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Review: 'Maurice Blondel, A Philosophical Life'

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who appreciate nuance. Anyone who wants to understand how and why Vatican II was a historical necessity, what really happened there, and why we are today witnessing a struggle between those who see the council as a revolutionary event and those who prefer to see it as little more than a confirmation of what the Church has always taught must study this book. It masterfully constructs a convincing historical argument that there is a striking continuity of intention and method between the so-called “Modernists” (1890–1914) and the so-called *nouvelles théologiens* (1930s–1950s)—both groups pejoratively labeled and condemned by the Vatican. Today the struggle has passed to those who argue that something momentous happened at Vatican II and those who argue the opposite. The contenders are divided, as they were in the earlier periods, over according due weight to the human subject as a historical, developmental being who can know absolute truth only historically and developmentally.

Jürgen Mettepenningen shows that today’s Church owes an incalculable debt to the courageous theologians (Congar, Chenu; Bouillard, Daniélou, de Lubac; and Schillebeeckx and Schoonenberg, to name just the better known) who sacrificed their reputations to develop a more authentic theological method than the one they had inherited. The method of the *nouvelle théologie* by-passed the thick and tendentious layer of ahistorical neo-Scholastic manuals for a *ressourcement*—a return to the Scriptures, the Church Fathers, and the liturgy, giving them a critical-historical reading and finding in them a historical-mindedness that was truer to the human grasp of revelation (turn to the subject) than could be found in the ahistorical, static conceptualizations of neo-Scholastic dogmatism that programmatically eschewed historical and developmental realities.

The genetic connection of the *nouvelle théologie* and Modernism is cogently demonstrated, beginning with the fact that both terms were invented by magisterial insiders to disparagingly label and control movements deemed threatening to church doctrine. However convincingly Mettepenningen argues that the *nouvelle théologie* is a “cluster concept . . . representing a variety of visions,” nonetheless the *nouvelle théologie* and “Modernism” methodologically were born of the common desire “to restore contact between theology and the living faith” (141), a contact not available in the ahistorical, static, deductive method of the “closed” system of manual theology.

Teachers should consider this study essential reading to provide an illuminating context for studying the documents of Vatican II. It can open readers’ eyes to the possibilities for church renewal and reformation that are undeniably present in those documents.

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Maurice Blondel, A Philosophical Life. By Oliva Blanchette. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. xvi + 820 pages. \$45.00 (paper).

No one is better qualified to write about Maurice Blondel than Oliva Blanchette. In 1984 he published his now standard translation of Blondel’s doctoral dissertation, *L’Action (1893), Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science*

of *Practice*. Blanchette's lengthy and important new biography shows that there is much more to Blondel than *L'Action* and the modernist crisis. He lived well beyond the modernist period and died in 1949 at the age of eighty-eight. Born in 1861 into an old Burgundian Catholic family, Blondel chose philosophy over law, the family profession of choice. He studied philosophy at the École Normale Supérieure from 1881 to 1884. At the Sorbonne in June 1893, he defended his controversial doctoral dissertation, *L'Action*. Blondel married Rose Royer the following year and they had three children. She died in 1919, in the twenty-fifth year of their marriage. After a year at the University of Lille, Blondel taught philosophy at the University of Aix en Provence from 1896 to 1927. He was an intense and inspiring teacher. Among the social Catholics, his students included Marc Sangnier, founder of *Le Sillon*, and many members of the *Semaines Sociales de Bordeaux*. He also taught the Jesuits Henri Bremond and Auguste Valensin. His correspondence with each runs to three large volumes. Bremond left the Jesuits after the modernist crisis, but Valensin remained. Through him Blondel met other Jesuits in France such as Henri de Lubac, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, and Yves de Montcheuil. From France, Blondel's influence on twentieth-century Catholic theology spread to such figures as Joseph Maréchal, Karl Rahner, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, all, in Blondel scholar Bishop Peter Henrici's phrase, "*les jésuites blondelizants*."

In March 1926, the retina in Blondel's right eye hemorrhaged. The next February, blindness forced him to resign from teaching. Family and friends helped Blondel continue writing and he managed to publish his contributions to the "Christian Philosophy" debate in 1930 and 1931. For almost two years, Blondel's close friend, Parisian priest Johannès Wehrlé, attempted to edit Blondel's notes for a projected volume on *La Pensée*. By March 1931, Wehrlé admitted the task was beyond him and returned Blondel's notes. Later that year, Nathalie Panis, a former graduate student of Blondel's, returned from teaching abroad and contacted Blondel about working as his assistant. Panis came to Aix in December 1931 and never left. She collaborated closely with Blondel during the last seventeen years of his life. She continued in charge of Blondel's archives at Aix and Blanchette came to know her during his own research as a young philosophy professor. Blanchette explains her role in his acknowledgments and dedicates his book to her as "faithful disciple and collaboratrix in Blondel's legacy to the philosophical world." He describes his book as, "in many ways, the story of Blondel's life as told by Blondel himself to Mademoiselle Panis" (xvi).

But Blanchette's book is much more than conventional biography. It includes a complete chronological exposition of Blondel's work. It has two parts of roughly four hundred pages. Part One, *The Journey Inward*, treats in ten chapters Blondel's life and thought up to his blindness and the arrival of Nathalie Panis in 1931. Part Two, *The Systematic Summation*, treats in eight chapters the works, unknown to many Anglophone readers, Blondel produced in collaboration with Panis between 1932 and 1949. Chief among them are his two trilogies, the first on *Thought* (2 vols., 1934), *Being* (1935), and *Action* (2 vols., 1936, 1937). The second trilogy was to be on *Philosophy and the*

Christian Spirit. The first two volumes appeared in 1944 and 1946. Unable to finish the third volume, Blondel gathered previous material that sketched it. He signed the contract for it the day before he died and it appeared in 1950 as *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*, “a concise presentation of his approach to the study of the Christian spirit as historically relevant and philosophically legitimate” (800).

