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## BLONDEL, THE PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION AND LIBERATION THEOLOGY\*

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### ABSTRACT

Maurice Blondel's philosophy of action and concrete political theology provide foundations for modern theologies of action. By commencing with the reflective subject, Blondel compensates the deficiencies of collectivist Marxist social analysis. He did not live to complete his account of the social, political and economic implications of his philosophy, but they are realized in the work and witness of others: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Yves de Montcheuil, Henri de Lubac and John McNeill. Liberation theologians of diverse persuasions need especially to acknowledge their debt to Blondel in an era when, in Western societies, the fundamental context of action is no longer material but intellectual, spiritual and interpersonal. The abstract nature of his thought means that he frequently opens suggestive paths into further reflection rather than prescribing complete solutions to specific practical questions.

**Keywords:** action; Maurice Blondel; liberation theology.

In his groundbreaking philosophical method of immanence, Maurice Blondel demonstrates the radical insufficiency of any purely natural theory of action. Humans, whenever they truly act, necessarily affirm an

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absolute supernatural value which is in the world but not of the world. Blondel's philosophy of action is well-known, but remains as such curiously abstract. Readers of his doctoral thesis *L'Action*, his youthful yet best-known work, could be forgiven for thinking that the effects of action on the human subject, and the description of action as a phenomenon, remain his fundamental concerns.

Blondel was in fact profoundly engaged with concrete political questions throughout his life. This article will identify the key themes he pursues and thereby develop a coherent view of his theory and practice. It will then examine his relation to liberation theology, that theology's indebtedness—often unacknowledged—to him, and the challenges he poses to it.

In the Thomist tradition of God as *actus purus* (pure act) out of which Blondel's work emerges, God is the only being able to initiate new events in the world, and in this sense the only being capable of action. All other beings merely *act*, that is, they perform mechanical and mental operations caused by God. This does not mean that they are mere automatons, but instead that the source of their acting subsists beyond them. In *L'Action*, Blondel wished to revise this account of the relation of divine action to human acts. Humans are not beings who only *act*, but are the sources of creative, original *action* as well. This is because the willing of the mere phenomenality of the act harbours within itself a willing not to be. The latter produces a rupture of the will that is impossibly contradictory, and in any case preserves the common term willing.<sup>2</sup> Blondel's philosophy of action is founded on his argument that the acceptance and the denial of the pervasiveness of divine action in human acts *both* amount to the affirmation of an absolute value which is more than the product of mere speculation.

Blondel's insight that an individual's action is inextricably linked with that of other individuals applies supremely to his own work. This article will therefore consider Blondel particularly through the eyes of his interpreters and those whom he inspired. The collective dimension of human action is recognized above all by liberation theologians, a category which I shall construe rather widely to encompass theologians concerned with human liberation through action who are not Latin American by birth or nationality. The orientation of many of these figures owes more to Blondel than is often recognized, and liberation theology, whether defined in narrow geographical and ecclesial terms or more inclusively,

2. Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*, §§ 31–39 (Paris: Alcan, 1893); trans. O. Blanchette, *Action: Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 43–50.

cannot therefore be dismissed as a valid theological option on the grounds that it is irredeemably Marxist. In fact, I will argue, Blondel provides a more nuanced account of action through linking personal decision with wider social groups and with divine action. This provides more convincing foundations for a theology of liberation in the twenty-first century than the Marxist dissolution of individual personality in the collective identities and conflicts produced by industrial capitalism.

This article will begin by examining Blondel's three contributions to the *Semaines Sociales* in 1910, 1928 and 1947. The middle of these is significant in being the closest he comes to delineating a systematic political theology. This will be followed by consideration of his analysis of the Second World War and the international situation of the mid-twentieth century. The discussion will then move to French Jesuit theologians influenced by Blondel—Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Yves de Montcheuil and Henri de Lubac—before reflecting on the global impact of his thought on a more recent generation—Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo, and John McNeill—and its implications for current political theology.

### The *Semaines Sociales*

#### *Bordeaux 1910: Nature and Grace*

The aim of the *Semaines Sociales*, convened in a different French city each year, was to bring together professionals, workers, clergy, students and other interested people for collective reflection under the aegis of leading academics and practitioners on the topic selected for that year.<sup>3</sup> Blondel made a major contribution to the 1910 *Semaine* in Bordeaux. His target was what he termed “monophorism”: literally any “one-” (μόνος-) “payment” (φόρος) or “one-sided” conception of the nature–grace relation.<sup>4</sup> He attacks the incoherence of the neo-Thomist fideism of “pure nature” which pictured divine action as affecting only a distinct part of creation spiritually ordained to receive it: rather than exalting supernatural action, this theory in fact posited a realm pre-existing independently of spiritual action. But he is equally hostile to the immanentism of the atheist Third Republic philosophers who were implacably opposed to any notion of human dependence on divine action or revelation.

3. For an overview, see Peter Bernardi, “Social Modernism: The Case of the *Semaines Sociales*,” in *Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context*, ed. Darrell Jodock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 277–307. The website of the *Semaines Sociales* de France is <http://www.ssf-fr.org/>.

4. Peter Bernardi, “Maurice Blondel and the Renewal of the Nature–Grace Relationship,” *Communio (US)* 26 (1999): 834 n. 78.

Blondel develops a third vision of “integral realism” encompassing both the spiritual and material dimensions of reality.<sup>5</sup> Its governing theses he identifies closely with those of the *Semaines Sociales*: (i) the challenging of the notion that action is the application of ideas, in favour of a conception of a reciprocal relation between action and reflection; (ii) solidarity and continuity between the different parts of nature, including economic actors, rather than necessary opposition; (iii) the identification of economic problems as being equally ethical problems.<sup>6</sup> At the conclusion of his study, Blondel discusses various social distortions of society characteristic of monophorism: the undermining of human fraternity; canonization of social inequality; reactionary political mysticism; the privileging of temporality above spiritual principles; free market defence of economic inequality on the grounds that possession indicates religious justification; the dialectical opposition of force with force in attempts to ensure the triumph of political causes; a separation of spiritual concerns from those of material life; and the subordination of eschatological Christian values to worldly ones.<sup>7</sup> Critics attacked Blondel for allegedly promoting an immanentist theology that made God no more than a function of temporal realities. This caricature of his position was, however, the very philosophy he was seeking to abolish, replacing it with a philosophical theology predicated on continuity from the divine order to the material order and the necessary dependence of materiality on the supernatural.

