoqs has been called "the last great representative of the Suarezian tradition"¹¹ Francisco Suárez, S.J. (1548-1617) played a central role in the revival of scholastic thought during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Descoqs's defense of Catholic collaboration with Action Française drew on certain basic Suarezian positions, that were largely shared with other scholastics. Suárez held that while the Church and State are distinct societies, the Church in the person of the Pope has indirect power over civil authority.¹² "There may occur a clash between the spiritual good and temporal convenience or expediency, and on such occasions the temporal sovereign must yield to the spiritual."¹³ The Church has this right because it serves a higher end, the human being's eternal salvation. Also, in contrast with Blondel, Suárez made a sharp distinction between the natural and supernatural orders; he gleaned from St. Thomas Aquinas the notion of an essential "pure nature" that he judged necessary for securing the gratuity of the supernatural gift.

Most French Jesuits of Descoq's generation favored a restoration of the monarchy.¹⁴ They had good reason to feel alienated from the Third Republic (1875-1940) because a series of fiercely anti-clerical administrations had effectively annulled the Society of Jesus as a corporate presence in France. Most notably, their extensive school system was suppressed.¹⁵ In 1901, another flare-up of anti-clericalism resulted in a complete ban of "unapproved" religious congregations, among whom the Society of Jesus was a primary target. Forced entries, plundering of property, and expulsions were the order of the day. Catholic disaffection grew as the radical-republican coalitions holding sway pressed their agenda. Laicization of education, liberalization of divorce laws, and a variety of other secularizing measures were constant reminders of the "de-Christianizing"

¹⁰ Among useful sources of information on Descoqs, see the sympathetic, but candid obituary composed by fellow Suarezian and Jersey colleague Gabriel Picard, S.J. IN: "In Memoriam: Le Père Pedro Descoqs." *Archives de philosophie* 18 (1949), pp. 129-135. The name "Descoqs" is pronounced [De-ko]; his family named him "Pedro" to distinguish him from an uncle named "Pierre."

¹¹ *Christliche Philosophie in Katholischen Denken des 19. und 20. Jahrhunderts*. Band 2. Köln: Styra, 1988, p. 400.

¹² See *ibid.*, pp. 402-03.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

¹⁴ Belgian Church historian Roger Aubert estimated that perhaps 3/4 of the pre-First World War era Jesuits had monarchist sympathies. See "La discordance (1880-1918)." IN: AVON, Dominic and ROCHER, Philippe Rocher. *Les jésuites et la société française*. Paris: Éditions Privat, 2001, pp. 81-120.

¹⁵ Anti-Jesuit animus played a special role in the republican politics of the era. See CUBITT, Geoffrey. *The Jesuit Myth: Conspiracy Theory and Politics in Nineteenth-Century France*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993. For an overview of the Jesuits in France during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see FOUILLOUX, Étienne. "Épilogue: Les jésuites en France du XIX au XX siècle." IN: *Les jésuites à Lyon XVI-XX siècle*. Sous la direction de Étienne Fouilloux et Bernard Hours. Lyon: ENS Éditions, 2005, pp. 247-264.

of France. The anti-clerical tide reached its peak in 1905 when the Law of Separation was enacted that unilaterally abrogated the Concordat between the French State and the Roman Catholic Church. Many Catholics felt that grave harm had been inflicted on the Church and her interests. Catholic "liberals," however, tended to view the separation of Church and State as a progressive step. From Rome, Pope Pius X issued *Vehementer nos* (Feb. 11, 1906) which resolutely refused all accommodation to the Law of Separation and the humiliating measures it entailed.¹⁶ At this low ebb in the Church's institutional fortunes, Charles Maurras opportunely presented himself as her staunch defender.

As early as 1898, Maurras had invited Catholics to make common cause for the salvation of France. The enemy was the socially corrosive, egoistic individualism and liberalism that had its sources in the ideals of the French Revolution and the Protestant Reformation. The goal was the defeat of the Third Republic and the restoration of the union of altar and throne. This was an assessment that was bound to appeal to the intransigent Catholics who refused all compromise with political liberalism. However, as we shall see, Maurras's appreciation of the Catholic Church scandalously eviscerated her biblical based prophetic mission.

