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Before and After Blondel:
Scripture, Tradition and the Problem of Representation in Modern Catholicism

A DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines the development of the notion of tradition in modern Catholicism, its relationship to the modern problem of representation, and Maurice Blondel’s role and contribution to the development of tradition’s history. It contends that Blondel’s notion of tradition provides modern Catholicism with a new framework within which it is able to attend to the competing claims of reason, as it has been transformed by modernity, and revelation, in the unwavering and particular claims it makes upon humanity. After tracing the late-medieval shifts in the notion of God’s power, ecclesial power, and political power and how these shifts created the conceptual climate for the idea of tradition in modern Catholicism to become less an expression of God’s presence embodied in the liturgical practice of the church and more a procedural and institutional reality, the dissertation introduces Blondel’s thought to the development of the notion of tradition, by examining the speculative and conceptual context of his idea of tradition in his philosophy of action. Drawing on the philosophical resources of Blondel’s account of action and the key role it allots to “liturgical action,” the dissertation also describes and analyzes his notion of tradition in the text History and Dogma.

The final and constructive part of the dissertation examines the import of Blondel’s idea of tradition for contemporary philosophical and theological debates about the modern understanding of history in the development of Christian doctrine, as well as
the philosophical debates surrounding the practice of modern hermeneutics outside of Catholicism. This part of the dissertation argues that Blondel’s theory of tradition envisions tradition as a “sacramental” representation of God’s presence, which shows human understanding how God’s revelation is represented in history through the liturgical action of the church. Tradition calls the church to discover God’s presence in human history not merely as facts and linear phenomena or as a social and cultural reality, but as the event of salvation. It is in its ability to discern the spiritual dimension of history that Blondel’s notion of tradition makes its most important contribution to modern Catholicism.
This dissertation by Robert C. Koerpel fulfills the dissertation requirement for the
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Chad C. Pecknold, Ph.D., and John Galvin, Dr. Theol., as Readers.

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LA *L’Action: Essai d’une critique de la vie et d’une science de la pratique.* (Paris: Alcan, 1893). There are at least two versions of *L’Action* published by Blondel. The first version was published in 1893 after his doctoral defense at the Sorbonne. The second version was published as two volumes in 1936 and 1937 as part of Blondel’s trilogy on thought, being and action. All references in this dissertation are to the English translation *L’Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).


INTRODUCTION

“It was the destiny of the nineteenth century to call for a new precision in the idea of tradition.”¹ Behind Yves Congar’s lapidary statement concerning the idea of tradition resides a conceptual and theological history (much of which Congar himself catalogues), which this dissertation seeks to understand and advance by exploring the role and contribution of the French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) to the history and development of the idea of tradition in modern Catholicism.

Blondel’s fundamental influence on modern Catholicism is ostensible. His presence lurks behind the thought of such diverse mid-twentieth century Catholic thinkers as Congar, Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Hans Urs von Balthasar, John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Yet, despite the import of his thought for modern Catholic thinking, his significance for post-conciliar, contemporary theology remains to be adequately assessed by the English-speaking world. His influence today, when it is felt, is primarily in the area of philosophical and theological anthropology, where his philosophy of action provides a new way of thinking about humanity’s relationship to God in the modern world.² This dissertation, however, contends that Blondel’s notion of tradition provides modern and contemporary Catholicism with a new horizon from which it is able to attend


² For example, see the use made of Blondel’s thought by John Milbank, Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1993) and Adam English, The Possibility of Christian Philosophy: Maurice Blondel at the Intersection of Theology and Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2007).
to the competing claims of reason, as it has been transformed by modernity, and revelation, in the unwavering and particular claims it makes upon humanity. It suggests that in this area of Blondel’s thought, modern and contemporary Catholicism discovers the “new precision,” as it were, which allows tradition to re-present God’s truth in human history through Christ and his church. Indeed, Blondel’s thought illuminates the sacramental significance of tradition in the economy of revelation. In the Blondelian horizon, tradition is, along with Scripture, as the Second Vatican Council puts it, “a mirror, in which the Church, during its pilgrim journey here on earth, contemplates God.”¹

The first part of the dissertation discusses both the broader and the more immediate historical, philosophical, and theological contexts out of which Blondel’s notion of tradition and the two extreme positions he criticizes emerge. Blondel wrote at a time when, as a result of the epistemological shifts in western thought, the historical and exegetical methods of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had become unmoored from their traditional anchors in theology and apologetics. The decisive transformation western thought underwent during the modern period had raised considerable questions about Scripture’s and tradition’s ability to re-present revealed truth in human history.²


² The reader needs to aware that I am proposing an interpretation of a cultural shift in western thought and how that shift has effected tradition’s and Scripture’s ability to represent God’s revelation in human history. I am not entering into the philosophical debates surrounding representation theory.
With this speculative context of Blondel’s idea of tradition in mind, the first chapter explores the problem of representation as an epistemological question of the self and the self’s ability to understand the objects of his experience. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the self becomes estranged from the natural world and is required to construct a representational view of the world in order to render it intelligible. As the problem of representation is resituated within the self, the question of truth is conceived less in terms of the self’s participation in the created order and more in terms of reasons ability to construct an accurate representation of the world. Chapter one also discusses how the problem of representation manifests itself in Scripture. After tracing the transition from the pre-critical to the critical era, this chapter examines how Scripture is thought to represent accurately the events it recounts only by seeking an ostensive referent outside the Scriptural text in the critical era. Finally, chapter one also explores how the problem of representation effects the ecclesiological and political dynamics at work in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Catholicism, and how both the latter and the former made possible the ascendant form of Thomism that Blondel categorized as “extrinsicism” and the form of historicism exemplified by his principle interlocutor, Alfred Loisy.

Chapter two explores the transformation of tradition by tracing the shifts in late-medieval theological discourse and how these shifts signify a move away from thinking about tradition primarily as a liturgical reality and toward thinking about tradition as a juridical reality. This chapter also serves as a segue for chapter three’s discussion of the immediate occasion for Blondel’s concept of tradition in the publication of Alfred
Loisy’s work, *L’Évangile et l’Église*³ and Loisy’s subsequent attempt to clarify this work in *Autour d’une petit livre*.⁴ Chapter three pays special attention to the way in which the shifts discussed in chapter one and the transformation of tradition discussed in chapter two come to expression in Loisy’s thought.

After suggesting in chapter three that Loisy and John Henry Newman offer two contrasting examples of how the relationship between theology and history might be construed in the representation of tradition in modern Catholicism, chapter four opens the second part of the dissertation by engaging the immediate conceptual context of Blondel’s account of tradition in his philosophy of action. For Blondel, tradition is not merely adduced from Scripture and subsequently identified with it; nor is tradition an epiphenomenon that comes to expression in the absence of written texts. Rather, tradition relies on texts and relies on something else at the same time, something Blondel names as “an experience always in act” (*une expérience toujours en acte*) that is dependent on texts without becoming subservient to them.⁵ Chapter four also offers an interpretation of Blondel’s account of action that attends to the central role the sacramental life of the church plays in his thinking. Drawing on the speculative foundation laid in chapter four, chapter five expositis and discusses Blondel’s notion of tradition as the synthetic bond that embraces both the facts of history (reason) and the doctrine (faith) through the

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liturgical action of the church. Blondel considers the question of truth in tradition through category of “faithful action.” In so doing, the question of truth in tradition becomes less an epistemological problem and more an ontological problem. The shift in emphasis away from epistemology and toward ontology in Blondel’s thinking about the truth of tradition offers a resolution to the problem of tradition in modern Catholicism, by refocusing attention upon the representation of tradition as a liturgical reality.

Having discussed the ecclesiological, the philosophical and the theological histories out of which Blondel’s idea of tradition emerges, and having explicated and analyzed the idea itself, the final part of the dissertation consists of two constructive chapters which seek to develop and advance Blondel’s idea of tradition. Chapter six explores the relationship between the past, present and future in Blondel’s idea of tradition by examining this relationship in the liturgical and Eucharistic action of the church. Exploring this aspect of Blondel’s idea of tradition through the liturgical and Eucharistic action of the church brings into relief the way in which the truth in tradition is, for Blondel, more akin to the sacramental representation of truth than to the historical representation of truth. The final chapter, chapter seven, situates Blondel’s idea of tradition within the key question about the relation between ontology and epistemology raised by twentieth-century hermeneutics. Where thinkers like Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur failed to come to terms with the absolutely supernatural dimension of human history, the liturgical referent in Blondel’s “hermeneutics of tradition” allows him to attend to the insights of modern history while, at the same time, reading Scripture from within the ecclesial space of tradition, a space where the sacramental realities of
faith can disclose themselves as God’s eternal truth continually present in human history.

The conclusion of the dissertation summarizes the previous chapters of the dissertation and discusses briefly how Blondel’s notion of tradition makes its most important contribution to modern Catholicism.
PART I

BEFORE BLONDEL
CHAPTER ONE

REVELATION, REASON, AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTATION IN MODERN CATHOLIC THOUGHT

Introduction

The first section of this chapter briefly explores the problem of representation in modern thought. The problem of representation is the category through which one can trace the epistemological shift western thought undergoes in modernity and the consequent reshaping of the Christian concept of revelation that occurs during the transformation into the modern period. It is during this period that tradition’s capacity to represent God’s presence in human history is no longer assumed and, in the case of the Reformation, becomes an obstacle to God’s revelatory presence. The object of the first section of this chapter is to unfold the broader conceptual conditions that gave rise to the modern idea of tradition, as well as provide the broader speculative framework to which Blondel’s notion of tradition as the synthetic bond between history and faith belongs.

The problem of representation also serves as an entree into a brief overview of the modern interpretive history of Scripture as a form of revelation distinct from tradition. As the problem of representation brings about new forms of rationality, new questions regarding the historical reliability of Scripture and the biblical narratives’ ability to represent historical truth occupy a considerable share of modern exegetical inquiry. The rise of historical criticism as a common exegetical practice of the nineteenth century signals that the notion of tradition no longer constitutes a reliable exegetical referent in the
reading of Scripture. Instead the preponderance of meaning in Scripture derives from the reconstruction of the text from its original cultural and ideational context. The brief overview of the problem of representation and its influence upon the interpretation of Scripture provides the philosophical context for the publication of Alfred Loisy’s *L’Évangile et l’Église*, the immediate occasion for Blondel’s notion of tradition and the exegetical questions to which Blondel’s notion of tradition attempts to respond.

The second and third sections of this chapter move from the broader and the more speculative circumstances surrounding Blondel’s thought on tradition and recount the immediate historical and theological contexts of his notion of tradition in the Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. More specifically, the second section explores the pontificate of Pius IX and the political and the intellectual climes of the Church in the nineteenth century in order to render more palpable the mood of the Church prior to the publication of *History and Dogma*. The final section of this chapter discusses the historical and the theological events leading up to the publication of *History and Dogma* by examining the Thomistic renewal of Catholicism during the pontificate of Leo XIII. Leo’s “grand vision,” as it were, to renew the impoverished intellectual life of nineteenth-century Catholicism constitutes both the dominant form of nineteenth-century Catholic speculative theology against which thinkers such as Loisy would react, as well as the principal form of thought whose shortcomings Blondel’s notion of tradition would attempt to correct.
I. The Problem of Representation in Modern Thought

The speculative hub around which western thought has - and perhaps continues to - rotate is the “problem of representation” that surfaces in the sixteenth century.¹ Or so Gary Lease suggests in his study of the cultural climate within which modernism was produced. While “cracks,” so to speak, began to emerge in the Middle Ages, it is the Reformation which, on Lease’s reading, creates the chasm. G.E. Lessing identified between the accidental truths of history and the necessary truths of reason in On the Proof of Spirit and of Power (1777).² In Lease’s view the Reformation’s accomplishment is to contravene a pre-modern form of Christianity based on an “institutionally administrated revelation” that guaranteed an unobstructed view of the “representation…and the reality which it sought.”³ The Reformation proposed an alternative account of the character of revelation as premised on “personal, individual experience, and not a proclamation based on authority,” the former acting as the guarantor of the authenticity of representation.⁴ However, here Lease offers a loose


³ Lease, “Modernism,” 5.

⁴ Cf. Ibid. For an account of the relationship between the Reformation and the rise of historical-critical readings of scripture, and an argument how the practice of historical-critical readings of scripture in nineteenth-century Protestantism preserve the ideals of the
description of roughly fifteen hundred years of Christianity and its interpretation of revelation to make the general point of the Reformation’s break with ancient and medieval Christianity. There is in Lease’s expedient description a certain level of dissembling of the diversity and complexity of these fifteen hundred years of Christianity that need not sully Lease’s general point about the Reformation, but warrants mention: for example, Lease’s description simplifies – perhaps unwittingly - the development of the Reformation’s interpretation of Scripture and reduces it to the rejection of authority. To be sure, the Reformation does make a decisive break with the late-medieval interpretations of Scripture, but it might be more accurate to state that a decisive break is most clearly identifiably in Luther’s younger contemporaries, specifically John Calvin and most salient in Calvin’s *Institutes* (1536).\(^5\) Whereas Calvin allot no role to the church in his interpretation of scripture, the early Luther does by reading scripture in dialogue with Augustine, the *Glossa Interlinearis* and *Ordinaria*.\(^6\) The problem with Lease’s description of the Reformation’s break from the pre-modern interpretation of revelation is that it assumes a monolithic and a reductionistic account of all pre-modern Christian notions of revelation as institutionally administered. Of course, most pre-


modern notions of revelation did involve institutional authority, but that authority was much more diffuse, manifesting itself in various commentaries on Scripture and a complex of liturgical customs, practices and guilds embodied by pre-modern Christians and much less centralized than Lease’s modern, bureaucratic notion of institutional authority implies. Lease’s description neglects the many well-reputed works engaging the theological, philosophical, and ecclesiological complexity of pre-modern Christianity for a facile and anachronistic generalization about authority in pre-modern Christianity.7

Nevertheless, Lease’s impression of the Reformation account of revelation brings into relief an epistemological current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, drifting toward self-sufficient certainty and the reorientation of the problem of representation as a problem of radical reflexivity taking place in the subject. In the pre-modern view a preponderance of meaning resides in the object itself, its “ontic logos,” to use Charles Taylor’s term, and its role in the order of being, whereas the modern view, beginning with Descartes, resituates meaning to reside exclusively in the subject.8 What emerges


8 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 160-161. It should be noted that though Taylor locates the decisive shift in Descartes the antecedents of this “internalization” or turn inward toward radical reflexivity can be found in Augustine – though how this internalization is formulated and what philosophical implications follow from this formulation is quite
from this new “localization” of meaning in the mind of the subject is a form of rationality in which the subject is disengaged from the world, requiring her to construct a representational view of the world and impose it upon the world to render the world intelligible. When knowledge comes to be seen as the “correct representation of an independent reality” the process of understanding is reconfigured from the ancient view as a joining of the subject and the object to the subject as “over against the object.”

II. The Cartesian and the Kantian Problem with Representation

While Descartes brings about a transformation of reason, or, better put, its instrumentalization, and, in doing so, brings the first stage of modernity to a close, the problem of representation is advanced decisively in the eighteenth century with Immanuel Kant’s exploration of our knowledge of the appearance of objects in the world.

different in Descartes than in Augustine. See also Jean-Luc Marion, Au lieu de soi: L’approche de Saint Augustin (Paris: PUF, 2008).


10 Ibid., Sources, 188.

11 Cf. Louis Dupré, The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 3. Importantly, Dupré observes the distinct influence of late medieval nominalist theology on Descartes and its role in shaping Cartesian and post-Cartesian thought. Dupré’s contribution is an important supplement to Taylor’s account of the transformation of modern reason.
In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)\(^{12}\) Kant maps the workings of reason’s internal mechanisms of our knowledge concerning the appearance of these objects in the world, by examining how “synthetic *a priori* judgments” (speculative metaphysics) are possible. To be clear, the point of the First Critique is to question not whether we can have knowledge of objects in the world, but rather how it is that we have knowledge of objects in the world. For Kant representation could be called a problem only in the sense of the question of how it is that we come to have knowledge of objects in the world needs to be determined. What need not be determined, Kant thinks, is whether one can have knowledge of objects in the world at all. Instead, for Kant speculative metaphysics, though necessary for all thought as the principle of completeness that brings supreme unity to conceptual knowledge, fails to conceive of a world beyond appearances as the realm of true being, entangling itself in antinomies as it attempts to cull fragments of human experience into a totality of all appearances and make objective statements about the totality. Kant unveils the specious claims of metaphysical ideas, relegates them to a regulative function of all thought and in so doing transforms the western philosophical horizon by rendering dubious what much of that horizon took to be the main referent between representation and reality: God.\(^{13}\) Kant accomplishes this shift in western thought by proffering a theory of truth detached from a doctrine of creation and grounded in the understanding that human reason supplies the categories for the possibility of truth,


\(^{13}\) Cf. Lease, “Modernism,” 6.
a theory, according to Heidegger, in contrast to the medieval Christian conception of truth in which the grounds for the possibility of truth reside in created beings’ participation in the Creator’s divine plan of creation.¹⁴

Less than a century after the publication of the First Critique, Kant’s account of speculative metaphysics had shown up on the Catholic theological radar, when the First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith, Dei Filius, conceived of the act of faith by avoiding the Scylla of rationalism and Charybdis of fideism.¹⁵ Dei Filius drew on the scholastic distinction of the Duplex ordo cognitionis in such a way that the basic rationality and the supernatural origin of the act of faith remained distinct, yet related and intact. This distinction without disagreement between divine faith and natural reason at the First Vatican Council however, did not fare as well in the modernist crisis. Whereas the First Vatican Council sought to preserve the unity in distinction between faith and reason, this relationship was often interpreted in the modernist period in ways that suggested these two were at odds with each other.¹⁶ This interpretation, in which the

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¹⁵ Kant’s critique of speculative metaphysics and his turn to the postulates of practical reason were the alleged source of the so-called “subjectivism” of the modernists by the integralists (neo-Thomists), and later was to become the main target at which late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Catholic apologists would aim their apologia. Cf. Gerald McCool, The Neo-Thomists (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1994).

¹⁶ Here we have in mind such thinkers as George Tyrell, Édouard Le Roy and Ernesto Buonaiuti.
natural and the supernatural are unfolded as antithetical to each other, was, according to Gabriel Daly, never the intent of the First Vatican Council.\footnote{Cf. Gabriel Daly, \textit{Transcendence and Immanence: A Study in Catholic Modernism and Integralism} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), 8.}

III The Place of Scripture in the Problem of Representation

The problem of representation manifests itself in the transition in exegetical referents the reading of Scripture undergoes from the biblical story read literally, as referring to actual historical occurrences, to reading a passage of a text of the Bible literally, as evidence that it is a reliable historical report. Hans Frei has claimed that this transition marks a new stage in the history of interpretation and the dawn of historical criticism.\footnote{Cf. Hans W. Frei, \textit{The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1974), 2. I am interested here more in the history of transition in the reading of Scripture that Frei recounts than in the “realistic narrative” form of reading scripture he advocates. To the latter, Nicholas Boyle has indicted Frei’s account under the charge of bibliolatry. Boyle contends Frei is unable to appropriate Auerbach fully, since Frei, like Schleiermacher, allots no role to the church in his account the interpretation of Scripture. In Boyle’s words, “[t]his is bibliolatry in a new guise: a uniqueness and transcendence is given to the biblical text that belongs properly only to God. Frei’s conception of the Bible is far too narrow.” Nicholas Boyle, \textit{Sacred and Secular Scriptures: A Catholic Approach to Literature} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 62. Though Boyle’s exposition of Frei is insightful, his criticisms of Frei mistakenly imply Frei’s thought is contained fully in his 1974 publication \textit{The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative}, with no reference to Frei’s later works. In his later work, Frei clearly designates a role for the community of believers in the interpretation of scripture. Whether he offers an adequate account of this community and its role in the interpretative process is an important yet}
century with Benedict de Spinoza and Johannes Cocceius, in the eighteenth century with Johann Bengel, and in England by such figures as Thomas Hobbes, Charles Blount and Matthew Tindal, among many others.\footnote{For an overview of the transformation the Bible underwent in England at this time see Christopher Hill, \textit{The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution} (New York: Penguin Press, 1993).} At this time there is a considerable effort toward establishing the factual truth or falsity of the biblical stories and a serious effort toward determining the biblical stories’ meaning. It is as this point that the trajectory of biblical interpretation alters. Whereas prior to modernity extra-biblical events and experience were incorporated into the biblical narrative and made accessible, in modernity the biblical events and stories themselves are called into question insofar as they can be corroborated in the “real world.”

What is more, in this transition a breakdown of the literal-realistic interpretation of the biblical stories brings about the collapse of the figural interpretation of Scripture, which, in pre-modern exegesis was considered capable of unifying the canon. As Frei puts it,

\begin{quote}
Figural reading, to the degree that it had been an extension of literal interpretation in the older kind of realistic, narrative reading, was now bound to look to historical-critical eyes like a preposterous historical argument, and it rapidly lost credibility. In the past, one of its chief uses had been as a means for unifying the canon; it had not simply been an awkward historical proof-text. Its breakdown upon being introduced into the arena of historical argument and demonstration was accompanied by a similar failure as an instrument for uniting the \end{quote}

Bible. Historical critics were concerned with specific texts and specific historical circumstances. The unity of the Bible across millennia of differing cultural levels and conditions in any case seemed tenuous, indeed a dubious hypothesis to them. But if it were to be demonstrated, it would have to be done by an argument other than a historical claim to specific miraculous fulfillment of the Old Testament sayings and events in the New Testament. The figural reading broke down not only as a means of locating oneself and one’s world vis-à-vis the biblical narratives; in addition, it was forced to become a historical-factual argument in favor of the unity of the canon—and a poor one at that.  

In this transition the literal reading comes to mean the grammatical and lexical exactness in estimating the original sense of the text for its original audience and the coincidence of the description with how the facts occurred. The realistic reading becomes associated with how accurate the written description was when matched to the probable historical reconstruction. In other words, biblical commentators failed to understand a key feature of the biblical narratives: their realistic shape. Most commentators, particularly those influenced by historical criticism, confused the “realistic” element of the biblical narratives by identifying it with the historical likelihood of the stories. Frei notes,  

[i]n both affirmative and negative cases, the confusion of history-likeness (literal meaning) and history (ostensive reference), and the hermeneutical reduction of the former to an aspect of the latter, meant that one lacked the distinctive category and the appropriate interpretive procedure for understanding what one had actually recognized: the high significance of the literal, narrative shape of the stories for their meaning. And so, one might add, it has by and large remained ever since.  

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20 Ibid., 7-8.  

21 Ibid., 12.
The narrative shape of the biblical stories assumes that the intelligibility and the meaning of the narratives, “what they are about and how they make sense,” are dependent upon the narrative rendering and depiction of the events that constitute the narrative themselves. For example, “that the gospel story is about Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah means that it narrates the way his status came to be enacted.”

That is, the realistic narrative requires that the character, the character’s subjectivity, actions and agency and the external circumstances of the narrative in which the character is depicted, the social setting, be read together and need not refer to something else more real or more significant than the character and his social setting. The character and his circumstances are not a “carnal shadow” of some reality more significant. But during modernity this hermeneutical option is left unexplored and eventually cast aside by the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

In the realistic narrative rendering of the biblical stories the subject matter and narrative rendering (text) are inseparable. Even for early reformers such as Calvin and Luther the choice between subject matter and text was secondary rather than a distinction in principle. For both the literal or grammatical meaning was identical with the text’s subject matter and doctrinal content. Scripture was viewed primarily as a literal and figurative not an allegorical description of reality. Secondly, it made reality accessible through its narrative. This reading of Scripture was possible for Luther and Calvin, Frei suggests, because the correlation between the explicative (literal) sense and the historical

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22 Ibid., 13.
reference of texts rested on the narrative and not on a linguistic theory of reference in which nouns name and stand in the conceptual place of things they refer to.

The key point to Frei’s argument is that the literal and figurative reading belonged together by need of mutual supplementation in the pre-critical era. In the critical era the literal (explicative) sense becomes identical with the actual historical reference. When the literal (explicative) sense and historical are separated, as they are in the critical era, the literal and figurative readings of Scripture separate and begin to clash. This clash is evident in the Spinoza’s Tractatus theologico-politicus (1670). Here in Spinoza the subject matter of Scripture now becomes the religious lesson(s) it conveys and not the events it narrates. The meaning of the scriptural narratives does not lie in their historical truth. In the Spinozean distinction between the literal meaning and historical reference and narrative form and subject matter, we see the origins of modern exegesis that will distinguish between Scripture (revelation) and knowledge of God.

Frei’s account brings into sharper focus how in the transition from pre-critical to critical age the narrative of Scripture itself no longer is able to represent the history it depicts. By the end of the nineteenth century the distinction between Scripture as revelation and Scripture as knowledge of God would occupy a central place in modern hermeneutics as exegetes made it a common practice to seek an ostensive referent outside of the subject matter of Scripture in order to render the subject matter of Scripture intelligible. The distinction between revelation and reason that lies at the heart of modern exegesis was blurred in much modern Catholic theology in an effort to overcome the antagonistic relationship the realities of faith and reason had fallen into. In large part it is
on account of Thomism’s ability to prevent the gradual elision of the former by the latter that by the late-nineteenth century it was able to present itself as the only form of Catholic theology able to articulate a response to modern reason’s challenge to faith. From the ecclesial, political and intellectual events that transformed modern Europe, the Thomistic revival of the nineteenth century emerged as the speculative resolution to the problem of representation that plagued the intellectual life of modern Catholicism.