*Paris 1928: War, Peace and the Nation*

In 1893, Blondel had proclaimed: “Man’s will and his action do not stop at the borders of the country. In swarming around, the political is the symbol of the interior life of the will that spreads out without confines to hold back its expansion.”<sup>8</sup> Read in the post-Versailles context of the defence of the nation-state and the interwar erosion of the principle of national self-determination, this thought appears both truer and more problematic than in its original context. In this the second *Semaine Sociale* in which Blondel assumed a leading role, the tone of his presentation «Patrie et humanité» was noticeably different. His apologia here for the nation-state—that it provides the most natural grouping of human

5. Maurice Blondel, *Une alliance contre nature: catholicisme et intégrisme. La Semaine sociale de Bordeaux 1910* (Brussels: Lessius, 2000), 39–72 is translated by Peter J. Bernardi as “The Third ‘Testis’ Article,” *Communio (US)* 26 (1999): 846–74. See the valuable discussion in Alexander Dru, “From the Action Française to the Second Vatican Council: Blondel’s *La Semaine Sociale de Bordeaux*,” *Downside Review* 81 (1963): 226–45.

6. Blondel, *Une alliance contre nature*, 26–33.

7. Blondel, *Une alliance contre nature*, 145–80.

8. Blondel, *Action*, §§ 274; 259.

communities—needs also to be situated in the context of his ongoing domestic struggle against Maurrassian nationalism, which remained a potent force despite the Papal condemnation of *Action française* two years earlier. Blondel now places greater emphasis than in *L'Action* on the need for a plurality of nations. Michel Sutton rightly draws attention to his argument that it is the bonds between the people which preserve the nation rather than their obedience to a higher authority or their participation in larger collective groupings.<sup>9</sup> While Blondel's characteristic universal perspective remains prominent, the essential role of the function of the *patrie* in *mediating* from particularity to universality—rather than itself becoming the universal in an expansive movement analogous with that of the Fichtean ego—is systematically defended.

Blondel's governing proposition is that “human *unity*, in order to be that which it must be perfectly, in order to become living and spiritually enriching *union*, requires multiplicity and variety: multiplicity of persons, diversity of races and of peoples, legitimate and salutary plurality of nations.”<sup>10</sup> He sets out 24 pairs of theses, each contrasting the politics of what he terms «nationalisme intégriste» with his own political vision. This set of theses is the closest Blondel comes to enunciating a systematic political theology, and so deserves summarizing in full. By means of the binary pairs, he advocates: (1) social unity in diversity; (2) the individual as the principle of social life; (3) a supernatural end actualizing concrete political life; (4) the activity of citizens as the source of political power; (5) rational political decision making; (6) the sovereignty of natural law; (7) situating the state within a larger harmonious world order; (8) God as the only absolute principle; (9) the soul as the direct creation of God and not the product of social factors; (10) a hierarchy of obligation governed by divine charity; (11) the harmony of state, *patrie* and the person; (12) the human civilizing impulse as motivated by a spiritual principle; (13) generosity and not aggression as the primary expansive political force; (14) the intrinsic imperfection of people and institutions; (15) life as continuous creation; (16) the coherence of the concept of international ethics; (17) a society of *patries* founded on human conscience; (18) the separation of church and state, with each granted its own divinely-ordained function; (19) ecclesial supranationality, with the church not being confined within national religious bodies; (20) spiritual power as self-justifying and not

9. Michael Sutton, “‘Patrie et humanité’ (1928): politique et relations internationales,” in *Blondel entre L'Action et la Trilogie*, ed. Marc Leclerc (Brussels: Lessius, 2003), 376–79.

10. Maurice Blondel, “Patrie et humanité,” in *La loi de charité: principe de vie sociale* (Lyons: Chronique sociale de France, 1928), 363–403 (376) (my translation; original emphasis).

dependent for its validity on any institutional power; (21) faith in God and in Christ as the supreme end of life; (22) continuity between natural and supernatural orders; (23) the prior call of the Christian apostolate above that of the nation; (24) a unity of human life in which the will, practice and spiritual aspiration are harmoniously preserved.<sup>11</sup> The model of international unity Blondel espouses is curiously consistent with the Marxist internationalist model of interstate relations as this would later develop in the Soviet era. The Marxist exaltation of the collective over the personal, as well as its systemic materialism, is in contrast entirely incompatible with his vision.

#### *Paris 1947: Social Order*

In his contribution to the *Semaine Sociale* of 1947, Blondel confronted two varieties of immanentist philosophy: the positivist sociology of Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl, and Marxist dialectical materialism predicated on class conflict. His critique of both ideologies is that they dissolve human personality in a naturalized and collectivized view of human society. Marxist analysis regards liberation, moreover, as essentially economic and technological. Blondel protests that both these analyses, but especially the Marxist one, ignore the transcendent and theological aspect of human freedom grounded in the fact that authentic human life is a “dialogue between the brain and the hand.”<sup>12</sup> He proclaims: “Our mission is to bind the whole of creation, by means of a truly social bond, to Trinitarian society itself, across the gaps bought back [*les défaillances rachetées*] by the divine Word, incarnate and bruised, so that we may be led, with all others, to become children of God.”<sup>13</sup> This synthesizing and reconciling mission is the duty above all of Christians, whose role “is not, essentially, to combat enemies; it is, always, to illumine obscure truths and to constitute an order of self-sacrifice [*dévouement*], of union and of peace.”<sup>14</sup>

In this final contribution to the *Semaines Sociales*, Blondel thus pursues his critique of Marxist materialism more explicitly than before, defending the mental and spiritual dimensions of human life in response to Marxist ideology’s expanding power in both East and West. Yet remarkable theoretical continuity is evident with his first paper delivered almost four decades earlier in Bordeaux, founded on his defence of a spiritual dimension to material human life grounded in continuity from grace to nature.