In his *Études* series,¹⁷ Descoqs culminated his exposition of Maurras's system with this "most important" question: "In his blueprint [for social reconstruction] has Maurras reserved any place for Catholicism, and, if so, what is this place?"¹⁸ Though recognizing that this "Catholic atheist" does not recognize the supernatural constitution of the Church, Descoqs lauds Maurras's esteem for the Church as "the rampart of order" to which he assigns a privileged position in his reconstituted state.¹⁹

Yet Descoqs did not deceive himself regarding the limits of Maurras's appreciation of the Church. "The Church appears to him, from his relativist perspective, both as the guarantee of civilization and the guardian of nationality."²⁰ Being a consistent positivist, Maurras justified the Church's privileged role in his monarchist State by adducing her historical role in maintaining social order and cohesiveness. Thus, in contrast with the anti-clerical "barbarians" who deposed the Church from its official public role, Maurras proudly calls himself "Roman" and champions the cause of the Catholic Church as the historic bulwark of social order.

Against all those who take umbrage at the Church of Rome, against all these "barbarians" who only seem born to destroy, he declares himself "Roman." There lies his true faith, and this faith he expresses in a "symbol," known to all, that he intends to be above all a hymn of praise to the Church, guardian of order: "Order, tradition, discipline, hierarchy, authority, continuity, unity, work, family, corporation, decentralization, autonomy, labor organization," she alone has known how to preserve for societies the elements, [and] for intelligence the ideas, that found their life.²¹

¹⁶ *Acta Sanctae Sedis* 39 (1907). Rome: Vatican City, pp. 3-16.

¹⁷ DESCOQS, Pedro, S.J. "À travers l'oeuvre de M. Ch. Maurras." *Études* 120 (20 July 1909), pp. 153-186; (5 August), pp. 330-346; (5 Sept.), pp. 593-628; 121 (5 Dec.), pp. 602-628; (20 Dec.), pp. 773-786. In a pointed response to Blondel, Descoqs published "Monophorisme et Action française." *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 160 (June 1910), pp. 225-51. Descoqs's *Études* articles were subsequently published as monographs: *À travers l'oeuvre de M. Maurras*. Paris: Beauchesne, 1911; and *À travers l'oeuvre de M. Ch. Maurras*. 3rd ed. Paris: Beauchesne, 1913; and *Monophorisme et Action française*. 3rd ed. Paris: Beauchesne, 1913.

¹⁸ *À travers l'oeuvre de M. Ch. Maurras.* *Études* 120 (5 August), pp. 330-346, here at p. 339 and p. 343.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 340-41. Descoqs was citing from Maurras's preface to *Le Dilemme de Marc Sangnier: essai sur la démocratie religieuse* in *La Démocratie Religieuse*. Paris: Nouvelle Librairie Nationale, 1921 reprint. The "symbol" to which he refers was Maurras's rhetorical tour de force in which he repeatedly claimed "I am Roman" (*Je suis romain*). Descoqs felt no need to cite the "symbol" because it had been so widely reproduced in the press.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 340, n.1.

Here Descoqs registers a significant caveat. He cautioned that "in the thought of M. Maurras, the term 'Roman' is not to be confused with the term 'Catholic.'"²² Indeed, Maurras's use of the term "Catholic" was not to be confused with the term "Christian." His appreciation of the "true spirit" of the Church, was to say the least, peculiar. And he seemed to oppose the spirit of the "Roman" Church to the spirit of her founder. Maurras had expressed contempt for the spirit of the biblical prophets and even Jesus in certain of his early works. These passages were a scandal to any Christian who might contemplate an alliance with Maurras's movement. This was the second major impediment that Descoqs had to address if a collaboration between Catholics and Maurrassian positivists was to be deemed acceptable.

On the one hand, Descoqs extenuated the incriminating passages in which Maurras expressed his loathing for the "tumultuous sentences of the prophets" and the "venom" of the Magnificat. Maurras was simply castigating the "exegetical extravagances" of the Reformation that "revolutionaries and democrats" have employed to sanction their ruinous programs of social equality.²³ On the other hand, after conceding to Maurras that the gospel can give rise to "dangerous interpretations," and benevolently inferring from Maurras's praise of Rome an argument for the necessity of a magisterium to guard against "every fantastical interpretation," Descoqs firmly repudiated any suggestion of a dichotomy between the Church and her founder that Maurras's writings might suggest.

Apart from "these fundamental divergences" between Maurras's views and the Church's dogma, Descoqs opined that Maurras gave the impression of being "almost one of her sons."²⁴ Descoqs found it inexplicable why this "Catholic atheist" stopped short at the threshold, refusing to enter the Temple whose lines he so much admired.²⁵ Descoqs evidently hoped that Maurras would one day cross the threshold and return to the formative institution of his childhood. The Jesuit found no insuperable impediment in Maurras's positions that precluded his reconciliation with the Church.