IV. The Problem of Representation and the Rise of Modern Thomism

Many Catholic theologians in the nineteenth century considered their common enemy to be rationalism in its Enlightenment form, whether Humean empiricism, Kantian critical philosophy or post-Kantian idealism, since each, in their own way, disavowed the intellectual and moral claims of Christian revelation. In this respect, Catholic theologians were faced with two main philosophical problems: on the one hand, they faced the reduction of religious claims to postulates of pure practical reason, the “terms for peace” dictated by Kant to theologians, as Karl Barth once remarked. On the other hand, they faced British empiricism, which dismissed all religious claims. The task of the

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Catholic theologian was to show how the act of faith remained possible in light of Kant’s critique of speculative metaphysics, which, in turn, required him to preserve the free and authentic character of that act without compromising its supernatural character.

Also troubling for the theologian was how to offer an adequate response to the empiricist’s critique of revelation. This challenge required him to attend to the historical nature of revelation without succumbing to an account of faith that dissolved into fideism or historicism. As Gerald McCool observes: “faith and Kantian reason, the tradition of positive Christian revelation and Hegelian speculative reason: these were the antithesis which the philosophers and theologians of the Catholic revival had to try to reconcile.”

Three different responses to rationalism emerged in the nineteenth century: 1) Strict traditionalism: sought to argue that unaided reason was unable to arrive with certainty at any conclusions about religious and moral issues. 2) One could adopt a form of post-Kantian idealism such as Schelling’s philosophy or Hegel’s dialectic and employ it theologically, as Johnann Sebastian von Drey, Johann Adam Möhler and the Tübingen school had done. 3) Or lastly, one could espouse the claim, as the inchoate yet burgeoning neo-Thomist movement did, “that the negative conclusions which the rationalists had reached concerning the credibility of the Christian mysteries were the logical consequence of applying modern philosophy to religion and morals.”

That is to say, the conclusions of modern philosophies need not necessarily be true, since they are

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26 Ibid., 18.
the logical outcome of the antagonism toward religion intrinsic to all modern philosophy. Indeed, no modern philosophy “could provide a sound solution for the problem of faith and reason, and any attempt to correct and adapt them in the hope that they could do so was doomed in advance to failure.”

While in most cases the project of reconciling Catholicism to modern philosophy may have been destined to fail, much of the intellectual impotence of Catholicism in the latter half of the nineteenth century can be attributed to Pius IX’s early affection for liberalism and later disaffection from liberal ideas, his exile from Rome and eventual return, all of which, according to James Hennesey, set in motion a political and an ecclesiological reaction by the Vatican debilitating to the intellectual life of the Church.

Pius IX’s emphasis on authority, though not unwarranted given his predecessor’s (Gregory XVI) condemnation of the attempts of Félicité de Lamennais and his followers to reinvigorate French Catholicism by adopting some of the democratic principles of the Revolution, may have given some reason to pause, particularly those who assumed he harbored some affection for liberal ideals. Whatever fondness Pius IX may have held for political liberalism officially ended in 1854 when the Immaculate Conception was decreed, without a doubt, as a reflection of his genuine Marian piety, but also as a “political statement of the first order,” implying “[s]in-weakened man was incapable of

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27 Ibid., 19.

self-government,” according to one author.\(^{29}\) Ten years later he reaffirmed this view in the 1864 Syllabus of Errors, arguing political liberalism offered an attenuated account of civic life when it envisaged this life free from the Church’s authoritative voice. He reasserted the Church’s authoritative voice in the First Vatican Council’s definition of papal infallibility in the document *Pastor Aeternus* (1870). These documents, along with their theological rhetoric and virtue, contain political gestures signaling the Vatican was becoming increasingly isolated in the latter part of the nineteenth century from its traditional centers of European power, and the preponderance of intellectual value in Catholicism seemed to be assigned to “simple certitudes guaranteed by authority.”\(^{30}\)

Theologically, Pius IX’s emphasis on authority was expressed in an unprecedented spate of condemnations in Catholic theology, spanning eleven years between 1855 and 1866. For the most part this Roman intervention was an expression of the Church’s reaction to political liberalism and the latter’s anti-clerical thrust.\(^{31}\) In its defensive reaction to anticlerical liberalism in the nineteenth century, the Church

\(^{29}\) Ibid., S187.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., S188.

\(^{31}\) The Church’s reaction to liberalism ought not to be read merely as a political event. Instead, one ought to read it as a part of Catholicism’s broader attempt to work out the relationship between faith (grace) and reason (nature) in modernity. For an account of how this distinction continued to plague much twentieth-century European theology and the implications it had see Joseph Komonchak, “Theology and Culture at Mid-Century: The Example of Henri de Lubac,” *Theological Studies* 51 (1990): 579-602. For an interesting example of how this distinction paralyzed ecclesial life in the twentieth century outside of Europe see William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 121-202.
practiced an unstated policy of appointing bishops whose ecclesiological sympathies were Ultramontane rather than Febronian or Gallican.\textsuperscript{32} In so doing, Catholic theological education throughout Europe was consolidated within the walls of the Vatican, which, in turn advanced the role of such Roman congregations as the Congregation of the Holy Office and the Congregation of the Index in the mid and latter half of the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{33}

It is out of the larger political events in Europe and the Church’s reaction to them that the neo-Thomist movement and its prominent role in adjudicating orthodoxy is born, consolidated in a few leaders such as Joseph Kleutgen and Matteo Liberatore who, as influential Roman theologians of the congregation’s tribunals, advanced Thomism as a unitary theological system for Catholicism. Thomism’s rise to power in the late-nineteenth century was achieved in large part by Kleutgen’s and Liberatore’s concerted campaign through the influential German review \textit{Der Katholik} and the Italian review \textit{Civiltà Cattolica} to expose Louis Eugène Marie Bautain’s traditionalism, Antonio Rosmini-Serbati’s, Vincenzo Gioberti’s and Anton Günther’s ontologism, Georg Hermes semi-rationalism, and a French form of Cartesian scholasticism\textsuperscript{34} as philosophically and theologically specious, while, at the same time, presenting its form of Thomism as a

\textsuperscript{32} Cf. McCool, \textit{Nineteenth-Century Scholasticism}, 129-134.

\textsuperscript{33} Cf. ibid., 134.

system capable of adequately addressing the most salient problem facing modern
theology: the problem of faith and reason.

However, to suggest that the neo-Thomist movement was born of and sustained
by ruthless ecclesial politics alone would be misleading. To be sure, it was. But the neo-
Thomist critique of rival nineteenth-century theological systems was, to a certain degree,
warranted. The neo-Thomist’s argument against these other systems focused on its own
claim to preserve the distinction between philosophy (reason, nature) and theology (faith,
 grace) in its theory of knowledge, where others failed to and often obscured the
ontological distinction between the two. In the case of the traditionalists and ontologists
this confusion of orders had it roots in the division of the intellect into discursive reason
(Verstand) and intuitive reason (Vernuift), where the former attends to the appearance of
objects in the world, while the latter has access to metaphysical realities through the
intuitive apprehension of the intellect. The Cartesian and post-Kantian theories of
knowledge espoused by the traditionalists and ontologists did precisely what the neo-
Thomists thought they ought not to have done, namely, they grounded their first
principles of knowledge in the intuition of God, shattering the metaphysical unity of man
and nature and dissolving the necessary distinction between philosophy and theology.

Once they accepted the Cartesian cogito as their metaphysical point of origin, they

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35 See Pierre Thibault, Savoir et pouvoir: Philosophie thomiste et politique cléricale au


37 Cf. Ibid., 139-41.
committed themselves too deeply to the modern problem of representation of knowledge obtained through the senses, and consequently, they were required to turn to the category of intuition as the objective first principle of their metaphysic.\textsuperscript{38} The chief flaw of such a metaphysic and of all of modern philosophy was its individualistic account of reason inherently juxtaposed to the Church’s authoritative teaching tradition. The only remedy to the pathology of modern philosophy and its malignant influence on Catholicism was for Catholicism to excise modern philosophy from its intellectual tradition, and rebuild itself on the scholastic period’s clear distinction between the natural and the revealed knowledge of God.

V. Leo XIII and the Thomistic Revival

The Thomistic renewal of Catholicism during the Leonine papacy saw itself as the epistemological alternative to the encroaching secularism of the modern world. Leo’s vision for the Roman renewal of Thomism at the end of the nineteenth century extended beyond the purview of seminary curricula; it imagined implementing an objective and immutable order in the modern world, for which the church would be gatekeeper, and

\textsuperscript{38} In retrospect there is a certain irony to the neo-Thomist charge of Cartesianism against its interlocutors, for more than one scholar has observed how neo-Thomism itself seems to resemble more a form of Cartesianism than a development of Aquinas’s thought. See Wayne Hankey, “Making Theology Practical: Thomas Aquinas and the Nineteenth Century Religious Revival,” \textit{Dionysius} 9 (December, 1985): 91-92.
Thomistic philosophy the key to its implementation. The neo-Thomists saw the problem of modernity as one “grand system,” as Joseph Komonchak observes, to which the only suitable response was to offer an alternative “grand system”: Thomism.

39 Cf. Hennesey, “Leo XIII’s Thomistic Revival: A Political and Philosophical Event,” S189-S190. Leo’s “grand design,” as it has been called, to reconstruct Christian society in the midst of modernity correlates to his encyclicals, some scholars argue. For example, Aeterni Patris (1879) speaks to Christian society’s need to share a common philosophy. Aquinas’s “hylemorphic metaphysics” and “realistic epistemology” offers not only a healthy alternative to Kantian subjectivism, but substantiates a communitarian social and political philosophy. Church/state relations and the role of authority are addressed in Immortale Dei (1885) and Libertas praestantissimum (1888), while Rerum Novarum (1891) attends to the new economic realities forged by free-market capitalism and industrialization. See Paul Misner, “Catholic Anti-Modernism: The Ecclesial Setting,” in Catholicism Contending with Modernity: Roman Catholic Modernism and Anti-Modernism in Historical Context, ed. Darrell Jodock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79-80.

40 See Joseph Komonchak, “Modernity and the Construction of Roman Catholicism,” in Modernism as a Social Construct, ed. George Gilmore (Mobile: Spring Hill College Press, 1991), 11-41. In France, Leo reified his grand design with his policy of ralliement toward the Third Republic, a policy which may have been motivated less by the quixotic ideals of his grand system and more by the quotidian, yet, no less important, diplomatic hope that such a “conciliatory move towards the French government might induce it to support the Pope in his various attempts to recover Rome which the Papacy had lost to the Italian government in 1870.” See Maurice Larkin, Religion, Politics and Preference in France Since 1890: La Belle époque and its legacy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 6-7. Politically, the Papacy was eager to express its independence from Italy and did so by rejecting Italian attempts at conciliation and forbidding Italian Catholics to participate in national elections. Rome’s chief concern “was that other governments might use the Pope’s alleged dependence on Italy as an excuse to ignore him when it came to dealing with the Church in their own territories” (Ibid, 54-5). Larkin also suggests that Leo XIII and his papal secretary of state, Cardinal Rampolla, were so committed to the “Roman Question,” the maintenance of formal relations with France through the Napolean Concordat to maintain diplomatic leverage with Italy, that while it made many protests against the expulsion of religious orders from France in 1902, it did not cut off diplomatic relations with France, as one might expect given the drastic nature of the situation (Cf. Ibid., 54-8). French/Vatican diplomatic relations changed with the election of Leo’s successor, Pius X, in 1903. Pius’s secretary of state, Merry del Val, considered Leo’s and Rampolla’s policy of ralliement not only impolitic, “he regarded
The Leonine encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879) was an attempt to rehabilitate the listless intellectual life of Catholic seminaries and universities, both of which seemed to lend themselves disproportionately to fideism, while, on the other hand, it sought to protect seminarians from the rationalism pervading secular philosophy. It often has been described incorrectly as a “call to return to scholastic philosophy in general,” when, in fact, it is a “summons to return to the philosophy of Aquinas *simpliciter.*” ⁴¹ That is, Leo’s call to return to Aquinas *simpliciter* meant a return “tout court to the thirteenth century,” embracing “the cultural and scientific limitations” this return naturally entailed in the nineteenth century. ⁴² The form of Thomistic thought the Leonine revival of Thomistic philosophy embodied throughout the latter half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century then, found it difficult to manage the tension between the elements of the past and those of the future, a tension managed so masterfully by Aquinas himself, by Aquinas’s ability to allow “not only elements of the past but also those of the future [to] have room in his thought; either by being able to incorporate the new into [his thought] or

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the current predicament of the French Church [the modernist crisis] as its direct result” (Ibid., 59). Leo’s policy of *ralliement*, regardless of its failure or success and despite its political purposes, reflects part of what has been interpreted as the Leonine papacy’s attempt to reach out to the modern world. Paradoxically, this gesture to the modern world would lead to the phenomenon called, “ghetto Catholicism,” a phenomenon against which such thinkers as Loisy reacted.

⁴¹ Daly, *Transcendence and Immanence*, 9-10.

⁴² Ibid., 11
by being fruitful enough to let [his thought] be transformed by the new.\textsuperscript{43} That neo-Thomism found it difficult to navigate this tension between the past and the future is, one can argue, a consequence of its inability to understand the multiple traditions in which Aquinas himself inherited and worked within, as well as its own tradition.

Neo-Thomism’s failure to grasp the multiple traditions in which Aquinas worked is evident in Joseph Kleutgen, who by all accounts is the most brilliant, well-reputed and influential nineteenth-century interpreter of Aquinas. Following Francisco Suárez’s interpretation, Kleutgen committed himself to a reading of Aquinas that bracketed the historical context and doctrinal development of Aquinas’s thought. As Alasdair MacIntyre writes, Kleutgen “was lacking in adequate appreciation both of what it meant for Aquinas that he worked within not merely one but two inherited traditions and of what in general it is to do philosophical and theological work within a tradition.”\textsuperscript{44} To be sure, Kleutgen’s thought embodies a sense of tradition. Yet, his sense of tradition is the “socially transmitted and primaevally linguistic embodiment of knowledge” that fails to be mindful of the embeddedness of language as well as the temporal nature of

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\textsuperscript{44} Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy, and Tradition} (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 73-4. As an example, MacIntyre uses Kluetgen’s interpretation of Aquinas’s account of truth in the first question of the \textit{De Veritate}. For example, see Joseph Kluetgen, \textit{Die Philosophie der Vorzeit}, 2 vols. (Innsbruck: Rauch Verlag, 1878).
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philosophical speculation. The virtue of Kleutgen’s reading of Aquinas manifests itself in his keen understanding of the conclusions Aquinas draws for theology and the philosophical language that guides Aquinas’s thought to these conclusions. Yet this virtue too is sullied by Kleutgen’s inadequate appreciation of the conceptual context that regulates Aquinas’s philosophical grammar, the grammar that renders Aquinas’s conclusions intelligible. Furthermore, Kleutgen fails to appreciate that the practice of philosophy for Aquinas is a process of “conceptual clarification, analysis, and description,” requiring him “to draw upon the resources of, to correct and to modify, and to integrate into [his] own account, the various relevant arguments and considerations advanced by a variety of writers within the Augustinian and Aristotelian traditions.”

Instead of placing Aquinas within the traditions of inquiry he inherits, embodies in his discourse and unpacks further for succeeding generations to engage, Kleutgen “treats Aquinas as presenting a finished system whose indebtedness to earlier writers is no more than an accidental feature of it.” The upshot of Kleutgen’s interpretation is to import epistemological questions into Aquinas’s thought such that Aquinas, in MacIntyre’s words, is “presented as the author of one more system confronting the questions of Cartesian and post-Cartesian epistemology,” yet, an author offering a more faithful and a

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46 MacIntyre, Three Rival Versions of Moral Inquiry, 74.

47 Ibid.
more logical response to the modern problem of representation than Descartes and Kant.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 75.
CHAPTER TWO

GOD’S POWER AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF TRADITION IN MODERN CATHOLICISM

Introduction

Having surveyed the conceptual, exegetical and theological transformation of Western thought through the category of representation and its effect on the concept of revelation, as well as the immediate historical and theological contexts of Blondel’s notion of tradition in the previous chapter, this chapter connects the problem of representation to the notion of tradition, by tracing the late medieval shifts in the notion of God’s power, ecclesial power, and political power. This chapter argues that the complex set of theological shifts in the understanding of God’s power that take place at this time create the conceptual climate for the modern notion of tradition and facilitate the process of separation between the church and Scripture. As the classical and early medieval synthesis between the church and Scripture comes undone, the idea of tradition becomes less an expression (representation) of God’s presence embodied in the Church (paradosis, traditio) and more a procedural reality that reflects the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office.

By the time the Council of Trent addressed the hotly contested Reformation question of tradition in the sixteenth century it did not need to represent the church’s notion of tradition as the teaching magisterium. The juridification of the idea of tradition, that process by which it was transformed from norm (substance) to procedure, had been in the works, so to speak, for a few centuries by the time Trent was required to address
it.¹ This chapter, then, is devoted to unfolding the political and theological conditions that made possible the process by which the idea of tradition came to be understood as a bureaucratical reality in modern Catholicism.

I. The Medieval Heritage of the Modern Notion of Tradition

One observes in fourteenth and fifteenth-century thought an account of tradition that departs considerably from patristic and early medieval patterns of thought. For example, Conciliarists such as Pierre D’Ailly (1350-1420) posit the existence of a “purely” oral transmission of tradition residing in the Church that can continue to exist without being received in the ecclesial realm through the embodied liturgical practice of the church.² For D’Ailly, the idea of a purely oral transmission of tradition represents

¹ The reader needs to be aware that the office of the episcopate always has been a representation of God’s presence embodied in the church. The argument here attempts to discern the process by which one form of tradition’s representation comes to be privileged over others. Thus, the “juridification” of the idea of tradition only is intended to highlight the shift that occurs in the understanding of tradition in relation to the teaching authority of the magisterium not the office of the episcopate. However, as Francis Sullivan has observed, in its more recent development the term magisterium has come to mean both the teaching authority of the hierarchy as well as the hierarchy as the bearer of the office. See Francis A. Sullivan, Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1983), 24-34. For an analysis of the office of the episcopate see Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, The Episcopate and the Primacy, trans. Kenneth Barker, Patrick Kerans, Robert Ochs and Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962).

² George Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), 56.
God’s divine prerogative by which God reveals Himself, should God deem it necessary to do so. By God’s absolute power (potentia absoluta) God can and already has revealed Himself in a post-apostolic form of special revelation not found in the canonical Scriptures.³ It is not the case that the written word of Scripture is an insufficient mode of revelation, but rather, in God’s freedom and omnipotence God chooses (potentia absoluta) to reveal Himself through the working of the Holy Spirit in a direct manner requiring no liturgical embodiment or ecclesial practice.⁴ Revelation contains no limits, save the principle of non-contradiction, since by virtue of His potentia absoluta God can intervene directly in creation without the use of secondary causes.⁵ That D’Ailly conceives of a concept of tradition for which no embodied liturgical form or ecclesial practice is needed to render it intelligible is an indication that the bond between the church and Scripture has been broken by a doctrine of revelation in which the metaphysical bond between the created and uncreated realms is absent and the order of the natural world depends in principle on the divine will.⁶

³ Cf. Pierre D’Ailly, Quaestiones super I, Sententiarum (Lyons, 1500) and Francis Oakley, Omnipotence and Promise: The Legacy of the Scholastic Distinction of Powers (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002).

⁴ Cf. Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church, 56.


⁶ See ibid., The Political Thought of Pierre d’Ailly: The Voluntarist Tradition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 14-33. A detailed analysis of the complex of distinctions that accompany the potentia absoluta/ordinata distinction in D’Ailly’s
Of course, D’Ailly’s notion of tradition comes to expression within a confluence of interrelated theological and political forces flowing into late-medieval thought to form the speculative horizon of modernity. The question of the relations between *regnum* (kingship) and *sacerdotium* (priesthood) that had its origins in the Gregorian reforms of the eleventh century remained unresolved in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when D’Ailly is writing. Despite its success in reinvigorating papal authority, redeeming the life of clergy and liberating the church from lay ascendancy (lay investiture struggle), the Gregorian reforms had failed to dissolve the structural reality (feudalism) and the system of benefices that gave rise to the reform itself, and, in consequence, encouraged the further transformation of church’s identity by blurring the distinction between holding ecclesiastical office and owning property.⁷ In both theory and practice the Gregorian reform left the medieval church vulnerable to the conceptual and linguistic influence of the emerging domain of the secular. As the church began to speak of itself in terms of a centralized, bureaucratic institution, one can detect a trace of the transition to a juridical and a legalistic notion of tradition that would manifest itself in much modern Catholic theology. This moment is captured well

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thought is beyond the scope of this work. Here we have offered a rudimentary sketch of the distinction in relation to D’Ailly’s understanding of the notion of tradition. It is worth noting that this distinction, as it is worked out in D’Ailly’s account, allots an important role to human reason, as is evidenced by the further distinction between “absolute evidence” and “conditioned evidence” (cf. 29). Oakley contends the *potentia absoluta/ordinata* distinction and *evidentia absoluta/conditionata vel secundum quid* prevent D’Ailly’s thought from fideism or occasionalism (cf. 26-33).

when in the twelfth century the Church, including the clerical bureaucracy, established itself as the ‘mystical body of Christ,’ the secular world sector proclaimed itself the ‘holy Empire.’ This does not imply causation, either in the one way or the other. It merely indicates the activity of indeed interrelated impulses and ambitions by which the spiritual *corpus mysticum* and the secular *sacrum imperium* happened to emerge simultaneously – around the middle of the twelfth century.\(^8\)

The linguistic volleying that takes place between the church and the inchoate secular domain of the twelfth century accompanies the distinction between juridical and sacramental powers that appears during this period. Canonists and theologians begin to distinguish “between the ‘Lord’s two Bodies’ – one, the individual *corpus verum* on the altar, the host; and the other, the collective *corpus mysticum*, the Church.”\(^9\) The division of sacramental and juridical powers was, in fact, part of the internal reconfiguration the church was beginning to experience as it discovered – and perhaps formed – a novel relationship with the nascent secular domain. Indeed, the sacramental reality to which the *corpus mysticum* referred when uttered began to fade to the connotation of *corpus mysticum* as a sociological and juridical reality.\(^10\) “That originally liturgical notion, which formerly served to exalt the Church united in the Sacrament, began to be used in the hierarchical Church as a means to exalt the position of the emperor-like pope…the pope could be the head of the ‘mystical body of the Church’ as a corporation or polity or

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\(^8\) Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 197.

\(^9\) Ibid., 198.

*regnum* more easily than head of the ‘mystical body of Christ’.”11 The juridical and sacramental reconfiguration finds its concrete expression in the division of labor between the priest and the bishop. “The Eucharist was the *priest’s* job; *bishops* governed the Church. Priests were concerned with the *real* body of Christ, in the celebration of the Mass, and bishops with his mystical body, as the Church herself was now called.”12

When in the fifteenth century a form of Roman law emphasizing individual rights advanced from the fringes of ancient and medieval discourse to the center of late-medieval political thought, it generated a new anthropology “rooted in an individualistic account of the will, oblivious to questions of its providential purpose in the hands of God.”13 This new anthropology mandated that human persons be defined in their “individuality essentialistically, as ‘will’ or ‘capacity’ or ‘impulse to self-preservation’.”14 The anthropology of this “new politics” promotes the univocal predication of being it inherits from Nominalist thought a century earlier, such that being has the same meaning for every genus, eliminating any hierarchies of genera that would reflect the diversity of being and, most importantly, the infinite qualitative difference

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11 Kantorowicz, *The King’s Two Bodies*, 203.


14 Ibid., 14.
between finite and infinite being. Having abandoned participation in Being as the primary horizon for understanding finite reality’s participation in God’s life, “theology stakes out factum [the made] as an area of human autonomy, by making dominium into a matter of absolute sovereignty and absolute ownership,” and thus begins to understand human interrelationships in terms of “contractual arrangements.” The ecclesiological upshot of this political and theological transformation is seen most readily in the development the doctrine of plenitudo potestatis underwent in canonist thinking, from a relatively fluid early thirteenth-century term employed to denote, along with other terms, the administrative authority of prelates to the power it conveyed for the Pope in the fourteenth century, enabling him to exercise temporal power as well as spiritual power over non-Christians as well as Christians. The effects of this transformative process on the idea of tradition can be seen in D’Ailly and other canonists and theologians of the late Middle Ages, who subscribe to the theory that a tradition or “custom only obtains the force of law by the approbation of the competent superior,” replacing the emphasis on the content of custom (tradition) with “a consideration of the juridical title of authority.”

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16 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, 15.


18 Cf. Oakley, The Political Thought of Pierre d’Ailly, 163-197.

19 Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 181.
II. The Transformation of Tradition

One can trace a shift in emphasis away from the idea of tradition (tradi
tio, paradosis) as received and embodied in the practice of the members of the Body of
Christ and toward the idea of tradition as a reality that is centralized in the teaching
authority of the magisterium\(^\text{20}\) and channeled and managed through ecclesiastical office,
which comes to official expression in the Tridentine notion of tradition and obtains in
Catholic theology into the nineteenth century. The origins of this shift in emphasis can be
found in the medieval symbiosis between the church and Scripture. The patristic and
early medieval notions of tradition certainly did refer to the teaching authority of
ecclesiastical office in understanding the transmission and practice of tradition. However,
as soon as the mendicant-secular debates of the late thirteenth-century raised the specter
of an irreconcilable conflict between the teaching of the church and the teaching of
scriptural texts, a definite shift can be discerned in the relationship between the church,
and its magisterial authority in relationship to Scripture.\(^\text{21}\)

At the center of the mendicant-secular disputes is the question of post-apostolic
revelation and the authority such revelation carries. From this center new forms of
thought emerge regarding the relationship between Scripture and tradition, as is

\(^{20}\) Magisterium here refers to the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office.