11. Blondel, “Patrie et humanité,” 385–93.

12. Maurice Blondel, “La conception de l’ordre social,” in *Le Catholicisme social face au grands courants contemporains* (Lyons: Chronique sociale de France, 1948), 215–29 (221).

13. Blondel, “La conception de l’ordre social,” 226 (my translation).

14. Blondel, “La conception de l’ordre social,” 227 (my translation).

### Fighting for Peace

Eight years earlier, as the Second World War was breaking out, Blondel had published an impassioned philosophical analysis of the international situation and a critique of totalitarianism that drew explicitly on scholastic natural law tradition. The totalitarian state is founded, he here protests, on the notion of the “compact unity of a people forming in its totality a unique being, a Leviathan.”<sup>15</sup> This reference to Hobbesian liberalism highlights that Blondel holds both totalitarian *and* liberal regimes responsible for the outbreak of war.<sup>16</sup> Latent within liberal regimes, he argues, are conflict and absolutism which undermine peaceful polity and are a result of extreme liberalism’s exaltation of purely material values. The pursuit of such values allows the appearance of peace to be presented to the citizens of the liberal state, but peace can never be merely the absence of war. Instead, to attain stable and lasting peace it is necessary to “recognize, respect and foster the spiritual and transcendent character of the social bond and of the final point from which is suspended the natural and peaceful development of humanity in its unity and in all its communities.”<sup>17</sup>

Especially striking is the resonance of Blondel’s analysis of this historic confrontation with his evaluation of the absolute opposition between action and nihilism in *L’Action*, where the mutual contradiction of action and nihilism provides the dynamic that propels his negative dialectic outward and upward through the rest of the thesis. At every stage the choice is between unity and dissociation, truth and falsehood, being and nothingness. He affirms in *L’Action*: “To posit nothingness is to affirm in a single stroke this entire system of co-ordinates; to deny one of the terms is, by an inescapable compensation, to put forward the other.”<sup>18</sup> He states of the conflict of 1939:

It is in no way simply accidental, contingent [*passager*]; it does not result from a simple misunderstanding or from competing short-term interests, neither from political ideology, as would an antipathy between democracies and autocracies; it is the effect of a contradiction that is fundamental and also ontological between—a total *negation* which excludes, under its false label of totalitarianism, everything which, in humanity, is specifically spiritual, other-regarding [*charité*] and transcendently destined, and—an

15. Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation et philosophie de la paix* (Paris: Flammarion, 1939), 43 (my translation). For commentary see Claude Troisfontaines, “Conditions et exigences d’une paix véritable selon Maurice Blondel” and Mario Quaranta, “Maurice Blondel: la pensée chrétienne au-delà du totalitarisme,” in *La philosophie et la paix*, ed. Walter Tega (2 vols.; Paris: Vrin, 2002), vol. I, 443–7; vol. II, 903–906.

16. Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation*, 84–92.

17. Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation*, 98 (my translation).

18. Blondel, *Action*, §§ 38; 50.



*affirmation* that is truly whole, unifying and ordering all values beginning from the most humble natural conditions for human life, to bind together all stages of scientific and social progress, up to the summit of the spiritual edifice and of the religious life which consecrates, stabilizes and animates the entire movement destined for this living ascension.<sup>19</sup>

The conflict is thus seen in dramatic terms not as liberalism versus totalitarianism, but as being between materialist-immanentist ideology and a view of life which is genuinely totalizing and synthesizing in a lifting-up (*sursum*) of the world to God. Intrinsic to this truly totalizing vision of the world are personal decision and spiritual eschatology, both of which sit uneasily with the collectivism and immanentism of Marxist soteriology.

### Pierre Teilhard de Chardin

Blondel was introduced to Teilhard in December 1919 by their mutual friend Auguste Valensin. In France, priests and members of religious orders had not been exempted from the military draft, and Teilhard had therefore not long been demobilized from his role as a stretcher-bearer in the previous war. During the course of the month, Blondel reviewed a selection of Teilhard's papers and the two engaged in correspondence about them. The results of this exchange and Teilhard's subsequent interest in Blondel's work are evident in Teilhard's developing philosophical theology in ways that, I have argued elsewhere, have usually gone unacknowledged.<sup>20</sup> Teilhard affirms, alluding to Blondel, that the philosophy of action permits a more convincing analysis of reality than a philosophy concerned solely with intelligible forms.<sup>21</sup> Blondel for his part describes how, in human action, the "deliberate and willed act naturalizes the absolute in the relative itself." In any action that is truly voluntary, he states, a "secret nuptial takes place between the human will and the divine will" which amounts to a "synthesis of humanity and God."<sup>22</sup> The human soul thus enjoys a spiritual communion with God derived from God's creative power in which human action shares.

Teilhard's theory of action and passion developed in *The Divine Milieu*, his most important theological work, is fundamentally dependent on Blondel's philosophy of action. Teilhard states of action, with God in

19. Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation*, 179 (my translation; original emphasis).

20. David Grumett, *Teilhard de Chardin: Theology, Humanity and Cosmos* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 52–68.

21. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, "The Mysticism of Science" (1939), in *Human Energy* (London: Collins, 1969), 167; "Action and Activation" (1945), in *Science and Christ* (London: Collins, 1968), 176.