Descoqs vigorously defended the soundness of Maurras's conclusions apropos of the "natural" order, while lamenting his religious and philosophical "deficiencies" that prevented "any positive accord on dogmatic terrain."²⁶ Descoqs defended Maurras's capacity to arrive at the truths because the political and social order has its own autonomy and right reason can legitimately arrive at valid conclusions without recourse to supernatural revelation as their necessary source or sanction. The fundamental issue, then, was the relationship between the natural and supernatural orders.

What were Descoqs's main lines of his case for collaboration? First, Descoqs argued that a union for the sake of results in the natural order, viz., social prosperity, is valid even though the "ontological value of these results" is regarded differently by the collaborating parties. Second, he stated that though the natural and supernatural orders are intimately related, nevertheless, "the end of the natural order can be pursued in a very large measure independently of the supernatural end." Third, though Maurras has a woefully "deficient" understanding of metaphysics and the Church, his own positivist principles lead him not to interfere with her activity; furthermore, the valid social and political truths of his system are open to and, indeed, require completion by the *philosophia perennis*. Just as deficiencies in Aristotle's philosophy had not prevented Aquinas from incorporating Aristotle's valid insights into a Christian synthesis, so Descoqs viewed his own apologetic efforts in relation to Maurras's system. I shall now show how Descoqs clarified each of these points.

Since Catholics and neo-monarchists are able to agree on the "means for realizing the temporal prosperity of the community," expedients that "the experimental method"

²² Ibid., p. 336.

²³ Ibid., p. 345.

²⁴ Ibid., pp. 334-5.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 612.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 60-83.

confirms, they are able to work together for this very determinate end.²⁷ In making his case, Descoqs employed a helpful analogy that contrasted two sorts of working collaborations to illustrate the difference between permissible and impermissible coalitions.²⁸ On the one hand, consider two groups, made up of believers and unbelievers respectively, working together to transport heavy beams to Notre Dame Cathedral to erect a scaffolding. The believers intend to repair the sanctuary. The unbelievers intend to construct a pyre to destroy the Cathedral. Though the two groups agree on an immediate, "bare" (*brut*) end, i.e., the transport of the beams, their intentions are so contradictory that their joint venture must be unreservedly condemned as immoral.²⁹ On the other hand, imagine that these same two groups agree to transport the beams for the common goal of repairing the Church. The believers, motivated by a spirit of faith, want to give glory to God. The unbelievers simply want to safeguard an artistic marvel that is a legacy of French culture. Where would be the injustice or immorality of the collaboration of these two groups in hauling the beams since both propose to cooperate on the same good work?³⁰

The collaboration between Catholics and unbelieving positivists is precisely akin to the second example. It is not a case of these groups having absolutely no idea in common. Catholics can collaborate with positivists because "these latter have very just, though incomplete and 'deficient' ideas on several points: order, authority, [and] tradition."³¹ These truths "are from God....and ascend to God." Both parties "pursue a genuine good, the common, temporal good, which, according to rational philosophy and Christian doctrine, is the proper end of civil society."³² Sufficient to found a legitimate collaboration, "this has nothing analogous to the immoral accord on the results considered above and the negation of a personal God; *a fortiori*, the sole fact of not knowing God will not necessarily render all accord illegitimate."³³ There is a realm of truth equally accessible to a Catholic and an unbeliever. If, in the order of being, God is the supreme principle and goal, in the order of logic, God is not the first object nor the first principle.³⁴ To require an explicit appeal to God to validate truths in the natural order is to embrace the errors "of the traditionalists and the ontologists."³⁵ Catholics and neo-monarchists base their political constructions "on facts of experience that do not stem of themselves from any theory."³⁶ The natural order has "its proper value and relative independence."³⁷ Descoqs insisted on maintaining the "essential distinction...between purely political and economic questions and moral and religious questions."³⁸

The remote orientation [that the political and economic order] receives from the supernatural end does not change its proper object [nor] modify its laws. The supernatural corrects nature, extends its domain, completes it; it does not suppress it nor volatize it.³⁹

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 60-1.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 61-2.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 61.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 61-2.

³¹ Ibid., p. 62.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., pp. 62-3.

³⁴ See *ibid.*, p. 74, n.1.

³⁵ Ibid. For the historical background of Descoqs's charge, see McCool, Gerald A., S.J. *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method*. New York: Crossroad, 1977, pp. 37-58; and pp. 113-128.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 80.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 81.