\(^{21}\) See Yves Congar, “Aspects ecclésiologiques de la querelle entre mendians et séculiers
dans la seconde moitié du XIIIe siècle et le début du XIVe,” Archives d’histoire et
characterized by Henry of Ghent’s (1217-1293) preoccupation with the unique authority of Scripture and Duns Scotus’s (1265-1308) emphasis on the importance of non-Scriptural revelation. Aquinas and Bonaventure had not reached this point in their thought. Both inherit and continue, in their distinct ways, the patristic legacy of tradition, distinguishing tradition from the scriptural texts without opposing each to the other, since conceptually both sacra pagina and sacra doctrina fell under the same formal object of divine revelation. Unlike Henry of Ghent and Duns Scotus, Aquinas and Bonaventure did not speculate within the post-1277 Condemnation horizon where the change of mood exerted a palpable new set of pressures on reason’s relation to revelation.

That Aquinas and Bonaventure did not bear these pressures is reflected in the distinct, yet fluid relationship between the realm of reason and the realm of faith in each

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23 For a concise account of the various themes under which Bonaventure and Aquinas consider the notion of revelation see René Latourelle, Theology of Revelation (New York: Alba House, 1966), 155-179.

24 For an excellent summary of the similarities and differences between Aquinas and Bonaventure, as well as twentieth-century interpretations of the two thinkers, see Knowles, The Evolution of Medieval Thought, 213-225.

thinkers’ account. It is even more salient in the negligible role the distinction between God’s absolute and ordained powers (potentia dei absoluta et ordinata) plays in each thinkers’ account. To be sure, it was a feature of their thought, “but their interests had always lain with God as known to us by reason or revelation, and the ‘absolute’ power [of God] was no more than a formal saving clause.” When the full impact of the reception of Aristotle and his Arab commentators in the newly formed universities became clear in 1277, the desire to protect the freedom of God and to eliminate Greek naturalism propelled the potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata distinction to the center of post-1277 theological discourse. This event is visible in the way in which the truths of ‘natural’ theology, which had formed the chains binding the dictates of reason to the declarations of revelation, melted into thin air…the essentially supernatural life of the Christian, seen in action in divine faith and love, and derived from a totally new and God-given principle of grace which had inspired and dominated the work of an Anselm, a Bonaventure or a Thomas, was now relegated, as unknowable and inexpressible, to the purely religious sphere of belief, and in practice ignored.

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27 For an analysis of Aquinas’s and Bonaventure’s use of this distinction see Lawrence Moonan, Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 193-295.

28 Knowles, The Evolution of Medieval Thought, 300.

29 Ibid., 299. See also Gilson, History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages, 488-499.
Heiko Oberman has famously argued that by abandoning every form of realism and intellectual abstraction, denying the possibility of the universal as a metaphysical reality in its own right, and asserting the process of knowledge is a purely intuitionist phenomenon, Ockham bequeathed to Nominalist thought of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries a “clear distinction between the revelation of God Himself and human conclusions” that did not immediately or intentionally undermine God’s self-disclosure in creation and in the person of Christ, but did permit God to enjoy in his *potentia absoluta* a sovereignty that need not be bound to moral and natural laws, and must be considered despite his *potentia ordinata*, what God actually decides to do.30

Along with the influence of Nominalist thought, one needs to mention the influence of the canonists in late-medieval thought. As the ecclesiological vicissitudes of the Western Schism consumed the fourteenth century, canonists took on the more prominent and powerful role of adjudicating competing claims of juridical authority. With the rise of canonist thinking, revelation increasingly came to be considered a historical, non-metaphysical category, as the repository of reflection on God’s *potentia ordinata*. The patristic and early medieval doctrine of revelation that had underwritten the complementary relationship between the church and Scripture (the canonical scriptures and the totality of commentaries on the canon) in the early medieval period (Aquinas and Bonaventure) gradually was narrowed down to the written word captured in the canonical

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Scriptures. Through this process the idea of tradition as a distinct mode of truth emerged from under the rubric of Scripture and was set in distinction to the written word of Scripture. In the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century this process was facilitated by the rediscovery of St. Basil the Great’s (329-379) account of tradition,\(^{31}\) which spoke of “tradition as containing things not contained in Scripture,” and Scripture as “needing to be completed by tradition, not merely as a text needing to be supplemented by its interpretation.”\(^{32}\) In Basil’s fourth-century account of tradition late fourteenth and early fifteenth-century thinkers found confirmed in patristic thought what really was a late-medieval phenomenon: namely, an account of revelation that envisioned revelation as composed of two distinct sources, Scripture and tradition.

III. The Tridentine Decree and the Juridification of the Notion of Tradition in Modern Catholicism

The intellectual turbulence that consumed Catholicism in the wake of the Reformation is undoubtedly the high-water mark in the development of the idea of tradition in modern Catholicism. The Reformation account of justification by faith and Scripture alone succeeded in forcing sixteenth-century Catholicism to bring official

\(^{31}\) For a discussion of the new concept of tradition formulated in the fourth century with Basil the Great and propagated by Augustine see Oberman, *The Dawn of the Reformation*, 270-280.

expression to its notion of tradition. To defend the Catholic position against the protests and contraventions of the Reformers, and to stem the abuses that rightly concerned them, the Tridentine decree on Scripture and tradition was promulgated during the fourth session of the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546.\(^{33}\)

Although the decree has generated an extensive history of interpretation,\(^{34}\) the decree rendered its notion of tradition in vague and general terms, affirming merely the existence of apostolic traditions and the obligation to respect them without elaborating the precise nature of tradition.\(^{35}\) The apparent simplicity of the Tridentine decree, however, should not be mistaken for the complex political and theological history that gave birth to it.\(^{36}\) There was a modicum of virtue in the Council’s decision not to articulate the full nature of tradition, since many of the Reformers had objected not so


\(^{35}\) Cf. Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 182. It is worth noting there was considerable debate during the council as to what does and does not constitute an apostolic tradition. For a concise summary of this discussion see Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church, 196-209.

much to the church as the repository of the truths necessary for salvation, but to the abuse of authority that such institutional privilege often lent itself to. Having restrained itself from elaborating the full nature of tradition, the Council forced the Reformers to object to the church’s official defense of the question of tradition on speculative grounds, allowing the church to avoid the difficult and contentious question of which concrete ecclesiastical traditions were apostolic in origin and thus valid expressions of the truth inspired by the Holy Spirit.

One also needs to mention the difference of opinion showing itself among the Council Fathers at Trent. Yves Congar has suggested that the diversity of opinion with regard to any definitive idea of tradition is the one overarching fact one can glean from the deliberations between the Council Fathers and theologians in the general congregations prior to the promulgation of the final decree.37 The diversity of opinions among the Council Fathers manifested when the question of the content of tradition became the subject of discussion, and, in particular, whether the decree should affirm the binding value and authority of ecclesiastical and human traditions, as well as apostolic traditions.38 It seems clear from the debates that the Council did not intend its notion of tradition to be associated with the concept of an oral tradition, despite the decrees’ assertion that unwritten traditions “were received by the apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, or else have come down to us, handed on as it were from the apostles

37 Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 160.

38 The history of these deliberations also is captured well in Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church, 195-209.
themselves at the inspiration of the holy Spirit.”  

39 Had the decree specified the distinction between traditions pertaining to faith (traditiones ad fidem pertinentes) and traditions pertaining to observances and ceremonies (traditiones ad mores pertinentes), as suggested by various groups in the sessions leading up to the final decree, it might have prevented a number of theologians from misinterpreting tradition in the final decree as standing for revealed dogmas and moral principles.  

40 In fact, traditiones, Maurice Bévenot argues, “referred always primarily to the various rites, observances and practices of the church and only indirectly to the fact that some of them (e.g. the sacraments) involved the faith too.”  

Along with the question of the content of tradition was the distinct though related question of the relation between tradition and Scripture. In the language of the final decree “gospel” is considered a rich and an all-encompassing term in which the “salvific content” of God’s self-gift to the world in the person of Christ reflected in faith (fides) and conduct (mores) is disclosed in the written word of canonical Scriptures (libris scriptis) and unwritten traditions (sine scripto traditionibus), both of which are to be


41 Ibid., 341-342. It is important to note that in these pages Bévenot too quickly dismisses the use of tradition in both the singular and the plural in discerning the Council’s intention. See Jedin, A History of the Council of Trent, 2: 58-60.

accepted (*pari pietatis affectu*) “with a like feeling of piety and reverence.” Though the final decree did not contain the two-source formula, “*partim...partim...*” (“partly Scripture, partly tradition”), but instead the coordinating conjunction *et*, indicating one source of revelation in two forms, a critical mass of pre-Tridentine Catholic theology and the preponderance of post-Tridentine Catholic discourse expressed revelation in terms of the *partim...partim* distinction between Scripture and tradition. In order to substantiate its account of revelation, Trent maintained an ecclesiological pneumatology in the spirit of the early Church Fathers and medieval theology, which perceived an unbroken covenantal bond, guided by the presence of the Spirit, between the apostolic deposit and texts, the historical moments of the church, and the church’s present

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43 Ibid.

44 See for example, John L. Murphy, *The Notion of Tradition in John Driedo* (Milwaukee, Seraphic, 1959). It is important to note the polemical context of the two-source theory. Although Scripture and tradition are growing apart by the thirteenth century, the understanding of Scripture and tradition as two distinct sources of revelation was formulated in its “*partim...partim*” form by the Dutch theologian Albert Pigge (1490-1542) immediately before Trent and principally in response to the Reformers. See George Tavard, “Tradition in Early Post-Tridentine Theology,” *Theological Studies* 23 (1962): 377-405.

45 Cf. Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, 73-75; Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, 131-150 and 195-209; Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 156-176; Joseph Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, 26-35. Having suggested that the preponderance of post-Tridentine theology expressed itself in terms of the “*partim...partim*” distinction, the reader needs be aware that these expressions vary according to each particular thinker. Some, for example, Melchior Cano, Martin Perez de Ayala, Johannes Cochlaeus and Augustinian Aurelius Sanutus do not quote from the Tridentine decree, but instead formulate the distinction within complex and sophisticated accounts of revelation that offer subtle distinctions between different types of tradition. For an excellent analysis of post-Tridentine thinking that attends to the nuances of these thinkers’ ideas of tradition see Tavard, “Tradition in Early Post-Tridentine Theology,” 377-405.
moment. But the Reformation had called into question the authenticity of the bond between the past and the present, as well as the provenance and practice of the church’s many embodied traditions. In many instances the church’s concrete embodiment of particular traditions had become so wanton that the character of tradition as a legitimate and integral expression of revelation now was seen as an abusive human invention obscuring the presence of God. In its effort to reply to the Reformation, most post-Tridentine Catholic theology began to substantiate the concept of tradition from a theological horizon that had reconfigured its ecclesiological referent from “seeing tradition as having its reference to the past, [to seeing] it in reference to the current magisterium of the Church.” In the newly reconfigured post-Tridentine Catholic theology, then, can be seen the shift in emphasis in which the principle of receptivity, as the primary discourse for speaking of tradition, recedes and gives way to the principle of living teaching authority [magisterium] as the privileged language and grammar in which the modern notion of tradition is discussed.

46 Cf. Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 173.


48 Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 176.

49 For a summary of post-Tridentine Catholic thought see Tavard, Holy Writ or Holy Church, 225-247.

50 Cf. Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 176 and 182.
IV. The Post-Tridentine Idea of Tradition

The post-Tridentine shift in emphasis away from receptivity to authority was even more pronounced in France when Pius VII, in an effort to repair the destructive influence the French Revolution had wrought on the church both internally and in its relationship to the French state, signed the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801. In so doing he centralized ecclesial authority in the papacy in the long term by agreeing to create a new episcopate for the newly redrawn dioceses.\(^5\) Despite its tenure in France, the Gallican tradition’s failure to address adequately the new pressures from the modern French state, in part, made possible the conditions for the emergence of Ultramontanism during the period of Bourbon Restoration. The Gallican tradition, according to many of its Ultramontanist critics, offered an impoverished ecclesiological vision for the French church and state, which was “orientated toward the support of a simply national ecclesio-political system having as its most conspicuous feature the subordination of the Church to the State.”\(^5\)


Although the Ultramontanes exercised a considerable influence on the development of church’s thinking with regard to papal infallibility up to Vatican I, the Ultramontane doctrine of papal infallibility failed to provide a long-term compelling theo-political alternative to Gallicanism for the French state.\textsuperscript{53}

That Ultramontanism in its nineteenth-century form was unable to flourish in the twentieth century was in large part the consequence of the failure of such nineteenth-century Ultramontanists as Joseph de Maistre (1754-1821) to articulate an intelligible account of tradition capable of reconciling the conceptual tension between the ideas of infallibility\textsuperscript{54} and sovereignty.\textsuperscript{55} De Maistre understood the concept of tradition in terms of the inherited precedence of the past reflected in a society’s fundamental beliefs and embodied ideally in monarchical power. But unlike his predecessor, the British statesman and political philosopher, Edmund Burke (1729-1797), de Maistre considered tradition more than simply inherited precedence employed as a pragmatic tool for ordering society. Tradition, for de Maistre, was divine revelation, that primitive revelation which, despite human error, disclosed fundamental truths about humanity that could only be derived from God.\textsuperscript{56} The basic ideas of sovereignty and infallibility were, in their various

\textsuperscript{53} For example, see Hermann Josef Pottmeyer, \textit{Die Rolle des Papsttums im dritten Jahrtausend} (Freiburg: Herder, 1999).

\textsuperscript{54} See \textit{Du Pape}, 2 vols. (Lyons, 1819).


religious, social and political expressions, the normative dogmas to which reason must submit. Having opposed reason to tradition and correlated the latter with authority, de Maistre was able to employ authority as a “polemical battering-ram,” Isaiah Berlin notes, as well as to devote his rhetorical gifts and intellectual powers to “making the facts fit his preconceived notions, not to developing concepts which fit newly discovered, or newly visualized, facts.”\(^{57}\) In part, this explains why de Maistre could ignore medieval doctrines of papal infallibility designed to limit the power of popes.\(^{58}\) As a consequence of de Maistre’s metaphysics of authority and his reaction to the rationalism and individualism of the Enlightenment, a fundamental truth about the rationality of traditions was unable to show itself: namely, that traditions themselves are “bearers of reason” that “require and need revolutions for their continuance.”\(^{59}\) In this respect, de Maistre’s idea of tradition brings into relief the post-Tridentine transformation of tradition. The main feature of this transformation consists of the modern process of juridification the notion of tradition undergoes. Now the truth claims of tradition, both apostolic and ecclesial, need not necessarily be liturgically and practically embodied by the episcopate for their justification, but instead only need reference to the principle of power from which they issue, namely, in the virtue of the episcopate’s authority.

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\(^{59}\) MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” in *The Monist* 60 (1977): 461.
Had it been the destiny of the nineteenth century to call for a new precision in the idea of tradition, as Yves Congar suggests it was,\(^6^0\), it was not incidentally so, since among the many events of that century, including the resurgence of tradition manifesting itself in various forms in de Maistre, de Lammenais, and de Bonald, the nineteenth century witnessed the First Vatican Council. The Council’s dogmatic constitution on faith, Dei filius, repeats the Tridentine decrees’ assertion that revelation is contained in both the written books of Scripture and the unwritten traditions of the church.\(^6^1\) It also affirms the magisterium to be the primary subject of the active tradition of the ecclesia,\(^6^2\) and it gives official expression to the juridification of the idea of tradition in the fourth chapter of the dogmatic constitution on the church, Pastor aeternus, by ascribing infallibility to the bishop of Rome by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority.\(^6^3\)

Theologically, it was not uncommon for theologians to regard the faithful as dependent upon the magisterium to receive the objective contents of faith (tradition) and thus, the faithful were considered to possess a “passive infallibility” in contrast to the

\(^{60}\) Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 213.

\(^{61}\) See chapter 2 of the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith,” in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, 2:806.

\(^{62}\) See chapter 3 of the “Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith,” in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, 2:807.

\(^{63}\) See chapter 4 of “The First Dogmatic Constitution on the Church of Christ,” in Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, 2:815-16. This brief characterization of the First Vatican Council’s documents is intended to show one line of thinking that continues into the Council and finds official expression in its decrees. This line of thought should not be mistaken for the many other important tendencies present at the council.
magisterium’s “active infallibility”. However, John Henry Newman, Matthias Scheeben, and Johann Adam Möhler before both of them, believed and argued that the laity played a more active role (sensus fidelium) in the transmission of tradition. For Möhler, tradition is an intrinsically communicative reality that encompasses the whole of Christianity, including Scripture. He was able to see the partim...partim interpretation of revelation within the context of the Reformation and thus interpret it as the Catholic response to the Reformer’s disjunction between Scripture and tradition. Möhler’s great achievement, along with drawing attention to the interior reality of tradition guided by the Spirit, was to unite the subjective (spirit) and the objective (texts) dimensions of tradition in a theology of communion that showed the Spirit’s action is united with the people’s consciousness and the magisterium’s acts.

Along with Möhler the question of tradition for Newman was not simply an abstract juridical exercise, but one that had concrete implications for the life of the church, as Newman’s research on the Arian controversy led him to discover that the laity

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64 For example, see Giovanni Perrone, Praelectiones theologicae, vol. 1 (Romae: Collegio Urbano de Propaganda Fide, 1835-42) and Carlo Passaglia, Commentarius de praerogativis beati Petri, apostolorum principis: auctoritate divinatun litterarum comprobatis, (Ratisbonae: Manz, 1850).

65 For a brief summary of the sensus fidelium in Newman and Scheeben see Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 209-213.

was able to preserve the tradition of faith better than the bishops in the fourth century.  
Along with Newman’s own personal experience of the role the phenomenon of tradition plays in the life of a Christian, his idea of development brought to the attention of nineteenth-century Catholic thinkers the underlying tension that had formed between human history and Christian belief.

A little more than a decade after Newman had died, the Modernist crisis required Catholicism to address this tension, and, in so doing, to revisit its conception of tradition. Modernism confronted Catholicism with the question of how to articulate the relationship between “historical documentation and tradition as the Church lives it, as theology, the science of faith, can and should conceive of it,” Yves Congar writes. “Was tradition reducible to the demands and limitations of history, or does it go beyond them, and if so, how and under what conditions.”

That is to say, at a fundamental level, Modernism was the expression of the two powerful and deeply antagonistic forces, tradition (continuity) and modernity (rupture), coming to bear on the intellectual life of late-nineteenth century

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68 For example, see Newman’s essay “Milman’s View of Christianity” in Essays: Critical and Historical, vol. II (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), 186-248. Newman himself was already aware of this tension and was attempting to address it before he became Catholic.

69 Congar, Tradition and Traditions, 189.
Catholicism.⁷⁰ For many Catholic intellectuals, particularly those whom we have come to refer to as “modernists,” the pressure of these forces, especially as they manifested in the critical methods for reading Scripture, overwhelmed the speculative framework available to late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Catholicism.⁷¹ For what the historical and exegetical methods managed to disclose to Catholic intellectuals practicing them was the inadequate and insufficient nature of Catholicism’s response to modernity. Indeed, the modernist crisis constituted an “epistemological crisis”⁷² in nineteenth-century Catholicism, and the work of such thinkers as Loisy was the occasion for the disclosure of the inadequate and the insufficient philosophical and theological theories Catholicism had established to address the crisis.


⁷² Cf. MacIntyre, “Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” 453-472.
CHAPTER THREE

THEOLOGY, HISTORY AND THE PROBLEM OF TRADITION IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY CATHOLICISM

Introduction

Chapters one and two have engaged the modern problem of representation and the transformation of tradition in modern Catholicism. Chapter three examines representations of tradition in a late-modern French culture that is experiencing irreconcilable narratives. By the end of the nineteenth century the power the church wielded over important French ideational and cultural institutions had waned as a consequence of the concerted effort by anti-clerical forces throughout the tenure of the Third Republic. As the church’s presence in French institutions decreased, it tended to embody a narrative of increasing insularity from the developments of the modern world coming to expression in the intellectual life of France. While the church found itself becoming more and more isolated from the progress of the modern world, the modern world continued to embrace a narrative that fostered a laicized intellectual life designed to develop in ways which were self-consciously secular.

It is in the context of these seemingly incompatible narratives that this chapter explores how two very important representatives of tradition understand the relationship between theology and history. Alfred Loisy (1857-1940) and John Henry Newman (1801-1890) were two such figures in France and in England, who understood that the relationship between theology and history is central to the arbitration of power in the representation of tradition. Although Newman wrote and thought in a culture where the
tension between Christianity and modernity was not as deeply felt as it was for Loisy,\textsuperscript{1} at stake for both is how to think about change and what must be determinative in adjudicating change in tradition. Here, in Newman’s emphasis on continuity and Loisy’s insistence on innovation, we encounter two competing resolutions to the problem of representation in the phenomenon of tradition.

I. The Thomistic Renewal of Philosophy and the Intellectual Life of Nineteenth-Century French Catholicism

At the end of the nineteenth century, the force of Joseph Kleutgen’s interpretation of Aquinas and its influence upon the intellectual life of the Catholic Church came to bear most heavily on those Catholic intellectuals whose academic boundaries extended beyond the disciplines of theology and philosophy. For Scripture scholars and church historians in particular, the Thomistic renewal of philosophy, \textit{Aeterni Patris}, and four years later the letter on historical studies, \textit{Saepenumero considerantes} (1883), made life for those immersed in the intellectual life of the church and sympathetic to intellectual developments outside of the church complicated and at times, intractable. For along with the ecclesial politics that accompanied these documents, the positivistic sciences themselves were presented in a subordinate manner. In keeping with the Scholastic method of distinguishing between speculative and practical philosophy (metaphysics and natural philosophy), the positivistic sciences were regarded under the auspices of

\textsuperscript{1} In part this may explain why Newman was so badly misread in France.
philosophy and in pre-modern terms (as Aquinas had considered them following Aristotle), as designating a number of disciplines whose subject matter may vary but whose formal object (human reason) is the same. Contrary to the sovereignty the positivistic sciences had enjoyed for the previous two or three hundred years, they were construed as prolegomena (preparation) for the reception of divine revelation when rightly used. For those Catholic scholars familiar with and sympathetic to modern critical theory, this account of the relationship between theology and philosophy provoked the question whether one could continue to be an orthodox Catholic and a practitioner of modern critical methods given the trajectory the church’s intellectual life appeared to be on with the Thomistic renewal.

In France this relationship was made even more complex by the ideational, cultural, and institutional transformation France was undergoing at the end of the nineteenth century. At the beginning of the Third Republic, the Church in France, in part

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3 Undoubtedly this is the tension raised by Maurice Le Sage d’Hauteroche D’Hulst in his controversial essay “La question biblique,” Le Correspondent 134 (1893): 201-51 and later in scripture scholars such as Marie-Joseph Lagrange. For the latter, see for example La méthode historique (Paris : Lecroffre, 1903).
as a result of the Napoleonic Concordat of 1801, occupied an important and influential space in the French educational system and exercised a considerable amount of influence over French culture, politics, and the daily lives of French citizens. But the Third Republic’s “laic laws” passed by anti-clerical republicans in an attempt “to fortify and secularize the national schools so that they might successfully compete against, if not surpass, the rapidly growing Catholic educational system,” loosened the grip the Catholic Church had on the French higher and secondary education system. The most important provision of these laws mandated that state faculties alone were to confer degrees. Students attending “free” universities were required to choose between examinations by state faculties or “mixed jury”: state faculty members as well as faculty members from the candidate’s faculty with the presiding officer always being a state faculty member. For Catholic institutions the “law restricted the freedom of instruction, [since] the curriculum and methods were naturally determined to some extent by the examination which concluded the course.”


6 Ibid., 143. Along with the secularization of the education system in France during the Third Republic, anti-clerical republicans found other legislative ways to limit the church’s cultural influence. As Acomb notes, “anti-clericals attempted to curtail the privileges of the Church in another sphere which had long been regarded as peculiarly its won: death. They found a precedent for this in a decree of the Convention in 1793 which provided that members of all faiths should be buried in one cemetery” (202). The Third
What is more, as part of the educational reforms of the Third Republic, zealous anticlerical republicans supported historians in France’s secular universities conversant with and sympathetic to critical methods.\textsuperscript{7} Such unwritten policies afforded anticlerical republicans the opportunity to tout vicariously the republican platform.\textsuperscript{8} It also advanced the anti-Catholic policies put forward during the Third Republic and, in turn, increasingly complicated the lives of Catholic historians, many who found themselves in the unfortunate position of balancing the competing interests of republican policies, often stridently anti-Catholic, with the doctrinal claims of the church.\textsuperscript{9}

While the Catholic intellectual scene in the early and mid-nineteenth century was philosophically eclectic with moments of spiritual and intellectual rejuvenation, for example, René de Chateaubriand’s \textit{Le Génie du Christianisme} in 1802, Catholic seminaries in the nineteenth century were “above all schools of virtue” in which seminarians were transformed into “high-minded, hardworking, and personally austere” clergy in preparation for life in a parish where they would say Mass and administer the Republic’s funeral legislation was a reflection of the anti-clerical attempt to transfer the practice of charity from the Church to local and central government (cf. 207).


sacraments. They were, Marvin O’Connell writes, “places of professional preparation, not research centers.” Seminaries offered little to no intellectual content. Not only were secular opponents such as Kant, Comte, and Hume strictly avoided but even intellectual engagements with theological sources as weighty as Thomas Aquinas, Bonaventure, and Duns Scotus were seen to be unnecessary. The natural and social sciences, literature and Christian art were all equally ignored. The study of Scripture and the early church fathers were reduced to corroborating doctrinal propositions contained in manuals. In short, the seminarian’s day consisted of “liturgical and private prayer, some manual labor, some organized games, attention to minute observance of the rule as a means of harnessing the will and the passions, and a good deal of idleness.” As a result, “where philosophy flourished, Catholic faith was absent. [And] where the Catholic faith was sustained, philosophy failed to flourish.”