22. Blondel, *Action*, §§367, 371; 339, 342–3.

mind, that it “requires no less than the pull of what we call the Absolute—no less than you yourself—to set in motion the frail liberty which you have given us.”<sup>23</sup> He later declares:

In action, first of all, I adhere to the creative power of God; I coincide with it; I become not only its instrument but its living extension. And as there is nothing more personal in beings than their will, I merge myself, in a sense, through my heart, with the very heart of God. This contact is continuous because I am always acting.<sup>24</sup>

Echoing Blondel’s imagery just referred to of action as a marriage, Teilhard declares that in this state of communion the soul is “wedded [*sic*] to a creative effort” [original emphasis]. Here is a truly liberating view of action, not as a choice between preordained alternative options but as a moment of assent to *the* option of faithful participation in divine action. Teilhard wishes to open to readers in just this way new vistas in understanding how their everyday life is a collaboration with divine activity.

*The Divine Milieu* is primarily a treatise about the spiritual life of the individual in relation with God. From the early 1930s, however, Teilhard begins to reflect more on the effects of human action in the various intermediate spheres between the individual human actor and God. He states:

In order to become explicit...our consciousness, rising above the growing (but still much too limited) circles of family, country and race, shall finally discover that the *only truly natural and real human unity* is the spirit of the earth.<sup>25</sup>

Blondel affirms in strikingly similar terms:

In acting, the person does not limit their outlook to the family, to the city, to humanity. They project their intention still further. As the Stoics said quite rightly, they insert themselves into the universe as a whole.<sup>26</sup>

This sketch encapsulates the structure of the middle part of *L’Action*, which comprises a detailed examination of the phenomenology of action in the progressively expanding stages of sense intuition, consciousness, will, individual action and collective action.<sup>27</sup> Teilhard shares this awareness of the dependence of the soul on the wider cosmos of which the soul forms

23. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2004), 13.

24. Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu*, 21.

25. Teilhard de Chardin, “The Spirit of the Earth” (1931), in *Human Energy*, 32; original emphasis.

26. *Action*, §279; 263.

27. *Action*, §§43–322; 54–299.

a part in his concept of the spirit of the earth, which he stated to Bruno de Solages is “singularly related to the Blondelian metaphysics of action.”<sup>28</sup>

Thus far, the convergence of Teilhard with Blondel is clearly revealed in their common understanding of the divine–human relation in action and the intrinsic function of intermediate spheres of human community and association. Yet two areas of tension can be identified. The first is the relation between action and suffering. Blondel, in his first paper to Teilhard, critically comments of the essays of Teilhard’s that he has received via Valensin:

We have to give up the whole of creation for the precious Pearl, to die in the world to be nourished by a new life. Hence the dark night which the soul must cross, without a smooth transit from matter to spirit... The test, renunciation and abnegation are not necessary for the sake of penitence alone; they are essential in light of humankind’s (and through humankind, the universe’s) destiny to attain deification.<sup>29</sup>

Teilhard has frequently been charged with failing to give a satisfactory theological account of suffering and Blondel is his earliest critic on this point.<sup>30</sup> Teilhard nevertheless makes clear in his response to Blondel his fundamental agreement with the latter’s position: that the “completion of the world is only consummated through a death, a ‘night,’ a reversal, an ex-centration, and a quasi-depersonalisation of the monads.”<sup>31</sup> Teilhard in fact gives suffering—or as he calls it, passivity—greater prominence by the time of writing *The Divine Milieu* than Blondel affords it in *L’Action*. Suffering provides the topic of the book’s whole second section, following the first on action, and is described as “immeasurably the wider and the deeper part” of human life.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, although Blondel accounts for suffering existentially, he does not normally construe it in an explicitly christological context. In *The Divine Milieu*, by contrast, Teilhard considers the transfiguration of death, which encompasses both “partial” deaths and final physical death, as possible only in the passion of Christ, which alone enables the transition of the soul to new life. Here then is an affirmation of a personal struggle also found in Marxist analyses of class conflict and liberationist analyses of reflective praxis emerging in conditions of grinding poverty.

28. Quoted in Henri de Lubac, “The Contribution of Teilhard to the Knowledge of God,” in *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1996), 548.

29. Paper of 5 December 1919, in *Pierre Teilhard de Chardin—Maurice Blondel: Correspondence* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1976), 26.

30. E.g. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions* (London: SCM Press, 1990), 294.

31. Teilhard de Chardin, paper of 12 December 1919, in *Teilhard–Blondel: Correspondence*, 31.

32. Teilhard de Chardin, *Divine Milieu*, 36.

What is equally clear, however, is that Teilhard is affirming in Blondelian terms the subjective dimension of struggle and not the necessity or desirability of objective conflict between groups or individuals in society.

The second area of tension between Teilhard and Blondel concerns the different values each attaches to the material results of action. These differences are evident in their correspondence exchanged during 1919, when Teilhard writes to Blondel to justify his assessment of action's concrete products. Teilhard states:

I do not attribute a definitive or absolute value to the various constructions which humankind is led to establish through its struggle with the natural order. I believe they will disappear, recast into a totally new, unimaginably plane of existence. But I hold that they play a provisional and essential role—being irreplaceable, unavoidable *phases* we must go through (we or the species) in the course of our metamorphosis.<sup>33</sup>

Teilhard is here challenging, albeit apologetically, the devaluation of the material results of action with which Blondel seems to sympathize in his more abstract writings. The changes which action effects in nature, Blondel tends to suggest in his philosophical works, possess no absolute value, forming instead necessary and inevitable stages in a progression towards a final spiritual consummation. Teilhard embraces in contrast a more abiding concern with material life, asserting that:

Human action can be related to Christ, and can co-operate in the fulfilment of Christ, not only by the intention, the fidelity, and the obedience in which—as an addition—it is clothed, but also by the actual *material content* of the work done.<sup>34</sup>

It is clearly not the case that Blondel depreciates the social and political results of action. What is at issue is instead whether these results and the processes leading to them are ultimately conceived as spiritual or material. Blondel envisions the substantial bond of action as issuing in a spiritual bond of *love*. Teilhard, who also regards love as an essential unifying power, nevertheless places greater emphasis on its material effects, insisting that spirit organizes matter rather than annihilating it, and that spirit remains always dependent on matter.<sup>35</sup> Teilhard, ever the good materialist, clearly perceives the importance of technology for historical and social change and thus marks a significant step towards a theology of social and economic liberation.