The Jesuit recalled that Popes Leo XIII and Pius X had reaffirmed the just liberty for Catholics in the political order. Catholics do not have to renounce their principles to cooperate with Maurras on a plan of "immediately political reforms."⁴⁰

3. Blondel's "Testis" Articles

During the pontificate of Pius X (1903-1914), the perception of a crisis within the Church over the understanding and living of the faith grew sharper in Blondel. He especially deplored a certain Catholic reaction to the Law of Separation that sought to achieve "the triumph of political theocracy and the scholastic synthesis."⁴¹ Responding to a national survey in 1907, Blondel articulated his sense of the "present crisis":

[U]nprecedented perhaps in depth and extent—for it is at the same time scientific, metaphysical, moral, social and political—[the crisis] is not a "dissolution" [for the spirit of faith does not die], nor even an "evolution" [for the spirit of faith does not change], it is a *purification* of the religious sense, and an *integration* of Catholic truth.⁴²

In 1907, Pope Pius X promulgated the anti-modernist encyclical *Pascendi* which procribed "Modernism" as "the synthesis of all heresies."⁴³ This papal document was not the "purification" and "integration" of Catholic truth for which Blondel yearned. He thought that the condemnation in no way touched his own positions and, therefore, he had nothing to retract. Nevertheless, given the prevailing circumstances, he felt that he should keep silent. There were underlying reasons for the persistent incomprehension of his positions.

Approximately two years after the publication of *Pascendi*, Blondel decided to end his silence. Under cover of defending the social Catholics of the *Semaines sociales*, he gave his "witness" against a pervasive and insidious "extrinsicist" mentality, which he labelled "monophorist" ["one-way street"] that, boasting of its orthodoxy, threatened "the very understanding of the moral destiny and the religious conscience."⁴⁴ Blondel disclaimed the intention to refute the specific charges brought against the social Catholics and suggested a larger purpose for the "Testis" series.⁴⁵ The underlying issues "transcend

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴¹ Blondel to Wehrlé. 23 Dec. 1906, *Correspondance*, 2 vols. Presentation and notes by Henri de Lubac. Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1969, vol. 2, p. 375. Johannès Wehrlé, a diocesan priest, was a dear friend, confidant, and spiritual advisor of Blondel; they had been students together at the École Normale.

⁴² Cited by DRU, A. IN: "From the *Action française* to the Second Vatican Council: Blondel's 'La Semaine sociale de Bordeaux.'" *Downside Review* 81 (1963), p. 226. Blondel composed these lines as part of a response to an "international survey on the religious question" that was published by the *Mercure de France* in June, 1907.

⁴³ *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, ASS 40 (8 Sept. 1907), pp. 593-650. ET: *On the Doctrines of the Modernists*. Boston: Daughters of St. Paul. The decree *Lamentabili sine exitu* (ibid. [3 July 1907], pp. 470-8) had preceded *Pascendi*. Blondel was relieved that its 65 propositions contained no reference to the philosophy of action or the "new apologetics."

⁴⁴ *Catholicisme Social et Monophorisme: Controverses sur les Méthodes et les Doctrines* [Henceforth, CSM]. Paris: Bloud, 1910, p. 71. This volume is a reprint of Blondel's "Testis" essays that originally appeared in *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* (APC) between October, 1909, and May, 1910, bearing the title "La 'Semaine sociale' de Bordeaux: Testis [Blondel]: 'La 'Semaine sociale' de Bordeaux.'" APC 159 (Oct. 1909): 5-21; (Nov.): 163-84; (Dec.): 245-78; (Jan. 1910): 372-92; (Feb.): 449-71; (March): 561-92; 160 (May): 127-62; "Une Confirmation imprévue de nos précédentes critiques." APC 160 (April 1910): 69-78; "Réponse de Testis et remerciements au R. P. Catoire." APC 160 (May 1910): 187-89; "Les Moyens de l'univers." APC 160 (June 1910): 346-53; "Méprises, révélations, et aveux involontaires." APC 160 (June 1910): 252-76; "Dernières réflexions sur le système des 'alliances par les résultats seuls.'" APC 161 (Dec. 1910): 263-85. Citations will be from the facsimile reproduction: *Une alliance contre nature: catholicisme et intégrisme: La Semaine sociale de Bordeaux 1910*, préface de Peter Henrici et introduction historique de Michael Sutton. Bruxelles: Éditions Lessius, 2000.

⁴⁵ CSM, p. 4.

the horizon of the present controversies and...concern the entire future of Catholicism itself among us."⁴⁶

In the "Testis" articles, Blondel contrasted two mentalities according to three fundamental orientations. The three orientations concerned epistemology--the relation of our thoughts to reality; ontology--the relationships among the different orders of reality; and theology--the nature-supernatural relationship. Blondel used these articles to clarify his "philosophy of action." The contrasting positions that he limned, he attributed to the Maurrassian Catholics. Both mentalities were anti-modernist; they were nevertheless on a collision course.