That the intellectual life of seminaries in France in the nineteenth century had reached its nadir was perhaps a symptom of a broader intellectual malaise appearing in Catholicism during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. But, often lost in this


12 O’Connell, Critics on Trial, 13.

13 Alasdair MacIntyre, God, Philosophy, Universities: A Selective History of the Catholic Philosophical Tradition (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2009), 133.

14 Ibid., 131-143.
narrative of Catholicism, in large part because of the quantity of condemnations at this time, is the “Catholic renaissance” that begins to take place during the mid and latter half of the nineteenth century in which the contribution of poets and essayists such as Charles Péguy (1873-1914) and Paul Claudel (1868-1955), the intellectual depth and integrity of John Henry Newman’s mind, and the speculative insights of Maurice Blondel, though all to some degree marginalized in the church at the time, would come to have significant purchase in rejuvenating the intellectual and cultural life of Catholicism in the early part of the twentieth century. Alexander Dru has insightfully characterized this period at the end of the nineteenth century “as the renewal of Catholic life and thought, the re-establishment of links with the culture of the time, but conditioned by the profound division within the Church on the problems this rejuvenation raised.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, early and mid-nineteenth century attempts to rethink Christianity in light of modern philosophy by Catholic theologians such as Georg Hermes, Anton Günther and Antonio Rosmini-Serbati, despite their creativity, revealed the simultaneously novel and ambiguous situation modern Catholicism found itself in by the time French Catholic biblical exegete, Alfred Loisy (1857-1940), experienced the larger cultural laicization Europe was undergoing in the nineteenth century and fashioned his work to reconcile the rift between Catholic orthodoxy and modern intellectual life.

II. Alfred Loisy

When Alfred Loisy was sent in 1878 from the major seminary at Châlons-sur-Marne to l’Institut catholique de Paris, little did he know he would come “to live in two intellectual worlds, a condition he [would have] to reckon with when he began to publish in the 1890s.”\(^{16}\) At the Institut catholique he encountered Louis Duchense (1843-1922), professor of ecclesiastical history, who had given his teaching a critical orientation he himself had received while studying at the École des Hautes Études in Paris and honed in Rome as a member of the École Française de Rome and disciple of the well-known Italian archaeologist and epigraphist, J.B. de Rossi (1822-1894).\(^{17}\) Though relations between Loisy and Duchense would cool years after Loisy had matriculated at the Institut catholique,\(^{18}\) it was Duchense who introduced Loisy to textual criticism by lending Loisy a copy of Tischendorf’s edition of the Greek New Testament during the summer of 1881,

\(^{16}\) C.J.T. Talar, “Innovation and Biblical Interpretation” in Catholicism Contending with Modernity, ed. Darrell Jodock, 199.

\(^{17}\) Alec R. Vidler, The Modernist Movement in the Roman Church: Its Origins and Outcome (New York: Gordon Press, 1976), 70-71. It should be noted Duchense’s doctorate on papal history from the Sorbonne was delated to the Congregation of the Index. This event along with his criticisms of the conventional narratives concerning the origins of some French dioceses may have contributed to his reluctance to publicly champion Loisy’s reform of scripture studies in the Catholic Church at the time.

\(^{18}\) According to Loisy, Duchense failed to follow through on his alleged promise to recommend Loisy for the chair of Assyriology at the École Pratique des Hautes Études. See Alfred Firmin Loisy, Choses passées (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1913), 98-100; and Mémoires pour servir à l’histoire de notre temps, 3 vols. (Paris: Émile Nourry, 1930-31), 165-172. Loisy also expressed his frustration at what characterized as Duchense’s aversion to discussing contemporary biblical questions. See Loisy, Mémoires, 1:96, 164.
and, in so doing, unwittingly creating the conditions for the possibility of the form of modernism that flourished in France. In Tischendorf’s rendering of the Greek New Testament Loisy saw clearly for the first time – much to his surprise - the distinct nature of each gospel narrative. The discrepancies between the narratives seemed irreconcilable to the notion of history he had inherited while in Paris.

In 1881, as Loisy was becoming conversant in the practice of historiography as a critical discipline, he was appointed to the faculty at the Institut catholique to teach Hebrew. At the same time he was required to take a course in Scripture at the major seminary in Paris, Saint-Sulpice, where the professor of scripture, Fulcran Vigouroux (1873-1915), was engaged in an attempt to align Scripture with the most recent discoveries in science. Vigouroux’s project had the two-fold aim of refuting the rationalism of Ernest Renan (1823-1892) and bringing about the reconciliation of the Catholic interpretation of Scripture and modern science. Ironically, Vigouroux’s irenic reading of scripture was, by Loisy’s own admission, more harmful to Loisy’s intellectual development than the rationalist reading he received from Renan. For Vigouroux’s interpretation of Scripture reinforced in Loisy “the sense of the chasm separating Catholic

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21 Cf. Loisy, Mémoires,1:189 and Choses passées, 58.
orthodoxy from modern intellectual life” that he was beginning to recognize and experience himself.22

In the same year Loisy was appointed lecturer of Hebrew at the Institut catholique and suffered Fulcran Vigouroux’s Scripture course at Saint-Sulpice, he began to attend the lectures of Renan. Had Duchense’s mentoring initiated Loisy into the practice of historical criticism, Renan’s lectures on textual criticism of the Old Testament made Loisy a proficient practitioner.23 Renan’s critical scholarship left an indelible mark on Loisy’s intellectual development by confirming for Loisy the chasm between theology and history, a chasm that would resurface in his work and as the source of his disagreement with Blondel. This chasm also would function as a source of inspiration for Loisy’s own project of a rapprochement between theology and history.24

Loisy’s appropriation of the exegetical methods he had learned from Duchense and Renan, and his attempt to broker a tenable relationship between the modern discipline of history and Catholic doctrine, first came to expression in his 1883 non-extant thesis on the nature of biblical inspiration written for his degree of doctor in theology two years after his appointment as lecturer at the Institut catholique.25 In the

22 Hill, The Politics of Modernism, 27.

23 On Loisy’s debt to Renan see Mémoires, 1:99 and 3:437.

24 Cf. Ibid., Mémoires, 1:118.

25 For a brief summary and discussion of this thesis see Loisy, Choses passées, 70-3 and Mémoires, 1:131.
thesis Loisy puts forward the notion of the “relative truth” of the Bible as the source of reconciliation between the original meaning of the biblical text and the Catholic Church’s ahistorical and outmoded theological interpretation of it. The rector of the Institut catholique, Msgr. Maurice Le Sage d’Hauteroche D’Hulst, though sympathetic to Loisy’s overarching objective of reform, expressed concern that Loisy’s thesis would compromise him, the Institut catholique, and Loisy too, and therefore Loisy did not publish his first doctoral thesis. Instead, Loisy submitted a new thesis in 1890 on the canonical formation of the Old Testament as he was appointed professor of scripture at the Institut catholique. This appointment allowed him to teach the exegetical methods he had honed in the intervening years between the two theses. Regrettably, however, controversy followed Loisy soon after he began his new appointment when the superior-general of Saint-Sulpice seminary, M. Icard, concerned about Loisy’s exegesis of the opening chapters of Genesis, prohibited the seminarians of Saint-Sulpice from attending Loisy’s lectures.

III. Loisy and *La Question biblique* in France

Ernest Renan’s death in 1892 prompted the editor of the Catholic periodical *Le Correspondant* to ask Msgr. d’Hulst to write an article on Renan.26 Though reluctant at

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26 For a detailed exposition and discussion of both Msgr. d’Hulst’s letter on Renan and his 1893 article on the biblical question in France, the political circumstances surrounding both articles and the controversy that ensued as a consequence of the 1893
first, given the complicated relationship Renan had had with the Catholic Church, d’Hulst obliged and in the October 25th 1892 issue of the periodical, d’Hulst published his article on Renan. The tenor of the article indirectly suggested to most readers that though the so-called “biblical question” lay dormant in the Catholic Church, it inevitably would surface, and already had, when, for example, d’Hulst remarked, that Renan’s departure from Catholicism might have been avoided had he received a better reading of Scripture as a seminarian.27 The generally positive reception of the article encouraged d’Hulst to write another the following year (1893),28 this time directly addressing the biblical question in France with the hope that the article would be politically auspicious for the Institut catholique and relieve some of the ecclesiastical and the anticlerical pressure the Institut had come under.29 D’Hulst’s article also was an attempt to secure toleration for Loisy’s teaching, though it did not mention Loisy by name. Instead it mentioned three schools of thought on the relationship between modern science and the doctrine of inspiration, naming the most controversial of the three, the école large, the school of thought willing to speak the language and employ the methods of rationalist critics.


29 For what d’Hulst sought to achieve through this article see the brief reprinted note from d’Hulst to Loisy in Loisy, *Mémoires*, 1:235. For Loisy’s interpretation of d’Hulst’s article and the events that followed see Loisy, *Mémoires*, 1:224-257.
Readers assumed Loisy to be the head the *école large*, and the article had the opposite effect of D’Hulst’s original intention, compromising Loisy’s appointment as professor of Scripture at the Institut catholique and requiring him to return to teaching only Semitic languages at the Institut. To make matters worse, D’Hulst had misrepresented Loisy’s position on the relationship between the doctrine of inspiration and the scientific study of the Bible. Loisy’s last lecture as professor of Scripture at the Institut catholique, published in an emended version in the journal Loisy had himself founded, *L’Enseignement biblique*,\(^{30}\) was the occasion for the clarification of his position and his response to D’Hulst. Loisy made clear his starting point for the study of Scripture was not the traditional doctrine of inspiration, but rather Scripture as a collection of human documents to be studied, as other texts were, by the best and latest exegetical methods. In terms of content, Loisy maintained the Bible contained scientific and historical errors and the veracity of claims related to matters of faith and morals needed to be considered through the notion of relative truth.\(^{31}\) The publication of Loisy’s lecture led to his dismissal from the Institut in November 1893, not coincidentally, the same month the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* was published.


\(^{31}\) Though when one reads Loisy, “one has the impression that the principle of relative truth is in fact of universal application,” as James Tunstead Burtchaell has aptly observed. See *Catholic Theories of Biblical Inspiration Since 1810: A Review and Critique* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 224.
IV. “A. Firmin” and Newman

The Irish-born, English Jesuit George Tyrrell (1861-1909) once remarked in a letter to Albert Houtin: “as Luther would have burned Harnack, so Newman would have burned Loisy.” Whatever else one may think about Tyrrell’s comment, it does allude to the fact that a chapter in the story of the battle for Newman’s legacy and its role in the intellectual life of the church belong to Loisy’s relationship to Newman. And that relationship begins in 1896, only six years after Newman’s death, when Baron Friedrich von Hügel (1852-1925) sent Loisy a package containing several of Newman’s works. By the time Loisy received von Hügel’s package, he was into his third year of chaplaincy at the convent school run by Dominican nuns in the Paris suburb of Neuilly. Loisy’s new

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32 Quoted from George Tyrell’s letter to Albert Houtin, 4 December 1907 in Thomas Michael Loome, Liberal Catholicism, Reform Catholicism, Modernism: A Contribution to a New Orientation in Modernist Research (Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1979), 39.


34 For a list of Newman’s work von Hügel sent to Loisy, see Loisy, Mémoires, 1:415.
pastoral post in Neuilly, given to him a few months after his dismissal from the Institut
catholique, afforded him the opportunity to contemplate and consider first hand the
dialectical and apologetic realities of Catholicism in the modern world.

What Loisy found in von Hugel’s package of Newman’s writings drew him
intellectually into the theological heart of the Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic
Church. For in Newman’s idea of the development of doctrine was an account of the
relationship between Christian doctrine and history that seemed to extract the kernel of
truth latent in the two competing concepts of Christian doctrine at the center of the crisis:
on the one hand, Christian doctrine as “immutable and perennially valid,” and, on the
other hand, as “culturally limited expressions of truths which are antecedent to their
formulation.” 35 Even better, Newman’s notion of development drew on the competing
concepts without falling victim to the ideological extremes both concepts might lend
themselves to: neo-scholastic essentialism 36 and liberal Protestant culturalism. In

35 Gabriel Daly, “Theological and Philosophical Modernism,” in Catholicism Contending
with Modernity, 88.

36 The noun “essentialism” is intended to denote the Aristotelian/Thomistic notion that,
prescinding from the distinction between what an object is and how it is, the identity of
an object can be determined through its substance-essence. It is important to be mindful
of the historical context of neo-scholastic essentialism, however. While still drawing on
Aristotelian metaphysics, it was in response to the mind-body dualism of Descartes, the
empiricism of Hobbes, Locke and Hume, and the idealism of Kant, all of which in their
respective ways challenged the intellects direct engagement with reality and the
possibility of it being receptive to the forms of external substances. This context shaped and
formed how various neo-scholastic thinkers read and formulated their interpretations
of Aquinas. For this context and how it shaped the neo-Scholastic interpretation of
Aquinas’s epistemology and ontology see Alasdair MacIntyre, “Essence and Existence”
Newman’s idea of development was a new horizon for Catholicism – albeit, one in need of a little nuance, Loisy thought – from which Catholicism could begin to reconsider its understanding of revelation. Newman’s idea of development and the novelty of his non-scholastic language so astonished Loisy that only a couple of months after reading Newman, Loisy declared, in correspondence to von Hügel, that Newman was “the most open theologian to have existed in the Church since Origen.”

Loisy’s enthusiasm for Newman need not come as a surprise, since few foreign intellectuals and very few English intellectuals have been as well received in France as Newman was in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It might come as a surprise that in France Newman “may have been more eagerly used than intelligently listened to.” That is, in France the reception of Newman more often than not involved interpolating into Newman’s theory of development “a more or less drastic principle of evolution, so that [Newman’s French readers] tended not only to misconceive but even to reverse Newman’s meaning,” according to one author.

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37 Loisy, Mémoires, 1:426.
39 Ibid., 184.
40 Ibid. It should be noted the context of Bouyer’s comment refers to Henri Bremond’s reading of Newman and its influence on Newman’s French readers, which, Bouyer seems
Of course, the temptation for all Newman’s readers is to read the essay on
development as a systematically composed treatise. But a close reading of Newman’s
correspondence and diaries reveal that Newman’s theory of development “does not claim
to provide a systematically elaborated explanation of variations in church teaching and
practice,” 41 but rather it is an *apologia* that emerges as, “the fruit of a complex,
personally acquired appreciation of the concrete facts of Christian history.” 42 Regrettably,
Newman’s use of scientific language, a register he inherited as an undergraduate at
Oxford, can belie the personal and apologetic thrust of the essay. In fact, Newman is not
interested in arguing whether there is “development” between ancient and modern
Christianity in their various forms. Newman argues that “though history shows none of
the modern churches to be identical with the ancient Church, history also shows one of
the modern churches to be more nearly identical than any other.” 43

Loisy’s appreciation and exposition of Newman’s theory of development first
comes to public expression in the first of a series of articles written for the *Revue du


42 Ibid., 17.

43 Owen Chadwick, *From Bossuet to Newman: The Idea of Doctrinal Development*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1957), 143.
Clergé Français (R.C.F.) under the pseudonym, A. Firmin.\textsuperscript{44} In the first article, Loisy expresses his enthusiasm for Newman with a balanced, perspicacious exposition and interpretation of Newman’s essay on development. Yet, within the article Loisy’s own concern and criticism begin to surface, which seems to corroborate the observation that Newman’s writings “fell in with, and accelerated, the line of thought that Loisy was already pursuing.”\textsuperscript{45} The line of thought Loisy was pursuing was whether Newman’s idea of development was able to resolve the so-called \textit{la Question biblique}. For chief among Loisy’s criticisms of Newman’s account of development is why Newman does not engage the question of revelation and how it enters the tropological stream Newman has analogically created for his theory of development.\textsuperscript{46} Loisy expresses his dissatisfaction with Newman on the question of revelation again toward the end of the article when he dismisses Newman’s account of inspiration as \textit{obita dicta} in Scripture.\textsuperscript{47}

Loisy’s evaluative remarks concerning Newman foreshow the direction in which Loisy intends to move Newman’s idea of development, a direction that will disclose itself fully four years later in Loisy’s 1902 work \textit{L’Évangile et l’Église}. However, the bearings for this new direction in which Loisy takes Newman’s thought are marked by the broad


\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 20.
gap between theology and history that he claims to find Newman advocating, a gap one
imagines Newman would have been uncomfortable with had he considered it. For
example, in discussing the argument from “antecedent probability,” Newman suggests
that when we consider particular doctrines such as the Incarnation for which Scripture is
the key referent, “we shall see that it is absolutely impossible for [it] to remain in the
mere letter of Scripture, if [it is] to be more than mere words, and to convey a definite
idea to the recipient.”^48 For Newman there is a fluid movement that takes place between
the scriptural, the theological and the historical. He continues: “[w]hen it is declared that
‘the Word became flesh,’ three wide questions open upon us on the very announcement.
What is meant by ‘the Word,’ what by ‘flesh,’ what by ‘became’? The answers to these
involve a process of investigation, and are developments.”^49 In Loisy’s interpretation of
Newman on the very same point, the fluid movement between the scriptural, the
theological and the historical is lost.50 As Loisy writes: “It is easy to understand that
Christianity must have a development...because it was impossible, even for the most
important points of belief, to adhere to the letter of Scripture without falling into a vain


^49 Ibid.

^50 Here one might recall Yves Congar’s observation that one of the unfortunate
intellectual errors of the Modernists was that they were unable to distinguish between
theology and dogma. See A History of Theology, trans. Hunter Guthrie (New York:
cult of formulas.”

Loisy’s omission of “mere letter” in Newman’s text reflects his aversion to dogmatic formulas and his reluctance to grant even the prospect of a theological interpretation of Scripture.\(^\text{52}\) Also missing from Loisy’s interpretation of Newman’s assertion of the necessity of an external authority as arbiter of true and false development\(^\text{53}\) is the “heuristic character” allotted to this external authority in Newman’s argument.\(^\text{54}\) For Loisy, “authority and revelation are correlative terms.”\(^\text{55}\)

Nicholas Lash observes that one key stylistic difference between Newman’s essay on development and the Loisy’s interpretation of it in the first Firmin article is that the latter is “strikingly sparing of metaphor.”\(^\text{56}\) Newman had drawn on a repository of images and metaphors to express the idea of development in a broad sense. But the broad sense of development was never unrelated to the idea of the development of doctrine. One often forgets that the process of development is, in addition to being psychological, historical


\(^{52}\) Cf. Francesco Turvasi, “The Development of Doctrine in John Cardinal Newman and Alfred Loisy” in John Henry Newman: Theology and Reform, 164-165. Loisy’s reluctance to grant a theological interpretation of Scripture is not entirely unwarranted. At the time, a theological interpretation would have involved little more than using Scripture as a proof-text for doctrine.


\(^{56}\) Lash, “Newman and ‘A. Firmin,” 60.
and theological, literary too, and the latter need not be unrelated to the others. Since, for Newman, the process of development takes place within an account of tradition that is grounded in the possibility of analogy, the genuine possibility of real difference and continuity between theology and history exists without each referring univocally to the other.

Loisy was interested in extending Newman’s theory of development into what has been termed an “evolutionary philosophy” beyond Christianity to the “spiritual development of humanity,” which the church could encourage and aid, were it to reform itself. As Loisy writes:

In order to give the theory of development the entire scope it consists of, expanding its historical base without which one would be unable to have knowledge, one should extend the principle more specifically and its application in more detail than Newman himself did, to the entire history of religion since the origin of humanity.

This last interest of Loisy’s can be read as the logical outcome of the observation that Loisy’s project sought not to contradict Newman’s work, but to continue it. Yet, when

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58 Cf. Ibid., 79-80.


61 Cf. Ronald Burke, “Was Loisy Newman’s Modern Disciple?,” in John Henry Newman: Theology and Reform, 147. The reader needs be aware that Burke’s essay
one considers Loisy’s early interest in Newman in light of the direction his later work would take, it appears less as a continuation of Newman’s work and more as “an attempt to verify by history the truth proclaimed by Feuerbach and by Comte that mankind, through all the manifold forms of creed and cult that it has invented, has always worshipped itself.”

V. L’Évangile et l’Église

“Inside many historians…there is a philosopher trying to get out; in Loisy’s case he escaped successfully.” This wry yet keen observation alludes to the fact that the more Loisy claimed the realm of history to be the intellectual integument upon which he conducted his reflection, the more philosophical his writing became. Thus, two years after the publication of the first Firmin article, the fourth Firmin article appeared and had as its central concern the immanent (historical) and the transcendent (theological) aspects contains Burke’s own reservation about whether Loisy’s project was, in Burke’s terms, “still Catholic?” Burke rightly claims that Loisy altered his theological horizon as a result of reading Newman. As Burke puts it, Loisy “moved away from Renan’s type of ‘evolutionary pantheism’ and toward an ‘incarnational theism’ more like Newman’s” (Burke, 144-145). What Newman’s “incarnational theism” is exactly is not clearly articulated by Burke.

62 For example, see La Religion (Paris: Émile Nourray, 1917) and Religion et Humanité (Paris: Émile Nourray, 1926).


64 Daly, Transcendence, 53.
of revelation. In his response to the French Protestant theologian Auguste Sabatier’s (1839-1901) claim that the history of Christian dogma is the history of religious feelings symbolically expressed, and that the truth of Christian dogma is relative only to those who adhere to them, Loisy begins his own account of revelation with the claim that revelation objectively considers the disclosure of God to humanity, which, “while realized in man, as God is, as an immanent manifestation in man, this manifestation need not be transcendent to man by its origin, content, or destination.” As his argument unfolds, Loisy employs the immanent dimension of revelation not simply to critique Sabatier, but also as a category through which his relativistic epistemology can challenge the dogmatic essentialism of Scholastic thought. He maintains that “particular forms of belief are indispensable to every religion, but absolute immobility of belief is excluded from every religion, being untenable and contrary to the nature of man’s expression of religious belief.” In the article Loisy goes to great lengths to preserve the distinction between the infinite (transcendent) and the finite (immanent) in his notion of revelation.

65 A.Fimin, “L’Idée de la revelation,” R.C.F. 21 (1900): 250-271. I am indebted to Gabriel Daly’s exegesis of this Firmin article. See Daly, Transcendence, 64-66.


and to express his account of revelation as something more than human reflection on religious truths.\textsuperscript{69}

With the publication of Adolf von Harnack’s public lectures delivered at the University of Berlin during the winter semester of 1899-1900,\textsuperscript{70} the immanent dimension of Loisy’s account of revelation in the fourth Firmin article came to full expression in his response to Harnack in \textit{L’Évangile et l’Église}. In his lectures Harnack had reduced the “essence of Christianity” to the individual believer’s relation to God. Prior to doing so, however, Harnack had encouraged historians to pursue and “to determine what is of permanent value” in Christianity, by suggesting that: “either the Gospel is in all respects identical with its earliest form, in which case it came with its time and has departed with it; or else it contains something which, under differing historical forms, is of permanent validity.”\textsuperscript{71} For Harnack the feeling of filial trust was the enduring reality of permanent validity in the gospel. It also was the reality that the apostolic tradition had obscured in the gospel portrayal of Jesus, according to Harnack. By imposing the antiquated Jewish concept of messianic consciousness on Jesus, the apostolic tradition had succeeded in inhibiting Jesus’s expression of filial trust for the Father.

\textsuperscript{69} Cf. ibid., 268.


\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 13-14.
Upon reading Harnack, Loisy was able to detect in Harnack’s and Sabatier’s project very little to rehabilitate the intellectual life of Christianity and very much to advance its dissolution, as he writes in the opening pages of EE.

At bottom, M. Sabatier and Herr Harnack have wished to reconcile Christian faith with the claims of science and of the scientific spirit of out time. The claims must indeed have become great, for the faith has become very small and modest. What would Luther have thought of his doctrine of salvation by faith, had it been presented to him with the amendment, “independently of creeds,” or with this other – “faith in a merciful father, for faith in the Son is no part of the gospel of Jesus”? Religion is thus reconciled with science, because it no longer encounters it. This trust in the goodness of God either exists in a man or it does not; but it seems impossible for a sentiment to contradict any conclusion of biblical or philosophical criticism.\(^2\)

Loisy’s ability to recognize the disjunction between theology and history in Harnack’s and Sabatier’s philosophies of history is expressed in his criticism of Harnack’s subordination of Jesus’s messianic consciousness to the feeling of filial trust, instead of recognizing it as a reflection of the consciousness of God’s providence.\(^3\)

According to Loisy, this subordination is a consequence of Harnack’s misunderstanding of the relationship between theology and history and a reflection of his questionable account of truth. Harnack’s misguided theory of truth gives Loisy the opportunity to

\(^2\) Loisy, EE, xii.