33. Teilhard de Chardin, paper of 12 December 1919, in *Teilhard–Blondel: Correspondence*, 34; original emphasis.

34. Teilhard de Chardin, “Note on the Universal Christ” (1920), in *Science and Christ*, 17; original emphasis.

35. Grumett, *Teilhard*, 13–36.

### Yves de Montcheuil

Blondel's philosophy of action made an equally decisive impact on the spiritual resistance of French Catholics to Nazi occupation and collaboration via the work of Yves de Montcheuil, whom Étienne Foullieux describes as "one of the first and the principal propagators of Blondelian thought within francophone catholic circles."<sup>36</sup> De Montcheuil had told Blondel, in a letter written while still in the early stages of producing his thesis on Malebranche, that his philosophy of action "has a significant place in the conception of the interior life that I am little by little constructing."<sup>37</sup> It seems clear that Blondel's oeuvre challenged de Montcheuil to translate the Cartesian debates surrounding the concept of disinterested love, on which the thesis focused, into terms with real-life consequences three centuries later.<sup>38</sup>

In 1934, the year in which de Montcheuil was awarded his doctorate, he collaborated with Auguste Valensin to produce a collection of extracts from Blondel's *L'Action*.<sup>39</sup> He arranges these extracts in order to identify five key stages in the progressive development of the philosophy of action: the nature and necessity of the moral problem; the realization that action is the only legitimate human response to this problem; the social consequences of action; the demands of fidelity to one's action, and to God as its absolute sustaining principle; and the social bonds by which action establishes society, politics, the *patrie*, and the entire human community. The Jesuit Superior General Wlodimir Ledochowski sought to veto the book's publication notwithstanding the positive verdict delivered by its *réviseurs*, but was too late to do so because publication was already in progress by the time he intervened. He instructed, however, that no second edition be permitted.<sup>40</sup>

Early in the summer of 1938, de Montcheuil travelled to Jersey with the intention of revising his Malebranche thesis for publication. Following two months' work he however decided that he could no longer continue with the project, and returned to Paris. Reflecting on the reasons for his departure from Jersey, he states that he became unable to proceed with his

36. Étienne Foullieux, *Yves de Montcheuil: philosophe et théologien jésuite (1900–1944)* (Paris: Médiasèvres, 1995), 20.

37. Yves de Montcheuil, letter of 25 February 1931, reproduced in Foullieux, *De Montcheuil*, 67–8.

38. For details, see Grumett, "Yves de Montcheuil: Action, Justice and the Kingdom in Spiritual Resistance to Nazism," *Theological Studies* 68.3 (2007): 618–41.

39. Auguste Valensin and Yves de Montcheuil, *Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Gabalda, 1934).

40. Antonio Russo, "Yves de Montcheuil et Maurice Blondel," in *Blondel entre "L'Action" et la "Trilogie": Actes du colloque internationale sur les écrits intermédiaires de Maurice Blondel* (Brussels: Lessius, 2003), 125–39 (137–8).

writing in the midst of the escalating European political crisis. In Paris, his writing and teaching assumed a more overtly social and political character, being intended to exhort Christians to live out the implications of their faith in troubled times, and to support them pastorally in so doing.

This clearer religious focus is identifiable in a second edited collection of Blondel's oeuvre published in 1942, the year of Ledochowski's death. The new volume incorporated a wider range of sources than the 1934 edition, but its principal trajectory lay in de Montcheuil's clearer insistence on the specifically *theological* character of action. As de Lubac confirms, de Montcheuil's fidelity to Blondel was creative and constructive and not mere repetition, entering with "free assurance into open paths through the philosophy of Action."<sup>41</sup> De Montcheuil now inverts the terms of Blondel's argument, which were from action to God, wishing no longer to demonstrate the necessity of divine activity to human actors, but the obligation to action placed on the people of God. Blondel's material is now organized in four sections: the necessity of the religious problem and the insufficiency of attempted naturalist solutions; the truly religious life and its conditions; religious knowledge; and religious action. De Montcheuil prefaces the collection with an introductory essay in which he offers a detailed interpretation of Blondel's oeuvre, with several continuing themes from his thesis identifiable, above all the centrality of the will in moral action.<sup>42</sup> The significance of action is here seen to lie in the translation between hypothetical and real faith which it effects: "All the relations posited become, as it were, hypothetically real. *Thought* ends become *real* ends: conditions which have been shown to be necessary in order to attain them thus become obligatory means [*moyens*]."<sup>43</sup>

Blondel enthused to de Lubac his great approval of de Montcheuil's exposition of his work, noting the "penetration and the tenacity of his commentaries on my thought, on which he reflected with so much perseverance and progressive understanding," which "have in the end helped me to understand more myself about the philosophy of action."<sup>44</sup> De Montcheuil's appropriation of Blondel is significant because it situates action within an explicitly ecclesial and theological framework rather than using the philosophy of action itself to establish the necessity of the spiritual realm. His studies are located, moreover, in the clear context of

41. Henri de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism: Memories from 1940–1944* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 239.

42. Yves de Montcheuil, *Pages religieuses* (Paris: Aubier, 1942), 12–15.

43. De Montcheuil, *Pages religieuses*, 28; original emphasis.

44. Letter of 10 March 1948 in Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned his Writings*, trans. Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius, 1993), 320–21.

collective liberation from tyrannical political power: an orientation that reveals obvious continuities from de Montcheuil to liberation theology in Latin America.