The first thesis concerns "the problem of knowledge and the relations of thought with action."⁴⁷ This thesis is the philosophical crux of the other two.

Actions are not simply the putting into practice of logically defined ideas and of geometrically shaped theories; and everything is not decided in the domain of abstractions, as if human beings were only pure intellects, as if concepts were the adequate substitute of things and the sole motivation of the will, as if we governed ourselves by them and them alone. In individual and social practice, there is always something more and different than in the speculative systems that appear to inspire it. That is why the ideas that determine actions do not prevent actions from prompting new ideas that, even setting out from inexact and mutilating theses, can become liberating and healing. The life of human beings and of peoples obeys a more complex logic than that of abstract thought; what one does is often better or worse than what one thinks.⁴⁸

On the other hand, extrinsicist monophorists like the Catholic Maurrassians embrace an epistemological essentialism, a notional realism, that claims that our concepts grasp reality, independently of any consideration of human subjectivity and historicity. In short, there is a tendency to separate theory and practice and to regard our clear and distinct ideas as giving an adequate grasp on reality.

The second thesis formulated the particular ontology that corresponded to "this dynamic philosophy of thought and action." This conception of being recognizes the "solidarity and continuity" among its different orders "without failing to recognize the distinction of beings and the hierarchy of different orders."⁴⁹ Reality is an interconnected whole in which no order of being is absolutely enclosed in itself. In contrast with every "exclusive ideology" that compartmentalizes the world in accord with its mental habit of "isolating ideas like intellectual atoms and logical blocks," reality is a continuum where "there is action from the top down and from the bottom up."⁵⁰

This philosophy of the interconnectedness of the various levels of reality counters classical economics and philosophical rationalism that effect a "murderous vivisection" on the unity of the human being and the world.⁵¹ In a negative allusion to the influential social doctrine of Auguste Comte, which Charles Maurras had adopted, Blondel declared "deceptive and myopic, that social physics that desires to suffice for scientifically regulating public and private interests from a positivist point of view."⁵² Reality is not a series of "water-tight" compartments that are totally self-contained.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 26-7. See also p. 32.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 30.

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 30-31. See also p. 33.

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵² Ibid. Auguste Comte (1798-1857) was the founder of "positivism," an anti-metaphysical social philosophy that metamorphosed into a "religion of humanity." Considered to be one the greatest post-revolution philosophers, in 1902, Comte's bust was gloriously enshrined at the Sorbonne; in 1904, his remains were solemnly interred in the Pantheon.

The third fundamental orientation concerned the understanding of the nature-supernatural relationship. Blondel declared this thesis to be "the most delicate of the disputed points, that which dominates the entire debate."⁵³ While insisting that the supernatural order is "entirely gratuitous and absolutely transcendent," Blondel contended that this order is not only "superimposed," but it is also "supposed and presupposed" by the natural order. Carefully stating that the supernatural order "is never able to be *naturalized*," he continued:

[The supernatural order] is destined to penetrate and to assume [the natural order] in itself without becoming confused with it. And at the same time that it is proposed from on high by Revelation, the Incarnation and the Redemption, which substantially constitute it and which are not simply facts to observe and mysteries to believe, but reach souls invisibly by the effulgence of the grace of which they are the source, act upon all human beings so to speak from below to enable them to break out of all the enclosures in which they would like to confine themselves, to raise them above themselves, to burst every merely natural equilibrium, to put them on a level, and require them to be in accord, with the plan of providence.⁵⁴

Blondel maintained that the human person can only be understood in his actual, concrete historical circumstances, and not by a putative state of "pure nature." This opened anthropology recognizes that human striving can never be satisfactorily explained or fulfilled in sheerly positivist terms. The social Catholics look to specifically "Christian solutions" to socio-economic problems because, contrary to the prevalent economic liberalism and sociological positivism, they recognize that a self-contained socio-economic order is an abstraction that falsifies the actual supernatural destiny of the concrete person.⁵⁵ In contrast, the Catholic Maurrassians separate the natural and supernatural orders, so that the supernatural is treated as an external overlay. The supernatural order is a gratuitous superimposition by purely extrinsic command that relates to a purely passive obediencial potency, without the external gift being able or having to entail the help of an interior contribution...[specifically supernatural truths] are only supernatural in the measure that they are defined, named, and expressly imposed by way of authority.⁵⁶

Blondel termed the ensemble of philosophical and theological positions to which he subscribed "integral realism."⁵⁷ "Monophorism" was Blondel's term for a reigning clerical authoritarianism which on principle refused to recognize that grace can be at work from below. Extrinsicist monophorism, claiming that nature is sufficient unto itself or, at most, possesses a "suitability" with respect to the supernatural, unavoidably presents the supernatural as a "sort of counter-nature" and presents Christianity as "a law of fear and constraint, as an instrument of domination."⁵⁸ Blondel blamed the "manualist theology" for this perversion of the tradition.