\(^3\) Loisy, EE, 56-57. The tension between faith (theology) and reason (history) and how this polarity discloses itself within the speculative (doctrinal) and practical (sacramental) life of the Church is the underlying current at work in EE - and, as some scholars have suggested, the tension embodied in Loisy’s own life as both “priest and savant.” See Lester R. Kurtz, The Politics of Heresy: The Modernist Crisis in Roman Catholicism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 57.
suggest, with the support of Newman’s idea of development, that all truth is subject to
limitations of history, and therefore subject to the original historical context out of which
it comes to expression. Here Loisy’s appropriation of Newman provides him the latitude
he needs to maintain the relativity of religious truth, while at the same time remaining in
what he considers to be the independent and value-free realm of history. Loisy’s
historical account of Jesus’s ministry is rendered in such a way that Jesus’s ministry in
the gospels has been preserved by being developed in the Catholic Church. He believes
Christianity can and must change, and this change need not necessarily contravene the
truth of Christianity. But, such change in Christianity is plausible only if theology -
specifically, nineteenth-century Scholastic theology – is arrested and subordinated to
critical-historical inquiry. Where such a rearrangement between theology and history is
possible, revelation can be approached without theological and metaphysical
presupposition. As he writes in his introduction:

There is no fundamental incompatibility between the professions of theologian
and historian. Possibly, there have already existed theologians who could be also
historians, that is, could deal with facts as they appear from evidence intelligently
investigated, without introducing their own conceptions into the texts they
explored, and able to take account of the change that the ideas of past times
inevitably undergo when adapted to modern thought. But it must be admitted that
there have been, and always will be, a far greater number, who, starting from a
general system, furnished by tradition, or elaborated by themselves under the
influence of tradition, unconsciously, or perhaps sometimes consciously, bend the
texts and the facts to the needs of their doctrine, though often honestly believing
they avoid the danger. It must be added that the adversaries of the theologians
have often brought to the discussion of these matters of religious history,
prejudices acquired before the examination of the facts, prejudices that can
interfere with calm and just investigation, fully as much as any theological bias.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{74} Loisy., \textit{EE}, x-xii.
Beyond engaging with Harnack, Loisy had in mind the prospect of uniting his notion of tradition to his philosophy of history through the idea of development, so as to simultaneously contest Harnack’s subjectivism and Scholastic essentialism. There is an “essence of Christianity,” according to Loisy, but it is found not in the primitivism of Harnack or Scholastic essentialism, but in the immutable reality of Christianity’s development.

To understand the essence of Christianity we must look to those vital manifestations which contain its reality, its permanent quintessence, recognizable in them, as the principal features of primitive Christianity are recognizable throughout their development. The particular and varied forms of the development, in so far as they are varied, are not of the essence of Christianity, but they follow one another, as it were, in a framework whose general proportions, though not absolutely constant, never cease to be balanced, so that if the figure change, its type does not vary, nor the law that governs its evolution. The essence of Christianity is constituted by the general features of this figure, the elements of this life and their characteristic properties; and this essence is unchangeable, like that of a living being, which remains the same while it lives, and to the extent to which it lives. The historian will find that the essence of Christianity has been more or less preserved in the different Christian communions.\(^75\)

Loisy’s aim in expropriating theology for a positivistic understanding of history was that such a coup would yield a process of reform in the church and would allow the church to translate the truths of faith into a contemporary idiom intelligible to the modern world. He was committed to the belief, perhaps not entirely insincerely, that such a

\(^75\) Ibid., EE, xxviii-xxix.
scientific methodology when applied to Scripture need not necessarily colonize faith, since science and theology explore different realities.

VI. After *L’Évangile et l’Église*

The publication of EE succeeded in drawing attention to the many neglected critical questions modern history posed to Christianity. In this respect, EE can be viewed as one Catholic scholar’s attempt to confront the challenge of modernity. At the center of this problem stood the problem of representation and what role history plays in mediating tradition. In EE Loisy envisions the historian as neither an apologist nor an adversary of Christianity.

[t]he historian as such need not constitute himself either apologist or adversary. He knows [faith] simply as a conception or a force whose antecedents, central manifestation and indefinite progress, he can analyze up to a point, but whose deep meaning and secret power are not things that can be deduced from simple analysis or critical discussion of texts and facts.

Having read EE, Blondel discerned in Loisy’s account a closed, self-sufficient view of history in which theological data are unnecessary to the interpretation of Scripture. In his correspondence with Baron Friedrich von Hügel Blondel affirmed the autonomy of the

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76 Cf. Daly, “Theological and Philosophical Modernism,” 90.

77 Loisy, EE, 32.
historian that Loisy advocated in EE.\textsuperscript{78} But, to Blondel’s mind, the methodological problem with Loisy’s view of history was that it failed to consider the role metaphysical presuppositions play in the practice of history.\textsuperscript{79} At issue between Blondel and Loisy is not whether history is a science, but whether history is a science unaffected by the contingent nature of human rationality.\textsuperscript{80}

Loisy’s claim that history possesses the only suitable method for determining the historical Jesus has its source in Loisy’s account of truth, which is the foundation for his doctrine of revelation. In Loisy’s \textit{Autour d’une petit livre},\textsuperscript{81} published the same year as his final exchange with Blondel, Loisy produced an account of truth similar to the one found in the Firmin articles, in which he contends truth is conditional, relative, and mutable.\textsuperscript{82} This epistemological horizon afforded Loisy the latitude to discuss dogmas as

\textsuperscript{78} Marlé, \textit{Au Coeur de la crise moderniste}, 64. Hereafter abbreviated AC. It is worth noting that the problem with Loisy’s Christology in EE appears to be suggested to Blondel in passing by Laberthonnière in the latter’s letter to Blondel dated November 20, 1902. See Maurice Blondel and Lucien Laberthonnière, \textit{Correspondance philosophique}, trans. Claude Tresmontant (Paris, Éditions du Seuil, 1961), 155. To what extent Blondel’s criticism of Loisy’s Christology in EE is appropriated from Laberthonnière is beyond the scope and interest of this work. See Émile Poulat, \textit{La Crise}, 514-520 and Jean-Jacques D’Aoust, “The Significance of Maurice Blondel’s Treatise History and Dogma in the French Modernist Crisis,” (Ph.D. Thesis, Yale University, 1968), 96-98.

\textsuperscript{79} Marlé, AC, 137.


\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 191.
symbolic utterances, containing revealed truths existing pre-conceptually in the church’s dogma, which, Loisy maintained, were closed to historical investigation. The account of truth in his doctrine of revelation conceived of a sphere of facts hovering above and separate from the linguistic horizon in which the Church’s particular doctrines came to expression. By positing a sharp distinction between form (dogmatic formula) and content (revealed truth), Loisy was able to judge the truth and falsity of particular doctrines by how well they represent the independent realm of facts established by the practice of history.

The correspondence between Blondel and von Hügel reveals that Blondel was unwilling to accept the idea of distinct levels of truth von Hügel proposed as an interpretation of the complicated relationship between history and metaphysics in EE and the Christology it entailed. At the center of Loisy’s EE was the distinction between the two images of Christ in Scripture, as, for example, in Paul, where the eternal Christ is represented in divine form and the historical Christ is represented in human form. Von Hügel’s interpretation of EE suggested that Loisy sought to recover this neglected apostolic distinction in Christology, which, Von Hügel maintained, more accurately represented the realm of reality by distinguishing the phenomenal level of truth (Jesus of

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83 See for example von Hügel’s distinction between the “Jesus of history” and “Christ of faith” in Marlé, AC, 139-147.

84 Cf. Philippians 2: 5-8.
History) from the noumenal (Christ of faith). In our knowledge of Jesus, von Hügel suggests, we must pass through distinct levels of truth beginning with the historical phenomenon, the examination of the Jesus of history, and encounter the more profound reality of the Christ of faith, which eludes us and cannot be immediately grasped. This is why the historian plays a necessary but insufficient role in elucidating the content of faith. Here von Hügel’s Kantian language could lend itself to the misunderstanding that he wishes to conceive of these two levels of truth as two separate planes. But von Hügel did not separate these two realms and Blondel did not object to their distinction in the process of human reflection on faith. What Blondel objected to was the distinction in application to Christ as a source of the limitation of his knowledge. The more concrete issue that comes to the surface in the correspondence between Blondel and Loisy is the way in which for each thinker the term “metaphysics” refers to a very different reality. For Loisy, the term metaphysics connotes the neo-Scholastic essentialism that has been stifling the church for the last twenty years. To cede the realm

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86 If this were the case one could readily understand why Blondel was unwilling to grant to von Hügel that the historian can arrive at any level of truth without acknowledging the metaphysical presuppositions endemic to the practice of critical history, since the central thrust of Blondel’s philosophy of action, as it comes to expression in L’Action, is to draw these two distinct realms (the noumenal and the phenomenal) into a deeper unity with each other.

87 Marlé, AC, 147-148; For scholarly commentary on Blondel’s exchange with von Hügel see René Virgoulay, Blondel et le modernisme, 398-407.
of history is to surrender the last territory in the intellectual life of early twentieth-century Catholicism that is not colonized by Scholasticism. As Loisy puts it in his letter to Blondel after the publication of EE:

I never thought that a metaphysics was unnecessary for history. However, there is metaphysics and there is metaphysics. When I claim autonomy for criticism, my point is certainly not to put everything into the criticism of texts and facts, but very simply that the preliminary work of true (real) history, the discussion of texts and facts, need not be rendered impossible from the beginning by a theology which thinks it knows everything before it examines anything. This theology makes it such that one is required to barricade himself against it, and also, unfortunately, confine oneself to a field where one escapes its tyrannical surveillance!.\(^{88}\)

For Blondel, “metaphysics” is not something one has, in the sense of an epistemological framework, a theory, or a set of principles. To put it very simply, for Blondel, metaphysics is something one does. Indeed, philosophy is the relentless pursuit of truth which finds its complete form embodied in communal practice. Metaphysics engages the mystery of human existence revealed through action, and opens human beings to a meaningful disclosure about who they are and what they are made to be. Thus, for Blondel, human history is a rich and complex phenomenon, a reality that cannot be exhausted theoretically, empirically, or expressed adequately by reason. That Blondel was unwilling to grant to critical history a relative autonomy from metaphysics stems from his deeply held conviction that the practice of history must attend to the ontology of action in everyday life. To fail to do so, as Blondel suggests Loisy does in EE, is “to

\(^{88}\) Marlé, AC, 81.
mistake the external act, the expressive trait, the concrete image, for the object itself, [which] tends surreptitiously to substitute the fact for the actor, the testimony for the witness, the portrait for the person."^89

Underneath the competing frameworks of Blondel and Loisy is a serious exegetical issue that penetrates straight to the heart of the relationship between the problem of representation and tradition in modern Catholicism. By substituting the "portrait for the person,"^90 to use Blondel’s phrase, Loisy’s account reduces the subject (Jesus) of the gospel narratives to the account of Jesus attainable by “history.” Lost in this interpretive process, however, are the personal actions of the agent, those realities that constitute the agent’s personal world of historical happenings. In this way, the personal world of the subject (agent) of the narrative becomes a “carnal shadow” looming over the historical reconstruction of the exegete. In extreme forms of critical interpretation, the actions of the subject (the "personal world" of the agent) in the narrative are rendered intelligible only by how well they correspond to or "re-present" the historical consciousness and cultural ethos of the exegetes reconstruction. As we saw in chapter one, this is the horizon within which the gospel narratives are rendered intelligible in modernity.\(^91\) For Catholicism then, Loisy’s EE represents the arrival of modern

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^89 Blondel, HD, 240-241. See also Blondel’s letter to Laberthonnière dated February 28, 1903 in Blondel, Correspondance philosophique, 159.

^90 Blondel, HD, 241.

exegetical methods, the “symbolic start” of a fundamental change in Catholic biblical scholarship that takes place in the twentieth century. Loisy initiates the moment of transition in Catholicism, whereby the literal reading comes to mean the grammatical and lexical exactness in estimating the original sense of the text for its original audience and the coincidence of the description with how the facts occurred. The theological upshot of this transitional moment is captured in Loisy’s interpretation of the kingdom of heaven, and the now infamous line from EE: “Jesus foretold the kingdom, and it was the Church that came.” In Loisy’s account, the Church appears to be born, not as a result of the generative power of Christ’s death on the cross, but instead, the failure of the imminent parousia, “whose fulfillment [Jesus] thought to ensure.” To suggest the ontological origin of church is the kenosis of Christ consummated in his death on the cross is, for Loisy, to cross an exegetical threshold away “from a historical point of view” and into the speculative matrix of “gratuitous hypothesis [that] attribute to Jesus a foreknowledge of the modifications His doctrine must endure in the course of centuries after the apostolic age.” If, as Loisy avers, “[h]e who wishes to decide historically the thoughts of the Saviour...must take the texts and interpret them according to their natural meaning and

93 Loisy, EE, 111.
94 Ibid, 119.
95 Ibid., EE, 62.
the guarantees of authenticity they present," then, the exegetical horizon within which Loisy interprets Christ’s messianic claims, and, the later Christological developments within the tradition, become plausible only if one can accurately match the written description in Scripture to the probable historical reconstruction.

The historical testimony does not allow one to affirm anything about this issue except divine filiation, in its messianic sense, other than to note, as a characteristic of this messianism, its purely religious and moral meaning, exclusive of nationalism. All the rest is conjecture and interpretation. By keeping to the texts about the issue, one finds in the Gospel notion of the Messiah, three principal elements: the idea of an eternal predestination (to which one associates the idea already present in Paul’s idea of preexistence); the idea of a unique role, like predestination, in relation to the kingdom: that is to say, to the salvation of humanity (out of which arises all developments in soteriology); the idea of a unique communication of the divine spirit, through which Jesus, because of his predestination, is capable of this unique role (and from which comes the development of Christology). From the point of view of the linkage of ideas, there is a continuity between the historical gospel and dogmatic development.\(^\text{97}\)

In Loisy’s account tradition no longer constitutes a distinct yet related form of revelation. Instead, tradition either obstructs the written form of God’s revelation in Scripture or it functions as a compensatory device when Scripture fails to present the historical truth accurately. There is a relationship between the content of Jesus’s messianic claims in Scripture and the dogmatic affirmation of Christ’s hypostatic union formulated in the tradition, but, for Loisy, it is impossible to articulate this relationship.\(^\text{98}\)

\(^{96}\) Ibid., EE, 62-63.

\(^{97}\) Marlé, AC, 82-83.

\(^{98}\) Ibid., 83.
This question had been in the background of Loisy’s thought since he encountered Tischendorf’s edition of the Greek New Testament during the summer of 1881. While in Paris it was present in his desire to overcome the rationalism of Renan. Now it had come to expression in the publication of EE.

VI. The Condemnation and Excommunication of Loisy

In 1907 when the decree Lamentabili sane exitu listed 65 propositions dangerous for Catholic scholars to hold it did not take long for most scholars to recognize the unnamed source of most of the propositions. Chief among these propositions were 22 and 60, both of which pertain to the substance of doctrine, and go to the heart of the Vatican’s dispute with Loisy’s thought.\(^{99}\) The question of whether Lamentibili accurately portrays his thought and, perhaps more importantly, whether Loisy’s unnamed condemnation is warranted are legitimate questions for discussion. In fact, the argument could be made that Loisy’s account of doctrine in EE, by claiming doctrine to be divine in origin and substance and human in structure and composition, does maintain the “divine-human asymmetry” necessary for generating a theologically sound and orthodox account of dogma.\(^{100}\) Such a claim seems to be warranted. But the important question about Loisy’s

\(^{99}\) Cf. Poulet, La crise Moderniste, 103-112.

\(^{100}\) Cf. Aidan Nichols, From Newman to Congar: The Idea of Doctrinal Development from the Victorians to the Second Vatican Council (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1990), 106.
theological thinking is not whether he makes a distinction between the finite and the infinite realities when he reflects on the nature of doctrine and revelation. Indeed, this is an important distinction and one that Loisy maintains. But, in the case of Loisy, the important question is whether he holds fast to the tension within the divine-human unity without dissolving the one into the other. This is the important and fundamental question of maintaining the unity-in-distinction between the infinite and the finite aspects of theological reasoning in all its registers.

In his treatise on the relationship between history and dogma and his discussion with Loisy a few years before *Lamentibili* and the encyclical, *Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, Maurice Blondel had picked up on Loisy’s inability to maintain the unity-in-distinction between theology (transcendence) and history (immanence) necessary to all theological thinking.101 Blondel’s concern was that Loisy had compartmentalized theology and history to the point at which each had become isolated from the other. Soon after Loisy published EE, Blondel responded that Loisy had not simply insisted on the genuine use of history as a hermeneutic for Scripture, but that his particular account of history appeared to eliminate theology as the primary discourse through which one attempts to understand and to express Christianity.102

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101 Cf. Marlé, AC, 54-63.
PART II

BLONDEL BETWEEN TWO WORLDS
CHAPTER FOUR

BLONDEL’S L’ACTION: THE LITURGY BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Introduction

Thus far this dissertation has explored the problem of representation in modern thought and its effect on tradition’s ability to represent God’s presence in human history. The late medieval theological shifts in the understanding of God’s power and the subsequent epistemological transformation of Western thought that followed it created the conditions for the possibility that modern Catholicism could view the concept of tradition primarily in terms of a juridical reality. We also have noted how John Henry Newman and Alfred Loisy, as two representatives of tradition in the nineteenth century, offer different resolutions to the problem of representation through the relationship between theology and history.

The following chapter builds on the foundation of these previous chapters by exploring Maurice Blondel’s pervasive, yet, “quietly unobtrusive”¹ resolution to the problem of representation in modern Catholicism through the dynamic reality of action, its engagement with modern philosophy, and the liturgical horizon which animates it. The first section situates Blondel’s thought against the background of modern philosophy. Blondel’s philosophy is seen as a reaction to and dialogue with modern thought through the categories of immanence and transcendence. The second section of this chapter

examines the speculative and conceptual context of his idea of tradition in his philosophy of action as it comes to expression in his work *L’Action* (1893).\(^1\) As a professionally trained philosopher and a devout Catholic who devoted his life to thinking through Catholicism’s engagement with modernity in both its theological and philosophical registers, Blondel was confronted with the challenge of facilitating a salubrious exchange between the two modes of thinking. In the course of discussing the various interpretations of Blondel’s thought, this chapter argues for a new interpretation of Blondel’s philosophy of action that attends to the way in which liturgical and sacramental practice facilitates the interplay between the distinct worlds of faith and reason. Indeed, for Blondel, liturgical action allows reason to enter “into a new world where no philosophical speculation can lead it or follow it.”\(^2\) As reason enters this new world it discovers the trace of its original desire for truth expressed in its fullest form. This interpretation of Blondel’s philosophy of action, then, emphasizes the role of the liturgy in mediating God’s presence in the world and forming the bond between the distinct worlds of faith and reason.

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1 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine the 1931 controversy concerning the possibility of Christian philosophy, the different positions of those involved in the discussion, and the various essays that issued forth from it. For an excellent summary and analysis of this controversy the reader should consult Henri de Lubac, “Sur la philosophie chrétienne,” *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 63 (1936): 225-253, translated into English as “Retrieving the Tradition: On Christian Philosophy,” *Communio* 19 (1992): 478-506.

I. Immanence and Transcendence

The point of departure for Blondel’s philosophy of action, the quest for the meaning of human life in part derives from his encounter with modern philosophy through the work of his friend Victor Delbos. Delbos was instrumental in introducing Blondel to the thought of Spinoza, where Blondel discovered the question of human destiny examined by a method of immanence. What Blondel found particularly appealing about Spinoza is the centrality of the “ethical problem” in Spinoza’s thought, principally his treatise on ethics, and its proximity to the question of human destiny and philosophy’s unique role in resolving it. The role of human destiny in such thinkers as Spinoza, Fichte, Schelling and Hegel led Blondel to regard much modern philosophy to be amenable to Christianity. He rightly saw in Spinoza’s rational reconfiguration of the Christian concept of beatitude in the second part of his ethics the veiled presence of the “Christian idea.” Unfortunately Blondel never clearly articulated what the Christian idea

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was.\textsuperscript{7} What is more, to grasp the so-called “ethical problem” in Spinoza’s thought requires understanding Spinoza’s political theory, his treatment of Scripture and the relation of both to his account of reason.\textsuperscript{8} While a full account of Spinoza’s notion of reason is beyond the scope of this chapter, Spinoza considered the life of reason a luxury few can pursue. For the general population there is the Bible, which appeals to the imagination instead of the intellect and makes morality more intelligible for the pedestrian members of the \textit{polis}. In Spinoza’s view Scripture does not contain any speculative, spiritual or theological truth, but it provides a popular religion that plays an important role in society. For Blondel not to attend to the ethical problem as it is inferred from Spinoza’s work outside of his treatise on ethics is to simplify a complex issue in Spinoza’s thought.\textsuperscript{9}

Traditionally, Blondel’s relationship to modern philosophy has given many of his readers reason to complain that he cedes too much ground to modern philosophy and fails to preserve the gratuity of grace. At the end of the nineteenth century many of his

\textsuperscript{7} It should be noted that Le Grys’s acknowledges the exaggerated nature of Blondel’s claim, along with the problems that accompany Blondel’s generic understanding of the “Christian idea.” Le Grys’s rightly suggests that Blondel’s philosophy of action offers a corrective to modern philosophy by arguing that the problem of human destiny is not merely speculative.


interlocutors criticized his thought as “naturalism” or “Kantianism.”  

Admittedly, these charges were exasperated by Blondel’s prose, which is cumbersome, obscure and does not lend itself to clarity. The so-called “Kantianism” in LA is a “curious intermixture of respect and antipathy” Blondel has for Kant. His complex relationship to Kant renders dubious any superficial interpretation of the relationship between the two thinkers.

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12 For example, see Adam English, The Possibility of Christian Philosophy: Maurice Blondel at the Intersection of Theology and Philosophy (London: Routledge, 2007). English argues that Blondel’s early work (L’Action) is ‘against’ Kant because Kantian critical phenomenology cannot “factor the ‘beyond’ satisfactorily, nor is that [its] intention” (12). Such a sweeping and vague statement about Blondel’s relationship to Kant does neither Kant or Blondel nor the relationship between the two thinkers justice. The overarching question in the First Critique is whether there can be what Kant calls First Philosophy (speculative metaphysics) as a science at all. He presupposes in human cognition and action aspects or features that are valid independent of experience and empirical evidence which cannot be known by the empirical sciences but only by philosophy. The question of how “synthetic a priori judgments” are possible is integral to understanding the project of the First Critique. For if synthetic a priori judgments are possible, then metaphysics is possible. What is at stake is whether philosophy has its own object of investigation different from the empirical sciences. Thus, it seems difficult to suggest, as English does, that Kant’s intention is not to factor the beyond when the First Critique is built around demonstrating the possibility of metaphysics as a transcendentental theory of experience in contrast to Rationalism and in distinction to Empiricism. Whether, in fact, Kant factors the beyond satisfactorily is a different question from whether he intended to do so. For an interesting critique of the beyond in Kant’s thought as it has been taken up and developed by Fichte and Schelling in the notion of “Force”
Insofar as Blondel envisioned his early work, LA, as a continuation of Kant’s project it was to carry forth Kant’s legacy of establishing the limits of pure and practical reason. Both Blondel and Kant faced the problem of explaining synthetic a priori propositions (speculative metaphysics).13 In the case of Kant, no adequate or compelling rationale or empirical explanation could be given, and therefore, in the First Critique Kant ascribes such propositions to intuition. Blondel, however, facing the same problem, ascribes synthetic a priori propositions to action and the internal structure of the will. The difference between the two thinkers facing the same problem is evident in the distinct points of origin both offer in their fundamental moral philosophies. Whereas Kant seeks to adduce normative principles of morality (categorical imperatives) and apply them to humanity, Blondel “searches within man’s consciousness of his own moral experiences and activity” for the formal principles of morality.14 For Blondel, human action is a synthetic a priori reality (metaphysical): synthetic, because it is the bond between thought and being, and, a priori, because it has an immanent structure governed by principles not given in empirical reality.15 Blondel’s “Copernican revolution,” so to speak, is to discover speculative reason’s conformity to human action.16 Such a discovery involves the usurpation of Kant’s own insight into the internal structure of pure reason,  

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14 Cf. Ibid., 84.  
15 Cf. Ibid., 103.  
16 Cf. Ibid., 62-64.
by proffering an account which contends that even more immanent than the “thought of action” is “the act of thinking.” The action which “produces thought and accomplishes it has its own proper a priori structure from which the whole of thought, both in its objective and subjective correlates, derives its meaning.”

In Blondel’s eyes Kant’s failure is to limit the method of immanence by excluding its access to the transcendent. Pure reason and practical reason are distinct, but they need not be in opposition to each other. Here one can detect Blondel’s desire to overcome Kant’s division of the intellect by reworking Kant’s division itself, rather than dismissing it. Blondel’s reconfiguration of the division of the intellect was at the center of his philosophy of action, a philosophy he sought to situate “between the Aristotelianism that depreciates and subordinates practice to thought and the Kantianism which detaches both orders from each other and exalts the practical order to the detriment of the other [thought].”

In this way Blondel’s philosophical pedigree is affiliated closely with post-Kantian Idealism, and, more specifically, Hegel’s attempt to resolve Kant’s antinomy between autonomy and transcendence. Blondel himself once remarked how much he enjoyed the “Trinitarian rhythm” of Hegel’s thought. There is a methodological rhythm

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17 Ibid., 63.