### Henri de Lubac

A relatively unknown episode in de Lubac's remarkable theological career is his key role in November 1941 in founding and subsequently editing the underground *Cahiers du témoignage Chrétien*. The *Cahiers* became a principal means of disseminating reliable facts about the occupation and Nazi genocide elsewhere, encouraging and exhorting the French people, and providing accurate versions of papal pronouncements, which were heavily censored in newspapers if they appeared at all. As the occupation progressed, de Lubac came under suspicion and worked with increasing care, fearing arrest or entrapment: collecting manuscripts from the houses of people who had fled; meeting with his colleague Pierre Chaillet, who was himself in hiding; and editing and proofreading each *Cahier*. On one occasion de Lubac narrowly escaped arrest by the Gestapo after receiving a warning that a round-up was imminent.<sup>45</sup>

This work was an active apostolate in the Blondelian tradition. But even more significantly, it formed part of a concerted attempt to involve the whole of the body of the church in resistance to tyranny and in the promotion of justice. Just as a stable and effective state required freedom for personal initiative and the bonds of action which exist between free individuals in order to sustain it, so the church, if it was to mount an effective witness, needed the commitment and active involvement of the whole body of the people. In times as dark as these, social witness had to be a lay initiative and could not be left solely to clergy.

This highly politicized ecclesiology shaped new understandings of lay participation in church mission in the aftermath of the war, and re-emerged, in adapted form, in the Vatican II ecclesiology of *Lumen gentium*. So far as political action is concerned, the document teaches for instance that it is the particular office of the laity to "seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according to the plan of God."<sup>46</sup> The importance of this active life for the whole body of the church can be seen in de Lubac's renewed understanding of the place of the laity within it, developed as part of his eucharistic theology.<sup>47</sup> In his ground-

45. de Lubac, *Christian Resistance to Anti-Semitism*, 126–7.

46. "Lumen gentium" §31 in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. N. P. Tanner (2 vols.; London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), vol. II, 875.

47. Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, trans. Gemma Simmonds (London: SCM Press, 2006).



breaking work *Corpus Mysticum*, de Lubac famously sought to refocus the reference of the term “mystical body,” arguing that it should be used to refer not to the eucharistic host in isolation but to the whole church as well. The term “mystical body” had originated, he argues, as an attempt to *distinguish* the eucharistic body of Christ from the actual historical body of Jesus, rather than to equate the two. It had never, in other words, been intended to introduce a separation between the clergy, as ministers of the eucharist, and the people as its recipients. The reverse intention had, if anything, been the original one: by guarding against the superstitions likely to develop around the host if regarded as part of the biological body of Jesus of Nazareth, the concept of the mystical body would in fact root the eucharist more realistically in the church community.<sup>48</sup>

The theoretical roots of this reconception of the action-contemplation relation lie in de Lubac’s appropriation of Blondel, whom he names in a late work as the source of the primary impulse for his own return to a more authentic tradition of the supernatural.<sup>49</sup> Fundamental for both thinkers is an awareness that concrete, practical activity is necessarily sustained by a power existing beyond the material context in which action occurs. De Lubac quotes Blondel’s affirmation that the supernatural

is not an arbitrary “something extra,” a form extrinsic to humanity... It is an adoption, an assimilation, an incorporation, a consortium, a transformation which, through the bond of charity, insures both the union and the distinction of two incommensurables... [not] a sort of distinct being, a receptacle into which we are to be absorbed, emptying us of our human nature; it is on the contrary intended to be in us, *in nobis*, without ever being on that account something coming from us, *ex nobis*.<sup>50</sup>

This description of supernatural action suggests, like the Augustinian *in nobis ex nobis* motif of God acting “in us, without us,” the complementarity in humanity of nature and grace. Such Blondelian motifs pervade the concluding chapters of de Lubac’s *Catholicism* in its many references to intention, the Absolute, concrete action, personality and universality, interior life, the one and the many, the gift, ascent and descent.<sup>51</sup> Their source there remains unidentified, however, as in de Lubac’s other works

48. David Grumett, *Henri de Lubac: A Guide for the Perplexed* (New York and London: T&T Clark, 2007), 56–63.

49. Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1984), 37.

50. de Lubac, *Brief Catechesis*, 48; citing *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1950), 58, 162.

51. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988), 326–66. See Antonio Russo, *Henri de Lubac: teologia e dogma nella storia: l'influsso di Blondel* (Rome: Studium, 1990), 237–74.



of this period, owing to the theological sensitivities surrounding Blondel's oeuvre. Yet, as with purely aesthetic or scientific accounts of action in Blondel's eponymous work, so with pure nature in *Surnaturel*: both are delusions because humanity cannot exist independently of the Absolute (Blondel) or the Supernatural (de Lubac).

### Gustavo Gutiérrez, Leonardo Boff, Juan Luis Segundo

The preceding observations of the different impacts made by Blondel on the theologies of Teilhard, de Montcheuil and de Lubac enable a trajectory to be traced between a radicalized Blondelian social catholicism and emerging liberation theology. This movement, or rather collection of movements, possesses its own theological dynamic and is far from being founded on secular Marxist ideology. As Jürgen Moltmann acknowledges, liberation theology frequently appropriates Blondel's theology of action and his concern for the material dimension of human life, whether directly or indirectly.<sup>52</sup>

Gustavo Gutiérrez assimilated Blondelian insights while undertaking his "theological grand tour" of Europe during the 1950s prior to ordination, which included periods of residence in Louvain and Lyons.<sup>53</sup> In his seminal *Theology of Liberation*, the Peruvian Dominican priest identifies Blondel's conception of philosophy as critical reflection on action, as well as his associated discovery of the "historical and existential viewpoint" [original emphasis] of the concrete situation as a "transnatural" state, as inspirational to his own new apologetics defining theology as critical reflection on praxis. He describes Blondel as "one of the most important thinkers of contemporary theology, including the most recent trends."<sup>54</sup> Juan-Carlos Scannone has argued that Blondel completes and perfects the theology of Gutiérrez, particularly through his distinction between immanent and transcendent causes, which respects not only human freedom but divine gratuity and transcendence as well.<sup>55</sup> Yet, as Scannone also suggests, Gutiérrez's own analysis moves in a Blondelian direction in his later work. In the revised 1988 edition of *Theology of Liberation*, a strident chapter pro-

52. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (London: SCM Press, 2000), 238.