The social Catholics and the philosophers of action have done the most to show "the essential heterogeneity and real continuity of the two orders" of the natural and the supernatural.⁵⁹ Monophorists, on the other hand, juxtapose "an exclusively extrinsicist and authoritarian supernaturalism" to an all-sufficient nature. In contrast to the social Catholics who are attentive to "[the] stammerings, the complaints, [the] griefs" that arise from the people, the monophorists treat the people as a "perpetual child," demanding "a passive docility" and presenting Christianity not "as a liberation and an expansion for our being" but "as a new subjection, as an oppression weighing upon a nature already full,

⁵³ Ibid., p. 31.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 33.

⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 31-2.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pp. 34-5.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 68.

solid, and sufficient, and crushing it under the mystery and under the divine power..."⁶⁰ In the face of this radical "denaturing" of the "Good News," Blondel poignantly asked: "Apart from the Catholic truth, is not the very meaning of the moral destiny and the human religious conscience misconstrued?"⁶¹

4. Poisonous Fruits of Monophorism

Blondel judged Catholic collaboration with Maurras to be the most scandalous fruit of extrinsicist monophorism. Exposing the nature of the alliance between Catholics and the Maurrassian positivists was the decisive point to make his case that this mentality killed the Christian spirit. He indicated a sinister explanation for the attraction of intransigent Catholics to a political alliance with pagans:

It is their *a-Christianity* and even *anti-Christianity* that you love and assist in them, and, dare I say, that which is systematically irreligious. That is the terrible observation that we are going to make.⁶²

Blondel maintained that Catholic monophorists and Maurrassian positivists shared a common conception of authority that suppressed "interiority" (*le fait intérieur*). For both types of authoritarians, "the enemy is the liberty of souls and the initiative of spirit."⁶³ Blondel viewed Descoqs's apology for Maurras as a logically consistent but fatally flawed approach to the fundamental problem of the Christian renewal of society. Furthermore, Maurras's philosophy was patently anti-Christian and efforts to extenuate its true character were hardly worthy of refutation. Blondel did not engage in a meticulous, point by point refutation of the Jesuit's qualified case on behalf of Maurras. Rather, he addressed certain axial assertions and criticized them in the light of the flawed monophorist positions that he had already expounded.

The monophorist system followed a logic of three stages: first, the confiscation of civic liberty, and the domestication and mobilization of the Catholic faithful for a crusade under the banner of religion; second, the organization not only of an exclusively religious politics, but of a political religion; and third, the pursuit of the dream of a temporal Empire, spiritually elevated, against the secular power.⁶⁴ Blondel viewed this state of affairs with great alarm: "[I]t is a matter of interests so serious that we will be pardoned for expressing here our fears...whether one likes it or not, whether it is known or not, this is the theological enormity and political insanity to which certain minds are headed in the present crisis."⁶⁵

The monophorist philosophy of nature at work here separates the different levels of reality, denying to the lower levels "any spontaneity, any suppleness, any solidarity" in their subjection to the higher levels; "legality and formal literalness reign."⁶⁶ The monophorist system depends on linking the supernatural to a "solid" natural order by means of "logical principles and external data." "Reason only exists to obey and to proclaim reasonable the agnosticism that is imposed on it."⁶⁷ Though reason is championed, it remains captive within its enclosure.

Disclaiming an attack on persons or motives, Blondel strongly reproached the collaboration between Catholics and Maurrassians for which Descoqs had offered a qualified, "theoretical" endorsement. He asserted that this "demoralizing and de-

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 71.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., p. 139.

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 137-38.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 99-100.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 100.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 95.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

Christianizing" solution proved worse than the harmful liberal alternative. It turns Catholicism into a "war machine, an instrument of earthly reign" under cover of admiring a notion of "order" that suppresses "the spontaneous movement of souls."⁶⁸

Assessing the Fundamental Issues

The exchange between Blondel and Descoqs was messy. It was marked by misunderstandings, accusations, and what the French term a "*procès de tendances*" (conflict of mentalities). At a certain point, each admitted that his adversary's positions could be given an acceptable interpretation. Nevertheless, even after the condemnation of Action Française in 1926, Descoqs continued to insist that Blondel's approach to the problem betrayed a dangerous confusion of the natural and supernatural orders. In my assessment, I will focus on the central theological issue: the different understandings of the nature-supernatural relationship.