20 Blondel, Lettres, 18.
to both Blondel’s LA and Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807)\(^{21}\) which gives the impression of a synchronism of thought between the two philosophers. Hegel’s understanding of the role of philosophy in relieving the conceptual tensions that arise from oppositional thinking (necessity and freedom) resonates in LA’s speculative thrust toward resolving the heteronomy that characterizes the human will. And the various stages through which LA’s regressive analysis explores the will’s necessity clearly resounds with the transitions in consciousness from one form to the next in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

Yet these methodological parallels between Blondel and Hegel, while helpful in reaffirming Blondel’s own philosophical self-understanding as an ongoing engagement with such modern thinkers as Hegel, dissemble the fundamental difference between their respective visions of transcendence. In attempting to resolve Kant’s antinomy between autonomy and transcendence Hegel does not deny Kantian self-determination, but instead attempts to give a more holistic form to it by absolutizing it in absolute spirit’s (Geist) movement through history. In Hegel this process of transcendence (Geist) involves the self’s acquisition of a higher identity by assimilating the other.\(^{22}\) While both Hegel and Blondel conceive of a scientific knowledge as a form of *Wissenschaft* “which gives itself over, without reservation, to life and the dialectic movement of human reality, and which


thus assists in its own genesis and evolution, “Hegel’s horizon for the transcendence of the self from the self to the other to the self again implies no genuine possibility of ultimate transcendence as other. However, Blondel understands that the movement of the self toward the other is not a moment in the process of the self’s own becoming as the absolute source of self-determining being. Rather, the logic of action brings the self to the cusp of genuine transcendence as “other” through the religious option. For Blondel self-transcendence is a gift given in which the agent freely chooses to be receptive to the gift, and in choosing to be receptive to the gift is open to the genuine possibility of self-transcendence as other.

What is unsettling to some of Blondel’s readers is not so much the theological rhetoric at work in the philosophy of action, but what role it plays and where it appears. For example, Peter Henrici thinks that the introduction of explicit theological presuppositions in the fourth and the fifth parts of LA signals the logic of action has reached its contemplative limit, and therefore has moved beyond philosophical reason into the distinct realm of theology. The new theological language and grammar

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constitute a distinct plane of reflection, instead of the theological coming to explicit
expression from its prior latent role.\textsuperscript{26} Blondel’s discourse in the fourth and fifth parts of
LA is guided by a theological grammar distinct from preceding sections, presenting the
problem of retaining the inner tension in his thought between the necessity and the
inaccessibility of the supernatural. The natural and justified desire is to resolve
dialectically the heteronomy between the philosophical (natural) and the theological
(supernatural) in Blondel’s philosophy of action, leaving the conceptual impression that it
is either “naturalism,” “subjectivism” or, more keenly, as Henrici suggests, in the
tradition of Hegel’s \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit} with a return to the theological.\textsuperscript{27} However,
here the conceptual challenge is to remain within the inner tension or polarity between
philosophy (reason) and theology (faith), resisting the temptation to return to either the
strictly philosophical or the strictly theological. In William Desmond’s terms, one way of
remaining within the interplay between these two distinct realms is to see the logic of
action as situated at the intersection of the truth of the univocal, the equivocal and the

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Blondel’s thought in relation to the theological and philosophical. That is, Henrici
interprets Blondel’s thought to reside continually within the philosophical realm, in this
particular case, in Blondel’s formulation of the ontological argument. This is the key
aspect that distinguishes Blondel’s ontological argument from Anselm’s, whose argument
becomes decidedly confessional (theological). Nine years later however, there is a
noticeable shift in Henrici’s interpretation of Blondel from strictly practicing either
theology or philosophy to what appears to the possibility that Blondel’s thought might
operate within both theology and philosophy. For example, see “The One Who Went
Unnamed: Maurice Blondel in the Encyclical Fides et ratio,” \textit{Communio} 26 (1999): 609-
621.
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\textsuperscript{26} Cf. Bouillard, \textit{Blondel and Christianity}, 212-213

\textsuperscript{27} Henrici, \textit{Blondel und Hegel}, 180-188.
dialectical senses of being. That is, Blondel’s philosophy of action gets beyond traditional notions of dialectic and “keeps open the spaces of otherness…it does not domesticate the ruptures that shake the complacencies of our mediations of being. Moreover, it tries to deal with the limitations of dialectic determination.” Interpreting the philosophy of action as “between” such categories permits the protean, interdependent and complementary character of the distinct discourses of theology and of philosophy to emerge without the grammar of each discourse becoming agonistic toward the other. From this perspective, one can begin to read the role of philosophy as it is expressed in the pages of LA as attending to the Christological rupture that takes place in the mediation of being. Philosophy’s recourse to the Incarnate Word, as both fully human (reason) and fully divine (faith), is the direction in which Blondel seeks the solution to the problem of immanence and transcendence. “Beings are, but not without the being who sees them and makes them, no more than they can see themselves without his light and his presence.”

Reason (philosophy), having arrived at the juncture where it realizes it lacks the dint required to attain the “One Thing Necessary (God), discovers that the One Thing Necessary exists not as a conceptual reality but as an existential and ontological “option,”


31 Blondel, L’Action, 419-420.
encompassing a particular form of life in community.\textsuperscript{32} Indeed, as Blondel notes, “in order that what is known should be, it is not enough that a real being should know[,] this being has to be what is to be known, so that this known may have being.”\textsuperscript{33}

\section*{II. Blondel’s \textit{L’Action}}

In the course of a candid and revealing letter written to a priest three months and two days after he defended his thesis \textit{L’Action} at \textit{l’École Normale Supérieure} for the Docteur ès Lettres, Maurice Blondel notes that the source of his thought and the reason for his life is the “ardent desire to show that Catholic thought is not sterile and to make for it a place in the clash of modern doctrines where, for the most part, it seems to be excluded.”\textsuperscript{34} Less than a year later, in a moment of introspection captured in his personal diary, he gave voice to what he considered his vocation as a philosopher to be: “to open up the present paths of reason toward God incarnated and crucified.”\textsuperscript{35}

Blondel’s willingness to follow a different path, as it were, than the various forms of secular philosophy he encountered as a student at the Sorbonne in the late nineteenth century, accounts for a large part of his original contribution to modern philosophy and,


\textsuperscript{33} Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 419.


\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 526. For a discussion of Blondel’s secular vocation as it is reflected in his work see Peter Henrici, “Une vocation de laic,” in \textit{Maurice Blondel, une dramatique de la modernité}, 210-214.
regrettably, the tense relationship he experienced with the Catholic theological community throughout much of his life. Blondel’s originality is found in his rehabilitation of philosophy’s relationship to Christianity at the end of the nineteenth century. That approach is to construct a philosophy that confronts the philosopher with the Christian faith without imposing it upon her. This bold project was envisioned in contrast to much of the epistemological skepticism and ontological nihilism appearing in late-modern philosophy. As one commentator put it, Blondel’s philosophy of action seeks to display not humanity’s original “will to power,” but rather humanity’s “will to be powerless.” That is, humanity’s desire to will infinitely through the gift that the human will can neither predict nor produce.

The mettle to pave this new philosophical path was engendered in the devout Catholic environment of the idyllic French countryside of Provence, where Blondel developed a rich spiritual life as a young man. It was his devotion to the sacramental life of the church that allowed him to enter freely, genuinely, and confidently into the


secular spirit of thought animating the intellectual life of France at the end of the
nineteenth century.\footnote{Cf. Poulat, “La pensee Blondelienne,” 22-27. Blondel’s Eucharistic devotion is
scattered throughout the two published volumes of his personal diaries, \textit{Carnets Intimes},
Tome I (1883-1894) and \textit{Carnets Intimes}, Tome II (1894-1949). The centrality of the
Eucharist in his life is captured well however, in the final sentence of his diary entry for
March 4, 1884 in \textit{Carnets Intimes}, Tome I: “L’Eucharistie est le tout de l’esprit Chrétien”
284-299; Oliva Blanchette, “Blondel’s Philosophical Probe into the Mystery of the
Trinitarian Life as Mystery of Mysteries,” \textit{Science et Esprit} 59 (2007): 181-191; David
Grumett, “Blondel, Modern Catholic Theology and the Leibnizian Eucharistic Bond,”
\textit{Modern Theology} 23 (2007): 561-577; René Virgoulay, \textit{Philosophie et théologie chez
Maurice Blondel} (Paris: Cerf, 2002), 95-100; and John Sullivan, “Matter for Heaven:
Blondel, Christ and Creation,” \textit{Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses} 64 (1998): 60-83.}

The cultural context within which Blondel’s thought comes to expression makes
the symbiosis between his spiritual life and his intellectual life one of the more
remarkable features of his work as a philosopher. He believes the persuasive character of
Christianity need not necessarily reside in the speculative arguments in favor of the truths
of faith, despite spending his whole career unfolding the logical and philosophical
character of faith. Instead, Blondel believes that the truth, the goodness and the beauty of
Christianity are evident in the “agreement of the practice of faith with the essence of faith
fathomed by reason.”\footnote{Peter Henrici, “Blondel and Loisy in the Modernist Crisis,” \textit{Communio} 14 (Winter,
1987): 363. See also diary entries in \textit{Carnets Intimes}, Tome II, 282, 290.} The best argument or apologia for Christianity then, that which
most clearly reflects the splendor of its truth, is “the social power of lived Catholicism
[fonounded] on the goodness and the truth of Christ perpetuated in and manifested through
the faithful.”

Here one should note the difference in tenor between Blondel’s spiritual life as it comes to expression in the *Carnets Intimes* and his personal correspondence and that of his contemporary, Alfred Loisy, as Loisy recounts it in *Choses passées*.

That Blondel’s Catholicism shaped and formed his thought is even more evident in his capacity as a philosopher. Here his originality discloses itself through the breadth and the depth of his speculative insights which, in turn, reflect the catholicity (*catholicitas*) of his mind. The catholicity of Blondel’s thought, “his capacity for the universal that defines his philosophical ‘genius’,” is, at the same time, precisely what nourished in him the sense of the singular.” The universality and singularity which characterize his thought bring into relief the creative way in which he attends to the competing claims of reason, as they have been transformed by modernity, and revelation, in the unwavering and particular claims it makes upon humanity. Through this polarity


42 See Loisy, *Choses passées*, 3-46. I am indebted to Peter Henrici for this observation. See “Blondel and Loisy in the Modernist Crisis,” *Communio*, 361-364. While I agree with Henrici that one way of understanding how Loisy fell prey to ‘modernism’ is by comparing his spiritual life to Blondel’s, this is a limited – albeit, insightful – way to approach a complex issue. Clearly, Henrici is aware of the limits of this approach and in no way attempts to portray this approach as exhausting the issue. Nevertheless, along with considering the spiritual life of Loisy, one needs to attend to a whole host of aspects in determining why he succumbed to what is termed, ‘modernism’. One important, yet seemingly unexamined issue in the modernist crisis is the way in which the practice of excommunication changed from the pre-modern to modern church and how that change affected the excommunication of Loisy and other so-called modernists.

43 Jean Guittion, “Maurice Blondel, Chrétien parce que philosophe,” in *Maurice Blondel, une dramatique de la modernité*, 3.

44 Ibid.
the fundamental intention at work in his philosophy of action emerges: namely, “to
develop a philosophy which, in its autonomous movement opens spontaneously to
Christianity.”45

It has been suggested that the character of Blondel’s philosophy is captured well
by the twin terms, “greatness” and “weakness.” That is, greatness in the sense that
philosophy seeks a comprehensive understanding of reality and weakness insofar as,
through this process, philosophy (reason) discovers its own contingency. The question of
contingency is never far from Blondel’s immediate thoughts, and in the case of the
published version of his doctoral thesis, L’Action, it lies dormant in the immediate
question posed to the reader: “Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man have
a destiny?”46 This proto-eschatological question is the leitmotif throughout the
development of the text that finds its answer in the free reception of God’s self-gift given
to the world in the person of Christ, the “Amen of the universe.”47 Methodologically
however, Blondel brackets faith and allows reason to explore this question through the
phenomenon of action.

The term “action” connotes a metaphysical reality akin to traditional metaphysic’s
use of the term “existence” as the most fundamental and originating principle moving the

45 Henri Bouillard, “L’Intention fondamentale de Maurice Blondel et la théologie,”
Recherches de science religieuse 36 (1949): 321. Bouillard’s article was later revised,
46 Blondel, L’Action, 3.
47 Ibid., 420.
essence to act. Action also represents a shift in the understanding of God’s power as the original dynamism of spiritual beings, which resides beyond the intellect and the will, while at the same time functions as the source of power for the intellect and the will. In Blondel’s horizon, the will plays “less the role of a faculty among others than that of a vestigium. Such a vestige must first recognize itself as such – as a trace – follow its own path, and then traverse itself to find that of which it is the imprint.” It is an imprint of the vinculum substantiale (substantial bond), the actus purus (pure act) from which all reality has its origin and the end toward which all creation moves. The objective of the dialectic at work in LA is to discover what is necessary in action, the “determinism of action.” The determinism of action will reveal the necessity of the supernatural within all willing. Action, Blondel will say toward the end of his work, “is a synthesis of man and God.”

48 The reader needs be aware that the metaphysical tradition has never been unanimous in its interpretation and usage of the term ‘existence’. For a historical overview of the pre-Socratic, Platonic, and Aristotelean interpretations of the term see Leo Sweeney, S.J., A Metaphysics of Authentic Existentialism (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1965), 3-63. For an excellent survey of the Aristotelan-Thomist tradition of interpretation see Etienne Gilson, Being and Some Philosophers (Toronto, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1949).

49 Marion, ‘La conversion de la volonté selon l’Action’, 160.


51 Blondel, L’Action, 343.
The most immediate philosophical portal through which reason enters into the mystery of action belongs to the question of autonomy and heteronomy. The focus of action is the relationship between autonomy and necessity in the human will, and the speculative trajectory of LA delineates heteronomy as the condition for authentic autonomy. 52 Blondel’s “regressive analysis” of the will’s necessary development yields a polarity (heteronomy) between the freedom of the will and the necessity of the will, which Blondel expresses through the categories of the “la volonté voulue” (willed will) and the “la volonté voulante” (willing will). The polarity of the wills simultaneously reveals humanity’s desire for transcendence and its inability to achieve symmetry between the two wills.

Before Blondel’s analysis of action can arrive at the ontology of action and the completion of action in the “One Thing Necessary (OTN),” the analysis of action must examine the methodological assumptions of the positive sciences. 53 Here he explores the relationship between mathematics and the empirical sciences, discovering that intrinsic to determinate knowledge (positive sciences) is an excess or overdeterminancy that is the action of the spirit. 54 Put another way, there is an interiority, un dedans, to use Blondel’s term, that comes to expression in the empirical sciences and reveals

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52 Cf. Bouillard, Blondel and Christianity, 6.


an internal principle of unity, a center of grouping imperceptible to the senses or to the mathematical imagination, an operation immanent to the diversity of the parts, an organic idea, an original action that escapes positive knowledge at the moment it makes it possible, and, to say it all in one word which needs to be defined better, a subjectivity.\textsuperscript{55}

As Blondel’s dialectic unfolds the heteronomy of the will at various stages in the natural order, it returns again and again to the insufficiency of the natural and social sciences, as well as the personal and social institutions of the natural order (communal life, nation-state, and superstition).\textsuperscript{56} Even though action cannot find its completion in the natural order, philosophy remains unrelieved of the task of demonstrating the impossibility and insufficiency of action in that order. Briefly put, philosophy leads to the idea of the supernatural without affirming the reality of the supernatural. In the Blondelian horizon then, the “fullness of philosophy consists, not in a presumptuous self-sufficiency, but in the study of its own powerlessness.”\textsuperscript{57}

The fourth part of LA takes up the metaphysics of action (ontology). The “Third Moment,” as Blondel describes it, explores action’s movement toward transcendence. It arrives at the OTN, God, only after it has exhausted the natural, psychological, social, mathematical/empirical, and mystical explanations of the necessity of the phenomenon of human action.\textsuperscript{58} However, we must be careful not to interpret Blondel’s arrival at the

\textsuperscript{55} Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 94.

\textsuperscript{56} Cf. Ibid., 109-299.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 361-362.

\textsuperscript{58} See stages one through five of Part III of \textit{L’Action}, 54-299.
OTN as the logical outcome of a deductive argument. For Blondel “God is not the conclusion of a syllogism.”\(^{59}\) Rather, God is the inexorable and the necessary source or principle of the dynamism of the will, present at the beginning and the end of action. Blondel’s arrival at God’s existence emerges from the impossibility of God’s non-existence. The process of acknowledging the impossibility of God’s non-existence has arisen through the conceptual interplay of revealing (presence) and concealing (absence) in the dialectic of action. For in revealing the impossibility of “absolute non-being,” Blondel is revealing the contingency of “relative being.” As he notes, the “idea of nothingness is not without the idea of something else. And the argument that might best be termed ontological is this counterproof that establishes the impossibility of absolute non-being, by grounding itself on the insufficiency of relative being.”\(^{60}\)

Here the reader arrives at the key metaphysical theme that forms the overarching horizon within which the dynamism of action comes to expression: the distinction between finite and infinite being whereby the former is understood as possibly not having existed and the latter understood as possibly being all that there is, with no decrease of goodness or greatness.\(^{61}\) It is helpful in this connection to note the unusual way in which Blondel approaches the distinction. Unlike the traditional approach,\(^ {62}\) in which God’s

\(^{59}\) Somerville, *Total Commitment*, 213.

\(^{60}\) Blondel, *L’Action*, 316.


\(^{62}\) Here we have in mind Thomas Aquinas’s important distinction in the questions 3 and 7 of the *prima pars* of the *Summa Theologicae*, where he distinguishes between God’s
formal features distinguish God’s infinite being from finite being, Blondel observes the
formal feature of humanity, the heteronomy of its will. In doing so, he establishes the
otherness of finite being to infinite being, bringing into sharper focus the condition for
the possibility of humanity’s participation in God’s life does not reside in finite reality.
Within the purview of finite reality’s contingency the necessity of being-as-such for the
fulfillment of finite reality becomes the principle source of unity to human action.
Blondel summarizes it this way: “Without [God], all is nothing and nothing cannot be.
All that we will supposes that it is; all that we are requires that it be.”
God, then, is the source of unity of the wills that dwells within humanity, but is not of humanity. This
distinction, according to Blondel, derives from humanity’s inability to achieve equipoise
between spontaneous (free) and willed action. The argument for the insufficiency of all
finite reality through human action is, in turn, an argument for the contingency of finite
reality with greater force coming through the immanent aspect of finite reality.

The progressive disclosure of the simultaneously contingent and insufficient
nature of finite reality confronts humanity with an “alternative.” Despite the
unrelenting need for God inscribed in the human will, one is necessarily confronted with

‘formal features’ (simplicity and infinity) and God’s ‘attributes’ (goodness, beauty,
justice, and mercy), the former establishing God’s otherness so the latter can be
analogically predicated. For an excellent account of Aquinas’s distinction see David
Burrell, “Distinguishing God From the World,” in Brian Davies (ed.), Language,
Meaning and God, Essays in Honour of Herbert McCabe OP (London: Geoffrey
Chapman, 1987), 75-91.

63 Blondel, L’Action, 317.

64 Cf. Ibid., 330-331.
the alternative and freely chooses the “supreme option.” The supreme option consists of one of two possible choices, the first belonging to the “Death of Action,” the genuine exclusion of the infinite in favor of the idol.65 Having demonstrated the impossibility of humanity rectifying the disparity between its wills, the reconciliation must be brought about by a will totally other to finite reality. Yet, it is possible for humanity to refuse to reconcile the two wills by making the particular good itself the ultimate end of its action. As a consequence of masking the eschatological reality present in each particular good it seeks, there is a living death to action. The living death ensues as a result of action’s inability to see the infinite horizon of the good it pursues. In order to see the infinite horizon of finite goods, one must be able to “see the form” of God’s glory with the “eyes of faith.”66 In other words, the light of faith is necessary to see the veiled infinite-eschatological feature residing within the concrete acts of humanity. Blondel eloquently puts it this way:

No doubt, through a secret and subtle logic, we often seem to succeed in pacifying the restlessness of the heart, in drying up the flow of divine desires, and excluding from consciousness the most natural aspirations. But effort and study are required to do so, as in fixing our eyes carefully on a windowpane covered with light drawings, we half fail to see the distant prospect. And yet it is always this confused field of vision which serves as backdrop, which lights up these transparent trifles we try to see by themselves, and which we would not see if there were not beyond some depth and some brightness.67

65 Cf. Ibid., 332-344.


67 Blondel, L’Action, 337.
What lies veiled and undisclosed throughout the unfolding of the logic of action is as important as what is disclosed. The ontological affirmation of being comes to the fore at the end of Blondel’s philosophical speculation and with this affirmation the reader discovers its mysterious presence from the beginning. The ontological affirmation of being has as its true source the religious option for or against action (the supernatural) and in this form serves as the concrete way in which humanity comes to participate in the divine life of Christ.\textsuperscript{68} Once the affirmation of being is understood in relation to the religious option, one can return to the onto-eschatological question concerning human destiny posed at the beginning of the text: “Yes or no, does human life make sense, and does man have a destiny?”\textsuperscript{69} The problem of human destiny as it appears in its generic form at the beginning of LA is, in fact, “not in general terms, but in the Christian context.”\textsuperscript{70}

In the context of the dialectic of action, Blondel is interested in the necessary structural role the dogmatic and sacramental practices of Christianity play in completing the life of action.\textsuperscript{71} The transition from the natural to the supernatural life of action is sustained not merely by the effort of natural reason but also by ritual practice expressed

\textsuperscript{68} Cf. Bouillard, \textit{Blondel and Christianity}, 12.

\textsuperscript{69} Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 3.

\textsuperscript{70} Bouillard, \textit{Blondel and Christianity}, 15.

\textsuperscript{71} Blondel does not discuss the ontological purchase such practices may have, however, the ontological value of these practices becomes apparent in his discussion.
through the dogmatic and sacramental life of Christianity. It is the theme of necessity that holds together the transition through the initial stages of the dialectic of action, to the supreme option and now the transition from the supreme option to the life of action, should one freely chose the latter. At this stage of the dialectic the necessity of the philosophical task presents the philosopher with the prospect that the completion of action resides beyond her philosophical ken. Thus, she must resign herself to the eminent reason of action by embodying in practice what she cannot fully comprehend by reason.\footnote{Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 376.}

The chapter on dogma in the fourth part of LA is important for establishing the theme that dogmas are not only speculative in nature, but also practical.\footnote{Cf. Ibid., 363-372.} As Blondel notes toward the end of this chapter, “dogmas are not only facts and ideas in act, but also they are principles of action.”\footnote{Ibid., 372.} That is, the full value and meaning of dogma is not understood until it is embodied in practice, and practice becomes the unifying source of action and belief.\footnote{It is worth noting that here we see in its infancy Blondel’s main criticism in his 1904 work HD of the two schools of thought in Catholicism he terms “extrinsicism” and “historicism.” The one, extrinsicism, tends to emphasize the juridical, abstract or conceptual nature of dogmatic statements with little or no reference to the concrete and historical circumstances in which they were formulated, while the other, historicism, tends to reduce dogmatic statements and texts to the individual, unique and ascertainable facts of the historical situation from which they arise. See Maurice Blondel, \textit{The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma}, 222-264.} The problem of practice however is that it is often understood as an incidental outcome of an intention and is allotted no intrinsic value itself. In modernity
ritual practices are seen as epiphenomena coming to expression in the absence of texts. However Blondel suggests such an understanding of practice implies practices are little more than magic or superstition. The value of ritual and sacramental practices (literal practice), their unique reality, and their purpose is to give form and expression to the interior reality of faith. The sacramental practices of Christianity are the horizon within which action most clearly discloses to the will that it is a vestige of the infinite.

However, should practice be necessary for faith, but always an inadequate expression of it, and should faith always be necessary for practice, how is one to avoid making a fictive idol of practice, as well as avoid reducing practice to a necessary accessory of faith? To avoid these twin dangers, Blondel maintains practices must be the “expression of positive precepts and the original imitation of dogma divinely transcribed into distinct commandments…they have to contain [God’s] real presence and be [God’s] immanent truth. Caro verbum facta (the Word made flesh).” Hence, the command to celebrate the Eucharist: “do this in memory of me.” Blondel is not suggesting that every liturgical act needs to be founded on God’s explicit command. Rather, the idea here is


77 Again, it is worth noting here that Blondel’s account of religious practice articulates in an adumbrated manner his notion of tradition in HD. Tradition, as described in HD, is adduced not merely from Scripture and subsequently identified with it; nor is it an epiphenomenon that comes to expression in the absence of written texts. Rather, tradition relies on texts and, at the same time, on something else, something Blondel names as une expérience toujours en acte (“an experience always in act”) that is dependent on texts without becoming subservient to them. See HD, 267.

78 Blondel, L’Action, 382.
that liturgical action should issue forth from the divine life of the Spirit and embody and express the divine will. In the life of action liturgical practice draws humanity into the divine life of God. The paradigm of humanity’s transformative participation in God’s life is the theological person most closely associated with the life of Christ, Mary, who as Theotokos (θεοτόκη) shows us that “[w]e must all give ourselves birth by giving God birth in us.”

Ultimately, Blondel grounds his metaphysics of action in God as the source and principle of action. The being of action and the sequence of necessities that follow from it depend upon the OTN. This includes the life of action sustained by the dogmatic and sacramental practices of Christianity. To avoid or reject the litûrgia or “literal practice” which gives life and completes action, in Blondel’s view, would be to refuse to enter into the fullness of being.

The role of literal practice in the consummation of the life of action leads finally to the role of Being itself (God) as the synthetic and true bond between knowledge and action. Here we encounter the apex of the life of action. It is the point at which philosophy must resign itself, acknowledging, as the apostle Paul does, that “[Christ] is

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79 Determining whether a practice has its origin in the divine life of the Spirit requires a discernment process that takes place through prayer within the life of the community gathered in the name of Christ. Blondel’s discussion of the value of literal and liturgical practice is limited to the role it plays in the life of action. As such, it precludes a much-needed discussion of the ecclesiastical, the sacramental, and the juridical considerations that must be taken into account during this process.

80 Blondel, L’Action, 386.

81 Cf. ibid., 389-424.
before all things, and in him all things hold together.”\(^82\) In the hypostatic union of the person of Jesus Christ reside the perfection of the human wills and the bond which truly and fully unites knowledge and action. As the true image of the invisible and universal bond of all reality, Christ invites us to enter into his perfection through the life of action made whole through liturgical practice of the Church.