53. Robert McAfee Brown, *Gustavo Gutiérrez: An Introduction to Liberation Theology* (Maryland, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 25.

54. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, rev. edn (London: SCM Press, 1988), 7–8, 44–5.

55. Juan-Carlos Scannone, "La Philosophie sociale de Blondel et la théologie de la libération selon Gustavo Gutiérrez: convergences, divergences, apports," in *Blondel*, ed. Leclerc, 398.

claiming Marxist class struggle is replaced by a description of the progress towards unity and universal love made possible by building community through faithful action in a fragmented world.<sup>56</sup> Blondel himself states in his essay “The Elementary Principle of a Logic of the Moral Life” that, contra Levinas, the idea of the “other” is inadequate because contrariety is founded on a more fundamental synthetic movement of the will, which he there calls the “subjective determination of our activity.”<sup>57</sup>

Blondel’s voluntarism was especially apparent in the thought of Juan Luis Segundo. Central to the Uruguayan Jesuit’s theological anthropology was a preference for will above intellect in accounting for human knowledge of God. Frances Stefano cautions against overstating the degree of direct influence from Blondel, pointing to the wide range of other sources on which Segundo draws. Yet, as Stefano herself notes, for Segundo the “reflective functions of the intellect are incorporated into the essential structure of human willing, a fact which, as Blondel was intent on demonstrating, shows up existentially and epistemologically in life and praxis as the superiority of action over consciousness and cognition.”<sup>58</sup> In another context, the Brazilian former priest Leonardo Boff develops Blondel’s concept of the bond to argue for the connection of not only all humans but the whole of life in a specifically christological and eucharistic vision in his ecological preference for the poor.<sup>59</sup>

Proper appreciation of the Blondelian current within liberation theology demonstrates that the latter does not, fortunately, rest solely on the coherence or theological content of Marxism. It would be possible to favour, following Pascal Ide, a Marxist notion of liberation over that presented by Blondel on the supposition that, from Marx’s perspective, humanity is revealed in the poor, whereas Blondel presents an elitist model of human flourishing defined by the capacity for philosophical speculation.<sup>60</sup> Such a distinction would be too easy, however: part of Blondel’s desire is to defend the view that all individuals are persons—in the fullest sense of that word—capable of meaningful thought and existential reflection, as

56. Gutiérrez, “Faith and Social Conflict,” in *Theology of Liberation*, 245–52; cf. Gustavo Gutiérrez, “Christian Brotherhood and Class Struggle,” in *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 272–9.

57. Maurice Blondel, “The Elementary Principle of a Logic of the Moral Life,” in *The Idealist Illusion and Other Essays* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000), 95–113 (99).

58. Frances Stefano, *The Absolute Value of Human Action in the Theology of Juan Luis Segundo* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1992), xxviii–ix.

59. Leonardo Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 183–4.

60. Pascal Ide, “Joseph Wreninski et Maurice Blondel: quelques choix anthropologiques,” in *Blondel*, ed. Leclerc, 423–33.

portrayed for instance by members of the Raskólnikov family living in the slums of St Petersburg in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Blondel's philosophical approach to action is not elitist, but addresses a fundamental dimension of human life and activity. Gutiérrez himself indeed mounts a sustained defence of the place of reflection in liberation in his introduction to the revised edition of *Theology and Liberation*: poor people inhabit, like anybody else, a complex world, and are capable of concrete knowledge of that world, of dialogue and prayer, and thus of individual spontaneous action.<sup>61</sup>

### John McNeill

A particularly striking example of Blondelian thought in action is to be found in John McNeill's progression from producing his seminal study of the roots of Blondel's philosophy of action in a critique of German Idealism to his pioneering and controversial work for gay liberation.<sup>62</sup> In his autobiography, McNeill testifies in Blondelian terms to the necessity of discovering and integrating an authentic self in order to become unified with God. He seeks in particular to establish the principle that subjective freedom does not imply situational relativism and the absence of all norms.<sup>63</sup> Rather, the mutuality of relation between a person's interior volition, their community, and universal values, which Blondel's philosophy of action presents, forces reevaluation of how a diversity of concrete practices might coexist in a universe governed by a single set of positive moral principles. Blondel insists on the necessity of diversity for stable human community in his political writings, and moral diversity is likely to be one aspect of this. Yet he is equally determined to oppose moral nihilism, which includes "unscrupulous passion for pleasures, attachment to the life of the senses, an ardent search for well-being, levity in seriousness and gravity in the frivolous, contempt for humankind and exaltation of myself."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, the "will for nothingness" in which this dilettantism consists is a key target of *L'Action*, where it is shown to be "necessarily incoherent" because it "harbours within itself a struggle wherein it cannot

61. Gutiérrez, "Expanding the Horizons," in *Theology of Liberation* (rev. edn, 1988), 20–31.

62. John McNeill, *The Blondelian Synthesis: A Study of the Influence of German Philosophical Sources on the Formation of Blondel's Method and Thought* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966).

63. John McNeill, *Feet Firmly Planted in Mid Air: The Spiritual Journey of John McNeill* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1998), 63–4.

64. *Action*, §§ 32; 44.

succumb.” The will abides but so therefore does the absolute, “veiled perhaps but present.”<sup>65</sup>

Blondel like McNeill also situates action within an ecclesial context, most obviously in his 1904 study *History and Dogma*. The importance of action for the church is that it enables the transmission of truths and practices in non-textual and non-rational forms. This active transmission, otherwise known as tradition, becomes an “autonomous principle of discernment in the total experience of the Church” and possesses as such normative authority.<sup>66</sup> It cannot of course be denied that the relation of these two sources of action, collective and traditional on the one hand, and individual and conscientious on the other, generates numerous moral questions and problems. Moreover, within the specific context of human relationships and even in his comparatively abstract *L'Action*, Blondel appears to attach normative value to biological generation: a new life is born out of a unity as a “pledge of irreparable and indivisible union” which nevertheless testifies that the “will always seems to surpass itself” in that “action which seems at every instant the end and perfection of a world, but which is always the origin of a new world.”<sup>67</sup> The question of what Blondel would have thought of McNeill’s trajectory from his work is therefore difficult to answer, and itself anachronistic. Biological generation is not central to Blondel’s vision, and it seems possible that the new third life of which he speaks when two becomes one can be manifested in a diversity of forms.