The complexity and interconnectedness of their epistemological, ontological, and theological positions can be illuminated by three different images that give concrete expression to three contrasting ways of understanding the relationship between nature and the supernatural that figured in the dispute between Blondel and Descoqs.

Blondel's own position that emphasized that reality is a "continuum" in which there are no perfectly self-contained "airtight compartments," and in which there is an exigence for the supernatural, could be imaged by the structure of the Pantheon.⁶⁹ In the architectural design of this ancient Roman building, the lines of force of the circular walls converge on the open space above, the primary source of light. Standing within the windowless building, one notices that no part of the cavernous interior is "compartmentalized," but the eye is directed upwards to the incoming light. Though the lower part of the structure has solidity, it has no self-contained status. There are no "walls of separation" that divide one section from another. Furthermore, without the light that descends from above, it would be impossible to take adequate account of the lower levels.

No analogy is problem free, but I think this image wonderfully captures Blondel's view of the nature-supernatural relationship, both in its positive and defective aspects. On the positive side, it does translate Blondel's sense of the *élan* of the human spirit (and the whole created order) that is nowhere *chez lui* ['at home'], but whose dialectical movement requires the supernatural to make ultimate sense. There is movement from below upward, and from on high downward. It also conveys the ambiguity of Blondel's understanding of an "exigence" for the supernatural, i.e., the necessity that the supernatural be given in order for the lower levels to make sense. Indeed, the architectural design of the Pantheon translates Descoqs's accusation that Blondel's defective view of conceptual knowledge results in an undermining of the proper autonomy of the natural order. Imagine that the sole source of light in the Pantheon comes from the opening above--the oculus--at which the structural lines from below converge... is this not analogous to Descoqs's charge that Blondel seemed to imply that humans can only attain certitude in their knowing by means of the experience of the supernatural? And that "without this light pouring in from up above," human understanding cannot attain a certain grasp of the truth? It seems that for Blondel the experience of grace was a *sine qua non* for arriving at truth.

The second image illuminates the understanding of the nature-supernatural relationship that Blondel ascribed to "extrinsicist monophorism," and thus to Descoqs. Imagine a two-story house with a ground floor that is partitioned into several rooms. This floor is completely furnished and fully livable. The windows provide sufficient light to

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 124.

⁶⁹ I am indebted to Elizabeth A. Johnson for her reference to the Pantheon as an image to gain insight into a specific type of theological anthropology. See *Consider Jesus*. New York: Crossroad, 1990, p. 24. However, Johnson does not explicitly apply this to Blondel's thought, nor does she develop the image in such a detailed fashion.

carry on the tasks of daily life. The family residing on the ground floor has no real need of an upper floor. However, there does exist a second floor to which access is gained when trapdoors are opened from above and portable staircases let down. Only then does the family come to know of the existence of this upper level of which they had no previous inkling. Furthermore, they are told that a superior life awaits them above and that they must choose to ascend to the second floor under threat of being thrown out of the house altogether.

The ground floor is comparable to a supposed "pure nature" that has its own, self-contained consistency and fulfillment. The partitioning of the rooms corresponds to the divisions among the various sciences that are only externally connected with each other. By God's gift, a supernatural destiny (the second floor) has been added and staircases have been let down from above (God's salvific plan actualized in the sacramental ministry of the Church) by which the ground floor inhabitants gain access to supernatural life. However, there seems to be nothing in their native experience that would make such a move to a higher, supernatural life a compelling necessity except for the fact that a summons, a revelation "from above," has been issued.

Such an image of "extrinsicist monophorism" in which the supernatural is regarded as a superimposition on a self-sufficient nature, characterized by a mere non-repugnancy for the supernatural, corresponds to the notion that Blondel derided. He ascribed this understanding to those whom he labeled as "monophorists." For Blondel, this conception of an adventitious, extrinsic relationship of the supernatural to nature explained why these monophorists accused him of undermining the claims of the natural order. Such monophorists would never admit of an "exigence" that would connect the two orders. However, Descoqs rejected Blondel's imputation that he denied any exchange between the natural and supernatural orders and that he viewed grace as only a veneer, imposed by intellectual dialectic and authority. Descoqs rejected both of these understandings of the nature-supernatural relationship that have been pictured by the Pantheon and the two-story house.