III. Between Faith and Reason

Within the framework of the philosophy of action the option for the life of action is not “I believe,” but “It is.”\(^83\) That philosophy’s ambit extends no further than the affirmation of “It is,” affirms “[what] cannot be communicated because it arises only from the intimacy of totally personal action.”\(^84\) “It is” also is to formulate the act of faith in such a way as to assign a preponderance of value to the objective dimension of this act. The emphasis on the objective dimension of faith brings into sharper focus that the scandalous nature of Christian faith resides not only in the fact that it is necessary for the fulfillment of human existence, but also that it is a gift that only can be given.\(^85\)

\(^82\) Col. 1: 17 (NRSV).

\(^83\) Henrici, “The One Who Went Unnamed,” 619. See also Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 446.

\(^84\) Blondel, \textit{L’Action}, 446.

\(^85\) In recent years the concept of the gift has been given new life in theology through John Milbank’s essay “Can A Gift Be Given?” \textit{Modern Theology} 11 (1995): 119-161. Milbank’s interest in this concept stems from the way in which such philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion have considered this concept. For example, see Jacque Derrida, \textit{Given Time: 1. Counterfeit Money} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992) and \textit{The Gift of Death} (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1995); and Jean-Luc Marion, \textit{God Without Being: Hors-texte}, trans. Thomas Carlson (Chicago: University of
This aspect of the act of faith in Blondel’s thought has the tendency to perplex his
most charitable interpreters as they try to think through the relationship between
philosophy (nature) and theology (grace). One response to the ambiguous character of
Blondel’s thought in this regard is to overcompensate for him, reading his theological
discourse, as Adam English does, as a “violation of his purely philosophical
methodology.”

The “theological turn” in the fourth part of LA means Blondel’s

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86 English, The Possibility of Christian Philosophy, 15. It should be noted that English’s
work is not intended to be a comprehensive account of Blondel’s corpus, but deals
primarily with Blondel’s later work in the Trilogy. Nevertheless, he does treat the early
work of Blondel: L’Action (1893) and The Letter on Apologetics. In his effort to
demonstrate how ontology overcomes phenomenology in Blondel’s L’Action, English is
prone to make selective statements about Blondel’s philosophy of action which, while not
false, are ambiguous and misleading. For example, he states: “What does Blondel aim to
discover through action, the center of philosophy and life? The answer is clear: to
‘produce the hidden truth that souls live by and that they may perhaps die of for eternity.’
But is the ‘hidden truth’ something that arises out of action or does it come from beyond
action? Blondel confirms that action’s truth ‘is always a beyond’” (12). Blondel states
that the origin, or, to use his language, the “vital sap” (truth) of action derives from a
beyond. Yet, as it comes to expression in finite reality, the truth of action is disclosed as a
beyond that dwells within the natural order, while not of the natural order. This subtle yet
decisive movement in Blondel’s dialectic seems to be missed in English’s reading. In his
treatment of the Letter on Apologetics (Cf. 15-18), English spends a considerable amount
of time discussing Blondel’s impoverished account of the history of faith and reason, an
account Blondel himself later dismissed as insufficient (see Le problème de la
philosophique catholique [Paris: Bloud and Gay, 1932], 40 n.1). Regrettably, there is
very little about Blondel’s account of the relationship between philosophy (reason) and
theology (faith) in English’s interpretation of the Letter and very much concerning the
Leonine revival of Thomistic thought and the rise of the nouvelle théologie.
Unfortunately the section entitled: “The Modernist Crisis” concentrates almost
exclusively on Lamentabili Sane Exitu and the encyclical Pascendi Dominici Gregis, two
documents that hardly do justice to the various and complex forms of Roman Catholic
modernism. English fails to engage, much less mention, History and Dogma, the one text
“argument has been hijacked by the appearance of the divine. The entrance of God onto
the scene paralyzes thought, bringing it to a ‘full stop’.”\textsuperscript{87} Such a hyperbolic reading of
Blondel is appealing in light of the effort to herald him as the champion of Christian
ontology over the epistemological skepticism and ontological nihilism of late-modern
intellectual discourse,\textsuperscript{88} but it is of little help in distilling the subtle interplay between the
theological (supernatural) and the philosophical (natural) at work in Blondel’s thought.

On the other hand, Blondel’s interpreters also have tended to obfuscate his
thought on the relationship between theology and philosophy. In defending Blondel
against the criticisms of Henry Duméry,\textsuperscript{89} Henri Bouillard posits the distinction between
the “explicit” act of willing expressed in the realm of faith and the “implicit” act of
willing found in the free/spontaneous activity of all humanity.\textsuperscript{90} In Bouillard’s reading
the latter is the supernatural “undetermined” by revelation, which the philosopher can
recognize through the use of reason. In turn, this raises the question of whether Blondel’s
phenomenology of action considers humanity to be in a state of “pure nature.” In
contrast to Duméry, Bouillard maintains Blondel is concerned not with theological
categories such as nature/grace and pure nature, but with the “philosophical problem of

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 14.


\textsuperscript{90} Bouillard, \textit{Blondel and Christianity}, 50.
the meeting of philosophy and Christianity.”

Certainly Bouillard is correct in holding that Blondel, while not denying the possibility of a state of pure nature, is not employing the formal categories of theology in either LA or the Letter of 1896. Bouillard it seems, not without reason, would like to preserve the philosophical purity of Blondel’s so-called “method of immanence.” Yet, it seems difficult to determine where the boundaries between philosophy and theology begin and end in LA.

The two interpretations above bring into relief a key Christian reality which animates Blondel’s thought: namely, the question of human freedom and the problem of eternal damnation. “Blondel’s dilemma” is not without precedent in the Christian tradition. More than one of Blondel’s commentators have remarked how strikingly similar Anselm’s and Blondel’s methodologies are. In the case of Anselm, it becomes clear that his argument for the existence of God and the Incarnation in the Proslogion and Cur Deus homo, despite an interpretative history to the contrary, “could not be detached

91 Ibid., 53.
92 Cf. ibid., 231.
93 Cf. ibid., 52-54.
95 See Bouillard, Blondel and Christianity, 196-202 and Henrici, “Ontologie et religion: De S. Anselme à Blondel.”
from the Christian setting in which it occurs, because the understanding of God that it implies has arisen and is sustained in Christian faith. As we have seen in our liturgical reading of LA, the same can be said for Blondel’s thought and his argument for the existence of God, despite interpretations to the contrary. Blondel’s diary and personal correspondence reveal that his thought has arisen within and is sustained by Christian faith. It is a “philosophical thesis [conceived] from the very start in Christian prayer,” whose philosophical and theological realms interpenetrate each other. That is, it seeks to lay bare the inextricable truth of the human condition as being between itself and God. It displays the inner tension between finite and infinite freedom that must be maintained in order to give finite freedom “the opportunity to lay hold of its own freedom, a freedom that both is its own and comes from an external source.”

In this respect, Blondel’s thought “listens” to theology. His philosophical apologetic need not set out to discover the content of God’s revelation to humanity, but rather uncover how the latter forms humanity by virtue of its created status. The polarity between presence and absence, similarity and difference within the interplay of “la volonté voulue” (willed will) and “la volonté voulante” (willing will) allows the Christian notion of the supernatural to disclose itself in its exterior (philosophical) form, inviting

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99 Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 117.
one to pass through the exterior form presented at philosophy’s threshold and into the interior content of the mystery of the supernatural.101

But, can reason bear the weight of this task? What makes it competent and capable of such a task? For Blondel, reason can genuinely claim to practice philosophy unadulterated by the first principles of Christianity and, at the same time, find its completion beyond reason’s competence, because it is conceived within an implicitly normative theological horizon. The practice of philosophy as he understands it is sustained by a doctrine of creation that argues not simply for the contingency and dignity of human rationality, though, as he rightly observes, “[t]o act is in a way to entrust oneself to the universe.”102 Rather, the practice of philosophy attends to the role of reason

101 How the dialectic of the wills in Blondel’s philosophy of action might illuminate developments in twentieth-century phenomenology is an important question far beyond the scope of this essay. Nevertheless, one imagines Blondel would have been critical of the way in which Husserl prioritizes ‘intentional being’ over all forms of cognition and being, as well as Heidegger’s critique of Husserl’s understanding of intentional being, and the latter’s account of Dasein as the more original phenomena underlying intentional being. Christian Yves Dupont suggests a number of parallels exist between the Blondel and Husserl. They are united by a common aim to overcome positivism and both share a general vision of philosophy as representing a mode of being. Yet, despite these commonalities, Dupont notes that Blondel’s philosophy of action derives its inspiration largely from Aristotle, whereas Husserl’s phenomenology of consciousness is an extension of Cartesianism - though Husserl’s notion of intentionality has its roots in Brentano’s rehabilitation of this concept in medieval Scholasticism. At the end of a fine chapter, Dupont is led to the unfortunate and simplistic conclusion that Husserl’s project is a science of consciousness that attempts to resolve the problem of knowledge, whereas Blondel’s project is a science of action that tries to resolve the foundations of morality. These two thinkers are conveniently placed within the respective divisions of knowledge to which Kant’s First and Second Critiques correspond. See Christian Yves Dupont, “Receptions of Phenomenology in French Philosophy and Religious Thought, 1889-1939,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Notre Dame, 1997), 97-117.

102 Blondel, LA, 263.
in discerning God’s call to communion in the person of Jesus Christ. Put another way, there is a “metaphysical moment” in Blondel’s thought that the reader must grasp:

I act, but without even knowing what action is, without having wished to live, without knowing exactly either who I am or even if I am. This appearance of being which flutters about within me, these light and evanescent actions of a shadow, bear in them, I am told, an eternally weighty responsibility, and that, even at the price of blood, I cannot buy nothingness because for me it is no longer.\(^{103}\)

This crucial moment in which reason grasps its created nature liberates reason to plumb the depths of the human will in all its heteronomy without constant recourse to an explicit theological discourse. Yet Blondel’s thought does make a theological turn, but not in the abrupt manner that disavows all that has come before. Instead, all that comes before now takes on a renewed significance. Indeed, as reason draws ever nearer to “the sensible sign that obscurely contains the light whose invisible center thought seeks to discover little by little,”\(^{104}\) it realizes that the “perfect food...which alone is capable of vivifying a thought and a will animated by faith, resides in the formal command, the ritual act, the sacramental material.”\(^{105}\) Put another way, reason encounters in the liturgical life of the church, albeit imperfectly, that the full nature of the life of action is its life spent in communion sustained by the OTN, God. For in the liturgical life of the church reason (philosophy) discovers the highest expression of its original inclination toward truth and the delight it enjoys when it participates through faith in God’s truth.

\(^{103}\) Ibid., 3.

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 385.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.
CHAPTER FIVE

BLONDEL’S *HISTORY AND DOGMA*: A THEOLOGICAL RESOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM OF TRADITION IN MODERN CATHOLICISM

Introduction

When Alfred Loisy matriculated at *L’Institut catholique de Paris* in 1878, he did not foresee how his thought would come to embody the tension between the romantic revaluation of the past and the rise of nineteenth-century historiography, as it now does in retrospect. Indeed, this tension is in many respects what makes Loisy such a complex figure. His thought embodies the tension between the tradition of nineteenth-century historiography, with its sense of detached historical consciousness, and paradoxically, nineteenth-century Roman Catholic traditionalism, with its high and triumphalistic ecclesiology. Thus, one finds Loisy offering a vigorous defense of the Catholic tradition and its integral role in human (and theological) understanding to his liberal Protestant interlocutors, Auguste Sabatier and Adolf von Harnack.

Whatever we think, theologically, of tradition, whether we trust it or regard it with suspicion, we know Christ only by the tradition, across the tradition, and in the tradition of the primitive Christians. This is as much as to say that Christ is inseparable from His work, and that the attempt to define the essence of Christianity according to the pure gospel of Jesus, apart from the tradition, cannot succeed, for the mere idea of the gospel without tradition is in flagrant contradiction with the facts submitted to criticism.¹

At the same time, one finds a poignant account of the independence and objectivity of the historian when, for example, Loisy discusses the methodological horizon the historian

¹ Loisy, EE, 13.
employs in his investigation of Scripture: “[h]e who wishes to decide historically the thoughts of the Saviour...must take the texts and interpret them according to their natural meaning and the guarantees of authenticity they present.”

For Loisy, the conceptual resolution of these two dynamics at work in his thought, and that which could mediate between a conception of tradition as the antithesis of the freedom of reason and as the necessary element of human understanding, was the visible reality that issued forth from the failure of Christ’s immanent return, the church. For in Loisy’s account of the church the concept of tradition is hypostatized in such a way that it can be easily contrasted to history, Scripture, faith and the many other categories it has come to be distinguished from.

Here we arrive at the principal methodological problem Blondel observed in Loisy’s Christology and the central metaphysical presupposition animating his exegesis. This chapter exerts Blondel’s text *History and Dogma*, which in its immediate context offers a critique of Loisy’s attempt to appropriate the modern practice of historiography to resolve the tension between the immanent (historical) and transcendent (theological) aspects of Scripture. As the following exposition and discussion of Blondel’s notion of tradition should make clear, the question of tradition resides not in isolation from such fundamental polarities of Christianity as immanence and transcendence, theology and history, nature and grace, and ontology and epistemology. Indeed, in Blondel’s idea of tradition we are drawn into the intricate web of the fundamental tensions which shape and

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1 Ibid., EE, 62-63.
form how the eternal truth of God’s self-gift comes to be know and embodied both personally and communally in the life of the church.

I. The Dialectics of Real History: “Metaphysics in Act”

The first section of HD is devoted to laying out the “problem” of tradition and, in particular, what Blondel calls the “primordial question.” That is, the question pertaining to the relationship between the modern practice of history and Christian dogma and the transition that takes place between these two realities in the act of faith. Both are central to faith, but alone neither is sufficient to corroborate much less to sustain genuine Christian faith. As Blondel writes: “for while it is true that historical facts are the foundations of Christian faith, they do not of themselves engender it, nor do they suffice to justify it entirely.”\(^2\) Thus, the objective of Blondel’s project is to find the “explanatory principle” or “source of movement” that facilitates the movement between history and faith. In other words, he is interested in achieving a “synthesis of history and dogma while respecting their independence and solidarity,” that will discover the “authority proper to each” and how both “will continue to verify and vivify [each other].”\(^3\)

Before unfolding the conditions for achieving the synthesis, however, Blondel examines and critiques the two schools of thought, historicism and extrinsicism. The one, extrinsicism, tends to emphasize the juridical, abstract or conceptual nature of dogmatic

\(^2\) Blondel, HD, 223.

\(^3\) Ibid., 224.
statements with little or no reference to the concrete and historical circumstances in
which they were formulated. Facts are “merely a vehicle for apologetics.” The problem
with extrinsicism, according to Blondel, is that it offers an account of the relation
between facts (history) and theology (faith) that superimposes the former onto the latter.
In this process
the miraculous will be furnished by sensual perception; the divine disengaged by
the work of reason, the supernatural defined by the facts of revelation
authenticated by the divinely miraculous. But these elements remain external to
one another and are only related, where we are concerned, by an argument, a
purely intellectual structure, based solely on an empirical conclusion: as a result
of which it is easy to see that the least weakness in the theory of perception, and
in reasoning required, as a foundation, menaces its fragility.

The Scholastic horizon permits a “intransigent absolutism,” as Blondel puts it, that has no
rules of interpretation.

Blondel’s critique of historicism begins by demonstrating the philosophical
“lacunae” that exist in this position. Historicism reduces dogmatic statements and texts to
the individual, unique and ascertainable facts of the historical situation from which they
arise. The principle problem with Loisy’s historicism is the relation of history to the other
sciences. Is history a self-sufficient science? Or does history depend on other sciences
(metaphysics)? Blondel engages the Aristotelian account of the sciences, which

4 Ibid., 227.
5 Ibid., n.1, 228.
6 Cf. ibid., 229-330.
7 Cf. ibid., 234.
distinguishes each science according to its subject matter. In the modern horizon of science the practice of history represents all phenomena under which humanity allows its inward invisible work to be grasped in observable manifestations – manifestations which modify one another mutually, continually undergoing the repercussion of facts upon man, even of those most remote from him, and forming no doubt a coherent whole, though without supplying a total and satisfying explanation of the smallest detail.  

That is, the historian sees distinct empirical realities that do in fact form a coherent narrative, but without the narrative itself providing the framework within which the realities can be rendered intelligible. The historian (Loisy), unlike the philosopher who practices speculative metaphysics, refuses to do what Kant saw preventing speculative metaphysics from becoming a true science: namely, untangling the antinomies reason becomes entangled in when it attempts to cull fragments of human experience into a totality of all appearances and make objective statements about the totality of human experience. Put another way, the subordination of history to higher disciplines in Blondel’s account is premised on the understanding that the practice of history has as its primary referent the appearance of phenomena in the world and not their interior reality. Here it is important to note that Blondel and Loisy are in agreement as to the subject matter of the modern practice of historiography. Where they differ is whether one can engage in the practice of history adequately without taking into consideration the metaphysical limitations of this discipline. As Blondel writes,

8 Cf. ibid., 234-235.

9 Ibid., 237.
[w]hat the historian does not see, and what he must recognize as escaping him, is the spiritual reality, the activity of which is not wholly represented or exhausted by the historical phenomena (although the latter can be determined like a complete picture subsisting apart from the original). It remains true that the historian has to make the determinist explanation as intelligible and complete as possible – but it remains equally true that it is his duty to leave the issue open or even to open it as widely as possible to the realist explanation which lies always beneath.10

What the historian does not see need not be the subject matter of his investigation, but he needs to remain open to it methodologically, in the sense that he must admit it as a fundamental reality at work in the coming to be of historical phenomena in the world, which exacts limitations on his ability to interpret phenomena. To refuse to remain open in method to this fundamental reality, as Blondel accuses Loisy of doing, is to fail to understand that “real history is composed of human lives; and human life is metaphysics in act.”11 The historian need not necessarily insert the empirical realities of phenomena into a meta-narrative, but he does need to acknowledge, according to Blondel, the metaphysical reality that co-inheres in them as historical phenomena.

What is, in fact, the object or rather the aspect which belongs to history, in the technical and contemporary sense of the word? Everything in the social life of mankind which can be verified or testified to, and everything which, with these facts as the basis of induction, is an explanation of the fieri of mankind, and a definition of the laws of its continuous and continual movement.12

For Blondel the modern practice of history is a necessary but insufficient framework for understanding the totality of human existence. For human existence, as

10 Ibid.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 236.
Blondel understands it cannot be imagined outside the purview of the dynamic interplay between the infinite and finite realities that constitute human action. It is not the case that Blondel is unconcerned with history and historical facts. Rather, he is concerned with whether Loisy can interpret Christianity adequately without attending to the infinite realities that show themselves through the finite. Loisy’s historicism is, according to Blondel, both unwilling and unable to penetrate this deeper reality of human history. It was in this context that Blondel maintained the practice of history must be engaged with the disciplines of metaphysics and theology. Blondel was faced with the task of articulating a response to Loisy that, on the one hand, could integrate modern exegetical practices without excluding the theological from the realm of consideration, while, on the other hand, avoiding the ahistoricism of extrinsicism which inadequately distinguished history from theology (dogma).

Thus, from Blondel’s perspective the historian offers an interpretation of reality that is absolutely necessary and legitimate insofar as he does not consider his account self-sufficient. If he does, Blondel argues, he “becomes guilty of fraudulently converting a simple method of work into a negative and tyrannical doctrine.”

He assumes that the division of the sciences that exists in the modern mind, necessarily exists in reality. It is not enough for the historian to remain entrenched within his epistemological horizon and rhetorically acknowledge the horizons of the other sciences. When history is practiced

13 Ibid., 238.

14 Cf. ibid., 238-239.
this way, historical analysis reduces events and happenings to critical history and substitutes its analysis for real and genuine phenomena.\textsuperscript{15}

The phenomenological reduction of Christianity is most keen in historicism because it tends to view Christianity as simply a religion based on texts and ignores the “other strands linking us to Christ.”\textsuperscript{16} Historicism’s exclusion of these other strands and the Christological question (Christ’s divinity) from the realm of legitimate inquiry prevents the ontological and moral reality of Christ’s character and actions from being considered. In refusing to acknowledge the spiritual and metaphysical import of Christ’s existence upon history, Blondel notes that historicism fails to embody its own methodological ideal, which maintains “to look for the whole subject-matter of history.”\textsuperscript{17} The methodological presumptions of historicism are brought into relief through the rhetorical question Blondel poses to Loisy:

If it is true that the apostolic generation lived in the desire and the certitude of the proximate return of Jesus, if that is what the immediate echo of the Master’s preaching repeated as the essence of the primitive message, if the source of devotion to the Saviour and of submission to trials was the hope of a beatifying triumph, how did faith survive so immense a disillusionment? How was it purified, fortified and propagated with such rapidity and on such a disconcerting scale at the very moment when it appeared to have failed to fulfill the promises which appear to be the human cause of its early successes?\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{15} In these comments we see Blondel trying to find a epistemological horizon somewhere between the medieval dogmatism of much early twentieth-century Thomism and the critical spirit of Loisy’s historicism.

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 248.

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 241.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 248.
In EE Loisy’s answer to the question of the apostolic expectation of the *parousia* was that while the apostles expected the parousia what came was the church.\(^1^9\) Undoubtedly there is something compelling about Loisy’s answer.\(^2^0\) However, Blondel suggests that any worthwhile answer will be much more complex and much less circumscribed in its interpretation of this apostolic phenomenon. In order for Loisy to achieve a broader interpretation here requires he methodologically reconfigure his exegetical practices, such that the Christological referent of the phenomenon of apocalyptic expectation in first-century Christianity can disclose the eschatological element already present in the early church’s thinking. The apocalyptic expectation of the early church was, Blondel writes, the “first imaginative synthesis” of the early Christians, influenced by Jewish messianism, and intended to signify that such practices as martyrdom disclose the eschatological meaning of Christ’s self-gift in the present.

Was it not the concrete realization of the truth, like that which the expressive feasts of the liturgy teach us year by year, that the world is always on the point of ending for each one of us, and that what the goodness of God promises us is not some vague idealization but a fully and realist satisfaction, the material and spiritual transformation of the whole man and of the whole order of the universe?…And if the expectation of Christ’s glorious Coming never flagged, perhaps it was because…he was more truly present in the persecuted Church than if he had come suddenly on the clouds.\(^2^1\)

\(^{1^9}\) Cf. Loisy, EE, 111.

\(^{2^0}\) One needs to keep in mind the apologetic context of Loisy’s account of the failure of the imminent parousia in the early Church: namely, Harnack’s lectures on the essence of Christianity.

\(^{2^1}\) Blondel, HD, 250.
Here Blondel is suggesting, as he did in LA, that through the interplay between the speculative (metaphysics/theology) and the concrete (liturgical action) the truth discloses itself. The dialectics of real history, “metaphysics in act,” sets in motion the interplay between the interior and exterior realities to which the disciplines of history and philosophy accordingly refer, but real history also allows the bond that exists between the two disciplines to emerge in the concrete.

II. Between History and Dogma: Blondel’s Notion of Tradition

In the context of the positions put forward by extrinsicism and historicism, Blondel argues for the “need for an intermediary between history and dogma, the necessity for a link between them which would bring about the synthesis and maintain solidarity without compromising [history’s and dogma’s] relative independence.” The synthetic principle of tradition must have an original force, and a foundation of its own; for neither facts nor ideas nor reasoning have really succeeded in extricating us from the circle in which were enclosed by the initial question: ‘How is it that the Bible legitimately supports and guarantees the Church, and the Church legitimately supports and interprets the Bible?’

The notion of tradition must be a metaphysical principle with an ontological value distinct from history and dogma, Scripture and the church, fundamental ontology and

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22 Ibid., 264.

23 Ibid.
epistemological method, and yet a principle able to function as the source of unity between the two without eliding the one for the other. In other words, the objective of Blondel’s notion of tradition is to understand how tradition can unite such fundamental tensions in Christianity as history and dogma, the church and Scripture, ontology and epistemology, while maintaining the distinct integrity of each. To do so requires identifying the space between them, a space that constitutes their unity-in-distinction and that is interwoven into the fabric of the exegetical methods and the speculative doctrines of the church in such a way that it presupposes the ordinary language and grammar spoken in the church. As Blondel notes,

[t]his vivifying power is known to everyone. It is a commonplace to say that the Church rests on ‘Scripture and Tradition’. But what is it precisely? What is its function? What rational justification can be offered for it? How is it that it is linked, on the one hand, to historical facts without being absorbed into history, and that it is bound up, on the other hand, with speculative doctrines thought it is not completely absorbed in them.24

The task at hand is to liberate tradition from the assumptions that conceal it by describing its role and discovering “the source of its strength, and by virtue of what right it knows history in some respects otherwise and better than the critical historian, and dogma otherwise and better than the speculative theologian.”25

To begin, Blondel notes that the conventional idea of tradition is that of “transmission, principally by word of mouth, of historical facts, received truths, accepted teachings, hallowed practices and ancient customs. Is that, however, the whole content, is

24 Ibid., 264-265.
25 Ibid., 265.
it even, where Catholicism is concerned, the essential content of the notion?\textsuperscript{26} This conception of tradition conceives of tradition as an epiphenomenon that emerges in the absence of texts, “supplementing the lacunae,” as Blondel puts it. In this manner tradition is invoked in distinction to Scripture as revealing a “state of mind” or “ancient custom” prior to the text or even implied in the text, and becomes subject to a double presupposition:

\begin{quote}
tradition only reports things explicitly said, expressly prescribed or deliberately performed by men in whom we are interested only for their conscious ideas, and in the form in which they themselves expressed them; it furnishes nothing which cannot or could not be translated into written language, nothing which is not directly and integrally convertible into intellectual expression; so that as we complete our collection of all that former centuries, even without noticing it, confided to memory – rather like students of folklore noting down folk-songs – Tradition, it would seem, becomes superfluous, and recedes before the progress of reflective analysis, written codification and scientific co-ordination.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

Conceiving tradition in terms of a reality that emerges in the absence of texts neglects the dynamism of tradition, and, as Blondel would note in a later comment on tradition, that “element in tradition which is irreducible and always escapes when we formulate tradition in writing…[and which] permits some few particles of the gold of truth to pass from the level of what is implicit in life (l’implicite vécu) to the level of the expressly known (l’explicite connu)”\textsuperscript{28} As a metaphysical principle whose ontological value comes

\textsuperscript{26} Ibid. Blondel does not mention the important distinction between apostolic, post-apostolic and ecclesial tradition.