In the first three chapters of Part One, Blanchette treats Blondel’s defense of his dissertation, the process of writing it, and the treatment of the supernatural in the original 1893 version of *L’Action*. This dissertation offers a rigorous philosophical account of the basic human dynamism or *élan* that Blondel calls “action.” His analysis distinguishes the “willed will” and the “willing will.” He finds that particular willed actions (“willed will”) never satisfy the infinite desire of the “willing will.” This leads him to consider philosophically the possibility of a supernatural gift. In his exposition of the first trilogy, Blanchette describes our natural *élan* as “a quest for the infinite, an aspiration at once congenital and inefficacious by itself, for a knowledge that saturates and a fruition that leaves nothing to be desired” (682). Blondel drew criticism from secular representatives of “separate philosophy” and even more from fellow Catholics who not only distinguished philosophy and theology but tended to separate them in dualist fashion. During the modernist crisis, Blondel critiqued them as “extrinsicists” (194ff) in “History and Dogma” (1904) and “monophorists” (242ff) in his 1910 defense of the *Semaines Sociales de Bourdeaux*. Chapters five through seven recount these battles.

Blanchette sees Blondel’s engagement with theologians between 1896 and 1913 as a “deviation” (261) from his philosophical path. And yet he acknowledges that it is Blondel’s very attempt to open philosophy to the supernatural that requires renegotiating the boundaries between philosophy and theology. Dominicans M.-B. Schwalm and Reginald Beaudoin helped Blondel realize the distance between Aquinas himself and the extrinsicists Blondel criticized. He lectured on Aquinas at Aix between 1911 and 1913 and introduced him into the university curriculum. Though Blanchette describes the fear of condemnation that hung over Blondel and his family during the modernist crisis, and his medical leave from Aix between 1901 and 1906, he minimizes the intellectual effects of the crisis on Blondel’s philosophy, for example, in his relatively brief treatment of *Pascendi* (230–31) which ignores Blondel’s initial agony over the encyclical. Chapter ten on “The Question of a Catholic Philosophy” recapitulates the debates of 1930–31 from Blondel’s perspective and makes clear the extent to which Blondel’s philosophy requires a rethinking of the modern boundaries between philosophy and theology.

Part Two treats Blondel’s systematic exposition of his philosophy in the two trilogies which he described as an “explication of the philosophy of action” (795). Blanchette’s account of the first trilogy in Part Two’s first five chapters is the philosophical heart of the book. The last three chapters of Part Two treat the uncompleted second trilogy. He finds the treatment of action in the final volume of the first trilogy to be “more spontaneously metaphysical” than the original 1893 work (657). If Blanchette has a thesis to argue, it is against scholars such as Henri Bouillard (599–603) who see more of a break

between early and later Blondel. By contrast, Blanchette insists on the continuity of Blondel's thought. In emphasizing the "circumincession" of being, thought, and action in the first trilogy, Blanchette claims that, according to Blondel, "Being is the principle, the focus, and the end of our thinking and our acting" (492). Rather than an "evolution" in Blondel's thought from 1893 to the first trilogy, he sees "a revolution back to its origins in a philosophy of Thinking and Being." For Blanchette, its own interior dynamic drives Blondel's thought and not accusations of immanentism or idealism from outside (657).

Blanchette acknowledges Blondel's deeply religious nature and motivations, and somewhat more grudgingly, his impact on twentieth-century theology. But he thinks that "theologically-inclined interpreters," such as de Lubac, Bouillard, and de Montcheuil, often misread him, failing to distinguish sufficiently between philosophy and apologetics, and seeing too much discontinuity between his treatments of action in 1893 and 1936–37 (143, 600–01, 659). Against well-meaning theologians, Blanchette insists on Blondel's philosophical intent and on the consistency of his fundamental metaphysical concern. But this is complicated by Blondel's reading of modern philosophy as attempting to absorb the Christian idea of human finality as a return to God (274). Though Blondel defends philosophy's autonomy, he wants to open it to the possibility of "think[ing] religious life philosophically" (1), as he does in the second trilogy, and of examining the "hypothetical" necessity of the supernatural (138–43).

Blondel's philosophy constitutes a radical challenge to the understanding of philosophy and theology and their relationship that western theologians and philosophers inherit from their modern predecessors. To the extent that contemporary theologians find themselves between a collapsing christological center, in which all is grace in the same way, and resurgent conceptions of both philosophy and theology as more separate than distinct, they remain in need of an adequate and stable response to Blondel's challenge.

Demanding and rewarding, Blanchette's detailed chronological exposition of Blondel is unique in the literature. It succeeds in conveying the depth and painstaking intricacy of Blondel's philosophy and will serve for a long time as the best secondary access to Blondel in any language. It has an excellent Name Index and an Index of References to Blondel's Works. The latter not only provides the key to the book's citations but also serves as an annotated, chronological guide to Blondel's works and their English translations. This book is indispensable for all philosophical and theological libraries. David L. Schindler is to be commended for including it in the *Ressourcement* series. Hooray for Eerdmans' publishing such an important book in its entirety!

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A Short Life of Jonathan Edwards. By George M. Marsden. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008. xii + 152 pages. \$15.00 (paper).

This is one of more than twenty volumes in the Eerdmans series, "The Library of Religious Biography." Marsden, an emeritus chair holder at the