A third image presents a significant variation on the second image and seems to correspond to Descoqs's understanding of the nature-supernatural relationship. This image also consists of a two-story house, but the inhabitants are no longer fully content to live on the ground floor, but feel a longing ("attractions") for a possible second floor, the existence and nature of which they are incapable of ascertaining by reason alone. Once they have received the revelation by "external word" of the existence of and summons to an upper floor promising supernatural life, they experience an efficacious, positive desire ("grace") to dwell there. However, this positive desire does not utterly cancel out the legitimate functions of the first floor. The first floor is inhabitable and is not dependent on the upper floor for its purpose and meaning. Even though, in the light of an explicit revelation, life on the second floor is shown to be infinitely superior to life on the first floor, the first floor continues to serve as a necessary support to life on the second floor and does not lose that function even after the occupants gain access to the upper level.

I want to suggest another image that addresses the concerns of Descoqs and Blondel respectively regarding the nature-grace relationship. Imagine an A-Frame cottage where the first floor has a certain solidity, but this living space is not completely separated off from an upper region which completes the structure. In this architectural analogy, the quasi-integrity of the ground floor corresponds to Descoqs's insistence that human reason can attain certain truths unaided by supernatural grace. However, the ground floor is not absolutely self-contained and has an orientation to supernatural completion, symbolized by the upper level to which it is open and which is not extrinsically imposed on the lower level. This architectural image of a "natural" ground level that is not complete in itself but whose construction from the get-go opens to an upper-level captures the inherent dynamism towards supernatural fulfillment for which Blondel's philosophy of action contended.

5. Conclusion

Blondel repeatedly and emphatically stressed the "fundamental error" that poisoned both the Maurrassians and their monophorist apologists: "the failure to recognize the inner working of the divine gift, the doubly religious spontaneity of souls that are under the action of both grace and liberty."⁷⁰ Henri de Lubac, S.J. (1896-1991) gave Blondel primary credit for helping overcome the extrinsicist mentality that crippled Christian thought:

Latin theology's return to a more authentic tradition has taken place—not without some jolts, of course—in the course of the last century. We must admit that the main impulse for this return came from a philosopher, Maurice Blondel. His thinking was not primarily exercised in the areas proper to the professional theologians, nor did it base itself on a renewed history of tradition. Still, he is the one who launched the decisive attack on the dualist theory which was destroying Christian thought. Time after time he demonstrated the deficiencies of the thesis of the "extrinsicist" school, which recognized "no other link between nature and the supernatural than an ideal juxtaposition of elements which...were impenetrable to each other, and which were brought together by our intellectual obedience, so that the supernatural can subsist only if it remains extrinsic to the natural and if it is proposed from without as something important only in so far as it is a supernature..."⁷¹

Blondel's analysis also received high praise from two more of the twentieth's centuries most distinguished theologians. Balthasar considered Blondel's "Testis" essays to be "the most penetrating analysis of [what is called] Catholic integralism [*intégrisme*] that . . . represents an ever recurrent temptation for militant Catholics."⁷² Blondel's diagnosis of this integralist mentality was also evoked by Yves Congar, O.P., one of the Second Vatican Council's most influential theologians, at the close of the Council: "If one had to characterize in a word the Council's approach, I would appeal to the ideal of knowledge that Maurice Blondel proposed and that he defended against what he termed rather strangely 'monophorism', that is a reified conception of knowing."

Blondel's diagnosis has lost none its relevance at a time when fascist, nationalist political movements seek alliances with Christian institutions to attain political power. The Blondelian legacy, especially its impact on the understanding of the nature-grace relationship, is still pertinent to contemporary politico-theological debates and deserves further study.⁷³

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⁷⁰ CSM, p. 124.

⁷¹ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Br. Richard Armandez, F.S.C. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984, pp. 37-8.

⁷² BALTHASAR, Hans Urs von. IN: "Integralismus." *Wort und Wahrheit* 18 (1963), pp. 737-744.

⁷³ Cited by Peter Henrici in the preface to the facsimile reprint of Blondel's "Testis" essays bearing the title *Une Alliance contre nature: Catholicisme et intégrisme*. Brussels: Editions Lessius, 2000, p. viii. See also Alexander Dru's "From the Action Française to the Second Vatican Council: Blondel's *la Semaine sociale* de Bordeaux," *Downside Review* 81 (1963), pp. 226-245; and Avery Dulles, *The Catholicity of the Church*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985, pp. 57 and 65.