### Conclusion: Blondel, Liberation and Spiritual Action

Blondel intended to complete his trilogy *Philosophie et l'esprit chrétien* with a systematic exposition of the social and political implications of his philosophy of action which would have incorporated some earlier material, including the 1928 essay «Patrie et humanité.”<sup>68</sup> He did not live to complete this work, however, dying in 1949. The fragmentary sketch I have provided in this article therefore provides the fullest available account of his systematic understanding of political, social and economic ethics. Blondel leaves us less certain of his likely response to questions in personal ethics, particularly those which have become prominent since the

65. *Action*, §§38–39; 49–50.

66. Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), 274.

67. *Action*, §§ 258; 245. See Leo-Paul Bordeleau, “L’union conjugale et familiale,” in *Action et vie sociale dans l’oeuvre de Maurice Blondel* (Ottawa: Editions de l’Université d’Ottawa, 1978), 141–8.

68. As stated in Blondel, *Lutte pour la civilisation*, 215–16.

1960s such as wealth inequality, issues surrounding gender and sexuality, and abortion.

Blondel's reluctance to develop a concrete ethical manifesto is understandable: his principal aim is to address the transcendental question of the condition of the possibility of ethical action and not to develop detailed moral guidelines.<sup>69</sup> Moreover, his view that in any genuine action a "secret nuptial" occurs between humanity and God reminds us that moral decision-making contains a stubbornly private element which remains, in human terms, the sole preserve of the individual and for which only he or she is ultimately able to account. In this perspective, an ethics of detailed norms would resemble a new variety of extrinsicism similar to the ones which Blondel sought during his life consistently to oppose. He does nevertheless challenge all agents to accept the moral context of their actions and therefore to be ready to give a consistent account of how their willing and acting can be situated within a single, unified and interconnected moral universe. Yet within this whole, the consequence of his vision is likely to be a greater acceptance of the equivocality of moral concepts in contrast with univocal understandings. The essence of moral theology in its full complexity inheres not in abstract prescriptions which can be applied to every particular concrete situation, but in the actual lived practice of moral agents who themselves preserve and transmit the possibility, content and complexity of moral action.

Blondel's philosophy of action can be read with differing emphases. On the one hand, it announces a radical freedom (*liberté radicale*) which emerges from interior reflection and its judging and personalizing capacities.<sup>70</sup> This is especially apparent in the work of John McNeill, and generally prominent in Blondel's political theology. Nevertheless, his depiction of all human action as situated within a network of wider relations, which acquires as such some form of normative value, might be considered to urge a more conformist personal ethic. It suggests at the very least a culturally-rooted basis for moral action—but one which is nevertheless open to the transformation that action itself inaugurates. Sante Babolin states: "In the departure (*l'exode*) of action, one can perceive a cultural furrow (*un sillon culturel*), a philosophy of culture rooted in human nature but also open to the transcultural aspirations of all humanity, which lives

69. Peter Reifenberg, "La Logique de l'action humaine: les perspectives ouvertes par Maurice Blondel sur la réalité comme fondement de la réflexion éthique," in *Penser l'être de l'action: la métaphysique du "dernier" Blondel*, ed. Emmanuel Tourpe (Louvain: Peeters, 2000), 331.

70. Pierre de Cointet, *Maurice Blondel: un réalisme spirituel* (Toulouse: Carmel; Saint-Maur: Paroles et Silence, 2000), 172–5.

in this world but does not belong to this world here below.”<sup>71</sup> Action will thus inevitably be rooted in cultural particularity, yet equally be directed towards a universal value which exceeds that particularity. Moreover, for Blondel contra Marx, the spontaneity of efficient causes is due to the human cooperation with divine action made possible by human submission to divine will.<sup>72</sup> Action will therefore be not so much *against* injustice as *for* justice in its fullest form, “no longer oriented towards the world but towards the principle of all things.” He states: “We have been required to search right up to the source, right up to the perfect type of pure Action, for liberation, for the paradigm, for the inspiration of that which alone deserves to be called action in the fullest sense of the term.”<sup>73</sup>

Blondel thus provides posterity not with a definitive resolution of the perennial themes around which he constructs his philosophy, such as the tension between unity and diversity, but with ways of thinking through these themes: whether Teilhard’s spirituality of action, de Montcheuil’s activism of faith, de Lubac’s reformed ecclesiology, the various materialist voluntarisms of Latin American theologians, or McNeill’s theology of personal liberation. Yet this paper has identified several debates within Blondel’s philosophy of action and among its theological inheritors concerning the nature of liberation: the relation of action to suffering; the status of action’s material products; whether or not action requires a prior religious or ecclesial setting; action’s relation to contemplation; possibilities for collective action rather than individual action; tensions between conscientious action and traditional practice, and diversity versus conformity; as well as shifts in Blondel’s own understanding of the place of the nation in global society. What is clear, however, is that a wide range of liberation theologies have origins in particular readings of Blondel’s philosophy of action, and that many of the debates between them continue to be framed in Blondelian terms.

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71. Sante Babolin, “De *L’Action* à la culture,” in *L’Action: une dialectique du salut*, ed. Marie-Jeanne Coutagne (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), 133–44 (my translation).

72. Maurice Blondel, *L’Action I: Le Problème des causes secondes et le pur agir* (Paris: Alcan, 1936), 265.

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