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 266.

to expression in its communicative and unitive functions, tradition is a phenomenon whose origins are prior to self-reflection: “As a principle of unity, continuity and fecundity which is both initial, anticipatory and final, precedes all reconstructive synthesis and likewise survives all reflexive analysis.”

It is the absence of this metaphysical principle of tradition in Loisy’s account of history that, according to Blondel, prevents it from encountering the fullness of truth in Christianity. Loisy is right to insist that the truth claims of Christianity depend on historical evidence, but he is wrong to consider the historical evidence to be the full measure of their value. There is an inner reality to the truth claims made by Christianity that, though attuned to the historical realities and the results of the historical-critical method, still transcends the heuristic gaze of that method, inviting one to enter into the ultimate truth and become a participant in it. This is the living reality of tradition, which comes to expression through the charism of discernment embodied in concrete practice, animates the entire life of the church, and draws into itself a living synthesis of the speculative, historical and moral truths of the church, manifesting and corroborating these truths through the concrete reality of “faithful action.”

Now that Blondel has resituated the question of truth in tradition through the category of “faithful action,” the question of

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29 Ibid., 1141.


31 Cf. Ibid., 274.
the truth of tradition becomes less an epistemological problem and more an ontological problem. Here we encounter the central reality of the synthetic relationship between action, truth, and tradition in Blondel’s account. In *L’Action* this relationship was adumbrated, when, in the final stage of the drama of the “life of action” Blondel suggests that “a tradition and a discipline represent a constant interpretation of thought through acts, offering each individual, in the sanctified experience, something like an anticipated control, an authorized commentary, an impersonal verification of the truth.”  

In HD, the interplay between action, truth, and tradition unfolds within a more explicitly ecclesial horizon that envisions the disclosure of speculative truths of Christian doctrine as a process sustained by practice.

‘To keep’ the word of God means in the first place to do it, to put it into practice; and the deposit of Tradition, which the infidelities of the memory and the narrow limits of the intelligence would inevitably deform if it were handed to us in a purely intellectual form, cannot be transmitted in its entirety, indeed, cannot be used and developed, unless it is confided to the practical obedience of love. Faithful action is the Ark of the Covenant where the confidences of God are found, the Tabernacle where he perpetuates his presence and his teaching. If the essential truth of Catholicism is the incarnation of dogmatic ideas in historical facts, one must add reciprocally that the miracle of the Christian life is that from acts at first perhaps difficult, obscure and enforced, one rises to the light through a practical verification of speculative truths. *Lex voluntatis, lux veritatis.*

What Blondel is suggesting here is that to discern the full content and meaning of God’s truth in revelation requires the proper disposition of receptivity. Liturgical and sacramental practices, prayer, almsgiving and fasting, that is to say, concrete practices,


33 Ibid., HD, 274.
dispose the community (the church) toward discerning the truth revealed both in Scripture and doctrine.\textsuperscript{34} In this respect, tradition always transcends the text of Scripture by penetrating its content and implications, embodying the drama of salvation throughout human history, and, in doing so, participates in the unveiling of the pattern of redemption in the world.

This ecclesial space of tradition always transcends the material reality of Scripture, while remaining grounded in the historical details of Scripture, and prepares the church to discern God’s presence in a new interpretation and further explication of revelation. “Faced by intellectual novelties, or exegetical hypothesis,” the church discovers there is an autonomous principle of discernment in the total experience of the Church: in taking account of ideas and of facts, traditional faith also takes account of proven ways, of practice confirmed by the fruits of sanctity, of enlightenment gained through piety, prayer and mortification. That testimony is not the only one, no doubt, but it has its own inalienable value because it is based at the same time on the collective age-old action of the most human of men and on God’s action in them.\textsuperscript{35}

Here the attenuated nature of historicism’s and extrinsicism’s resolutions to the problem of representation as it pertains to tradition is most acute. Loisy’s exegesis fails to recognize and neo-Scholasticism’s apologetic fails to furnish a sense of tradition that adequately imagines and anticipates the future by attending to the way in which the past makes the future available to the present. Despite its desire to renew Catholicism, Loisy’s

\textsuperscript{34} Cf. ibid.

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid.
historicism inhibits the development of new and conceptually enriched schemes of thought by maintaining “nothing can modify Tradition which does not, when put to the test, reveal itself as compatible with it and favorable to its progress; so that, though fundamentally stimulating, it shows itself in the main as a moderating, curbing influence in regard to the diverse intellectual elements of the Christian faith.”36 For its part, extrinsicism is unable or unwilling to embrace the idea that “a truly supernatural teaching is only viable and conceivable if the initial gift is a seed capable of progressive and continual growth. The divine and human Word of Christ did not fix itself in immobility.”37

Blondel’s account of tradition then, is not an epiphenomenon that appears in the absence of the canonical Scriptures only to become identified with them. Tradition relies on texts, and, at the same time, it relies on something else he calls “an experience always in act which enables it to remain in some respects master of the texts instead of being strictly subservient to them.”38 This allows tradition to be more than a force preserving the intellectual aspect of the past, but also as a living reality of Christ’s presence. In its authentic manifestations tradition “anticipates and illuminates the future and is disposed to do so by the effort it makes to remain faithful to the past.”39 Likewise, tradition “frees


37 Blondel, HD, 275.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., 268.
us from the very Scriptures on which it never ceases to rely with devout respect,” to reach the real Christ who escapes scientific examination without rejecting the practices of exegesis and history.\(^{40}\)

Within this notion of tradition doctrines can be called not only speculative, but also practical.\(^{41}\) That is, the full value and meaning of doctrine cannot not be understood apart from the community’s embodiment of those very doctrines in their practice, since “dogmas are not only facts and ideas in act, but also they are principles of action.”\(^{42}\) As we saw in Blondel’s philosophy of action, practice is the unifying source between action and belief that gives form and expression to the interior reality of faith. When, therefore, he states that the “truth of Catholicism is not demonstrated simply by the miracle of an institution’s surviving so many disasters, nor by the beauty of its achievement...it supplies the verification of what it believes and teaches in its age-old experience and its continuous practice,”\(^{43}\) he is pointing toward the fundamental truth concerning the nature of tradition as embodied in, sustained by, and manifested through (sacramental) practices. It is these practices that render the Christian narrative intelligible, because their intelligibility presupposes they be embedded in the particular Christian history (or histories) from which they originate.

\(^{40}\) Ibid., 268.


\(^{42}\) Ibid., 372.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 269.
Furthermore, it is clear that, in order that we may pass from facts to dogma, even the most exact analysis of the texts and the effort of individual thought are not sufficient. The mediation of collective life, and the slow progressive labour of the Christian tradition, are essential...’faith in dogma presupposes a living faith’, an altogether false expression if taken to mean that the personal belief of each believer is not justified by explicit reasons, but profoundly true if it reminds us that the intellectual expression of Christian dogma was worked out in the matrix of a believing society, that it cannot be brought to life and further developed except by a living faith, and that in order to understand a dogma fully one must bear within one the fullness of the Tradition which has brought it to light. In this way the difficulty which held us up at the outset seems to be resolved: the active principle of the synthesis lies neither in the facts alone, nor in the ideas alone, but in the Tradition which embraces within it the facts of history, the effort of reason and the accumulated experiences of the faithful.\textsuperscript{44}

These aspects are important for establishing that tradition, though mysterious, is not arbitrary and capricious. It has a “rational process whose laws can be made clear and whose organon can be established.”\textsuperscript{45} The organon of tradition, though it has the supernatural as its “object and mode of action,” has a natural basis upon which it comes to expression.\textsuperscript{46} It does not proceed by way of “research” or scientific investigation, nor dialectically as a resolution to conceptual tensions, in the tradition of Hegel. Nor does it proceed as some sort of “empirical mysticism.” Rather, tradition adapts herself to the diverse forms of intellectual culture; she borrows the language she needs from philosophical systems so as to confer upon her doctrine the degree of precision required by a given state of civilization; but she is the slave of no system; even the most fully worked-out formulae, those most clearly

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 270.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
bound up with a philosophical terminology, Aristotle’s for example, the Church considers only as provisional in their scientific form.\textsuperscript{47}

The objective in employing diverse human means in tradition is to represent and “to discover in men the point of contact prepared for [the church’s] action.”\textsuperscript{48} This desire or objective brings into relief – albeit in an awkward and undeveloped way - the ideal role and intention of the interpretive authority of the \textit{magisterium} as the rule of faith in Blondel’s philosophy of tradition.\textsuperscript{49}

The idea of tradition in the Blondelian framework, then, is not literally dependent upon the scriptural texts, though it perpetually renews and provides an interpretive horizon for them. Blondel’s horizon allows tradition a relative latitude in appropriating other means for expressing the central truths of Christianity, without these other means, whether in their social, cultural or philosophical forms, usurping the theological expression of the principal truths of faith.\textsuperscript{50} Of course, it is possible that the forms by which the tradition does clarify and express its normative truth claims could become subject to ideological tendencies, threatening the intelligibility of those truth claims. Yet, in Blondel’s account of tradition, the openness to other means of understanding in a living tradition will, when embodied well in the practice of the community which represents that living tradition, render the central and enduring truths of that tradition

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 271.

\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 271-272.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 272.

\textsuperscript{50} Cf. ibid., 280.
intelligible to the community – and, when embodied poorly, imperspicuous to the community. There obtains, therefore, in the Blondelian framework, a symbiosis between truth and freedom in tradition, where tradition simultaneously preserves and develops through the ongoing interplay between history and faith. As the church becomes more receptive to God’s self-gift in the person of Christ as the preeminent expression of truth in the Christian tradition, that Truth discloses, through the illumination of the Holy Spirit, the multiple and diverse expressions this Truth gives rise to.

The right question to ask is not whether history must or can corroborate Christian beliefs, or whether exegesis and history ought to be divorced from speculative theology. Instead, Blondel suggests, tradition

is a question of accepting them in their real interdependence so as to discover their several contributions, their relative autonomy and their compensating action on one another: so that their legitimate interdependence, which is the condition of their co-operation, derives from their very solidarity, and that to isolate the study of facts or of Christian theology from the science of Christian life would be to tear out the heart of the bride and to expect her to go on living, and living for the bridegroom?51

Here one discovers the heart of Blondel’s understanding of tradition as the embodied reality of those fundamental beliefs from which it derives its existence, and, as an embodied reality that renders those very beliefs intelligible in the concrete. “One realizes through the practice of Christianity that its dogmas are rooted in reality. One has no right to set the facts on one side and the theological data on the other without going back to the

51 Ibid., 282-283.
sources of life and of action, finding the indivisible synthesis."\(^{52}\) The objective of this synthesis is to tease out a “Christian knowledge” that attends to the history, as well as the “collective experience of Christ verified and realized in us."\(^{53}\) For Blondel tradition is a form of knowledge which intends to situate itself between “those who offer us a Christianity so divine that there is nothing human, living or moving about it, and those who involve it so deeply in historical contingencies and make it so dependent upon natural factors that it retains nothing but a diffused sort of divinity.”\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 286.

\(^{53}\) Ibid., 287.

\(^{54}\) Ibid., 286.
PART III
AFTER BLONDEL
CHAPTER SIX

AFTER BLONDEL:
THE LITURGICAL ACTION OF TRADITION AS PARTICIPATION IN
GOD’S TRUTH

Introduction

In the immediate aftermath of the publication of History and Dogma, Baron
Friedrich von Hügel stated in his correspondence that Blondel’s account of tradition
lacked historical sense.¹ In his public response von Hügel maintained that Blondel
inadequately distinguished between the historian’s task of offering description of
phenomena and historical events (phenomenal) and the theological horizon from which
the Christian’s spiritual interpretation proceeds.² In a slightly emended form some years
later, Yves Congar, Blondel’s chief interpreter and critic, appropriated von Hügel’s
criticism of Blondel in his monumental work Tradition and Traditions. Congar observed
that Blondel’s account of tradition in History and Dogma insufficiently attended to the
historicity of dogma and the way in which dogma itself is conceived within the horizon
of history. Blondel’s account of tradition is part of the process by which “Catholics learnt
how to make a clearer distinction between a purely historical and a dogmatic tradition, or
rather between tradition as it appears to the historian and as it exists for the

¹ Cf. Marlé, AC, 205-206.

² Cf. von Hügel, “Du Christ eternal et de nos christologies successives,” 305.
Church.”⁴ According to Congar, Blondel’s account might benefit from “a more complete history, less bookish and critical, and more open to human realities, [which] can offer better resources to the believer who wishes to discover what support his religious experience can find in the relevant evidence.”⁵ What is more, Blondel’s account over-emphasizes the “really implicit” in the life of the members of the Body of Christ, at the expense of neglecting the apostolic deposit.⁶

This chapter engages Congar’s criticism of Blondel’s idea of tradition and suggests that that the latter understands its relation to the historical and dogmatic traditions of Catholicism in a manner not akin to the modern practice of historiography. Instead, Blondel’s theory of tradition rehabilitates an important feature of the apostolic

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¹ Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, 366 (emphasis added). Blondel’s interest in maintaining the distinction between a historical tradition and a dogmatic tradition is well attested to by his correspondence with von Hügel, Loisy, and his criticism of extrinsicism. Whether Blondel maintained this distinction in practice is a different question. For Blondel’s understanding of this distinction in his correspondence with von Hügel see chapter three. Regrettably, Congar tends to rely heavily on a sharp distinction between “historical” tradition and “dogmatic” tradition, at times seeming to suggest the latter consists of the process of gathering and collating documents and the former of the process in which the documents are reconstructed and re-imagined through the speculative and concrete encounter the thinker has with them in the present. Were Congar’s own thought to embrace a less strict version of this necessary distinction, his constructive theological comments would appear less axiomatic. Nevertheless, this observation should in no way take away from the considerable debt Catholic historical theology owes to Congar.

² Congar, TT, 367.

³ Ibid. Congar also criticizes Blondel for failing to develop the magisterium’s role in the synthesis of tradition. See Congar, TT, 366-367.
understanding of the economy of tradition in the form of an “analogy of tradition” 
\( (analogia\ traditionis) \). The transmission of tradition from the apostles to later 
generations of the church facilitates the church’s communal participation in and with 
Christ. As the synthetic living reality which mediates between history and faith, tradition 
\( (vinculum) \) is a participation in the \( vinculum\ substantiale \) (substantial bond) that exists 
between Creator and creature established by Christ’s hypostatic encounter with the 
world. The concrete process by which tradition unfolds God’s truth in history is through 
the liturgical action of the church. In Blondel’s scheme, “faithful action is the Ark of the 
Covenant” where God’s truth represented in doctrine becomes a living reality in the 

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4 For the sake of clarity, here analogy is employed as a conceptual device for exploring 
how finite reality participates in the fullness of being opened up in the event of Christ. 
This is in keeping with the concrete and historical aspects of Blondel’s ontology, which 
seeks to lay bare how finite reality bears the image of and participates in – albeit 

5 Blondel’s idea of tradition as the synthetic bond between history and faith belongs to his 
appropriation of the metaphysical concept of the \( vinculum\ substantiale \) in Leibniz’s 
philosophy. For a detailed discussion of the \( vinculum\ substantiale \) in Leibniz’s thought 
and Blondel’s appropriation of it see David Grumett, “Blondel, Modern Catholic 
Blondel’s first considers this motif in his Latin dissertation and soon after in the 1893 
version of the L’Action. After these two works it would unfold as a central theme around 
which his thought interweaves the trinitarian structure of history, the encounter between 
infinite and finite being in the Eucharistic action of the church, and the notion of tradition 
as the bond between history and faith. See \textit{De Vinculo substantiali et de substantia 
composita apud Leibnium} and the revised edition of the dissertation \textit{Une énigme 
historique. Le “Vinculum substantiale” d’après Leibniz et l’ébauche d’un réalisme 
supérieur}. For the impact of Leibniz’s account of the \( vinculum\ substantiale \) on Blondel’s 
thought, as well as his criticism of Leibniz’s account see \textit{Carnets intimes} (1883-1894), 
church. Here the interconnectedness between action, the problem of representation and tradition comes to the fore as one of Blondel’s most keen observations. By drawing on the thought of contemporary authors who have dealt with the question of tradition, this chapter develops Blondel’s key insight into interconnection between tradition, representation and liturgical action, while maintaining continuity with and bringing more coherence to his idea of tradition. In discussing the connections between action, representation and tradition, this chapter provides readers with a better window into the Blondelian insight that through liturgical action of the church tradition is a participation in and a representation of revealed truth in human history. Further, it will demonstrate to readers who are sympathetic to the criticisms of Blondel the good reasons to reconsider Blondel’s contribution to a participationist and representational understanding of the faith revealed to the early church and carried through liturgical action in tradition.

I. Between Congar and Blondel: Trinity, Tradition and Truth

In the context of his engagement with Loisy, Blondel discusses history only in the negative sense, as a critique of Loisy’s historicism. He says very little about what his understanding of history is and very much about what Loisy’s understanding of history neglects. From this perspective Congar’s criticism seemingly identifies the attenuated horizon of history within which Blondel conceives of his idea of tradition. But, for Blondel, tradition is not the antinomy of history, a static, isolated reality untouched by deeds and facts. Nor is it simply synonymous with the facts established though critical
history. The object of the study of tradition is not to establish mere causal links between phenomena, since tradition is not bound to historical attestation in the same manner as the modern practice of historiography. In order to avoid making “category mistakes” when one attempts to speak about religious events and their relation to dogmatic claims to truth, Blondel thought one needs to attend to the various linguistic usages of term “fact”. The categorization of the different kinds of facts suggests that to comprehend the full dimension of religious facts, to discover their internal connections, hierarchical interdependence, and spiritual substance, requires that they be seen through their various and appropriate categories.

The issue is to bring together simultaneously all kinds of proof, to understand why all facts are not on the same level; how for instance the adoration of the magi, although its ‘historicity’ is less impossible than the virgin birth, is, from the doctrinal view, of infinitely lesser importance and could be considered without guilt, the parabolic illustration of an infinitesimal point.

Here Blondel’s categorization of the various kinds of facts constitute the first step in the process of synthesizing history and dogma, and displays how the practice of tradition does not preserve historical facts and speculative aspects of the past, nor does it ignore the way in which the past influences historical and conceptual details. Rather, tradition attests to history by drawing the “living (vital) reality” out of the historical features of the

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7 Ibid., 241-242.
past and into a living synthesis that applies to the present and illuminates the future. In this sense, tradition relies on history to “re-present” the vital reality of truth present in the past in order for that reality to form the living synthesis of truth in the present. In contrast to Congar, the Blondelian notion of tradition is not simply an exercise in marshalling evidence of the past in support of religious belief, despite the importance of that task. Instead, tradition does retrieve and conserve evidence of the past, but its principal task is to facilitate the interplay between the living reality (deposit) of truth received from the past, embodied (action) in the present life of the church, and orientated toward the future (development).

In this respect, Congar’s critical observation of Blondel throws into relief not so much the lack of critical history in Blondel’s account of tradition, but instead Blondel’s concern that in pressing the historical/dogmatic tradition distinction the science of historiography comes perilously close to functioning as a substitute category for tradition in the representation of the vital (living) reality of truth. The interplay between deposit (preservation) and development (interpretation) in Blondel’s account of tradition can be found as a theological axiom in Congar’s understanding of tradition. Congar explains the fundamental tension tradition facilitates in the following way:

[i]n the first case [of deposit] all the actions of the Man-God may be predicated of God and thus bear an absolute guarantee. In the second (development) we have a ‘mystical’ body, which is also the Bride and keeps its own individual subjectivity before Christ its Lord; the human subject is left to its own freedom and responsibility within a framework of weaknesses and graces, efforts and ups-and-

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8 Blondel, HD, 267.
downs in fidelity; only the ultimate decisions about the reality of the covenant are guaranteed.\footnote{Congar, \textit{Tradition and Traditions}, 312-313.}

Congar struggled to substantiate the enduring tension between deposit and development in tradition. Indeed, he knew well that it is essential to faith and prior to precise theological formulation, even while the latter is necessary and important but insufficient and secondary. In the concrete Congar understood the reason for the primacy of the inner-reality of tradition over theological formula was that a “correct understanding of the truth may still exist even behind inadequate expressions of it,” and without apostolic certainty and biblical evidence.\footnote{Ibid., 353. Here Congar cites the complicated arguments that attempted and always failed to find textual (biblical) evidence for the bodily assumption of Mary. On the other hand, as Henri de Lubac’s work on the early church fathers shows the use of pre-modern exegetical practices often misinterpreted the text on one level, but at times also led to a very profound understanding of revelation. This profound understanding comes out of reading the text within the living community, which attempts to embody the Christian reality (tradition) itself. Congar also cites the case of the second century fathers theology of baptism which develops out of the lived reality of baptism.} It is the truth in tradition that gives primacy to this reality of tradition over its doctrinal formulation, though the two are inseparably united in such a way that each cannot exist without the other. The distinct but interrelated nature of truth in tradition brings into sharper focus how and why the liturgy is the paramount expression of tradition. The liturgy, as a repository of tradition and its privileged means of communication, brings to full expression the mystery of salvation residing within the content of tradition, and forms each generation of the church in the mystery of salvation, drawing each generation into the drama of eternal love played out in the world. The
Eucharist is the concrete reality through which we participate in the eternal union of love of the Father for the Son through the Spirit. It is the visible representation in time of the perfect Communion to which we are called, and therefore, it constitutes the preeminent place where the church encounters God.

In the polarity between deposit and development tradition is distinguished most clearly from Scripture, the latter a written form of God’s self-disclosure, by the way in which it is attuned to the ongoing encounter with Christ’s presence in the liturgical and sacramental practice of the church. To be sure, Scripture forms an integral and an essential feature, indeed, it is the foundation of liturgical action and without it the liturgy would be theologically unintelligible. Yet, it is the enduring character of the Christian reality of tradition as distinct from though shaped by oral tradition, and, more specifically, the inner reality of tradition and not its material form that is the key – albeit undeveloped - feature of Blondel’s understanding of tradition and requires further articulation.

Blondel’s account of tradition as a form of discernment and participation in revealed truth resonates deeply with Congar’s own treatment of the Pauline idea of tradition. For Paul and the early church the revelation of God in Jesus Christ is both the origin and the content of tradition, i.e. the paradosis, the “linking process in time which is of the historical order, and a non-temporal or supra-temporal reality, fully present here and now.”\(^{11}\) The knowledge of tradition given in the liturgical action of baptism and the

sacramental practice of the church and learned through catechetical training was the principle reality through which one participated in the truth that is genuinely present while at the same time always already beyond one’s full comprehension. To be a witness to the tradition of the twelve disciples meant not only to see, to hear, and to practice, but also to deliver and to transmit (tradere) the knowledge that comes from the deposit of faith through tradition.\textsuperscript{12} Within the Pauline corpus the concept of “deposit” signifies the essence of God’s plan to redeem the world through the death and the resurrection of Christ and this event remains the ultimate referent of tradition (2 Tim. 1: 13-14; 1 Cor. 3: 11). Yet, while this truth remains the ever-present and ultimate referent of tradition, interpreting, discerning, and embodying its presence as the pattern of redemption in the world remains open to development and change. The pattern discloses itself in every facet of faith: “the social, and even juridical, structure of the transmission and acceptance of faith is like the sacrament of the most mystical and spiritual reality.”\textsuperscript{13} In Congar’s view, the apostolic idea of tradition involves not only memory, “but also a deepening of insight; it is preserved, not merely in the mind, but also on the “heart,” which meditates lovingly on what it holds fast.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{12} On the relations between tradition, apostolic succession, and Scripture see Joseph Ratzinger, “Primacy, Episcopate, and Apostolic Succession,” in \textit{The Episcopate and the Primacy}, 46-54.

\textsuperscript{13} Congar, \textit{Tradition and Traditions}, 14-15.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15.
The apostolic economy of tradition, then, opens up an ecclesial space in which the content of revelation can be given further interpretation and formulation. While the historical Christ, the living Word of Scripture is the origin of tradition, the ecclesial space of tradition always transcends the material reality of Scripture by the “pneumatic surplus” dwelling at its center.¹⁵ Readers of Blondel and Congar alike will note that whenever the phenomenon of tradition opens up a new interpretation, and a further explication of revelation, it will always transcend the purely historical, as, for example, when the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament prescinds from the chronological pattern of the Old Testament.¹⁶ The new interpretation need not be considered completely foreign; rather, it can be seen as a new understanding of the same revelation disclosed in a different situation. Here, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, tradition functions as the hypostatic bond between God’s concrete and continual action in human history and the historical and literary character of God’s revelation in human history expressed in the canonical Scriptures.

For readers who worry about Blondel’s so-called immanentism, this hypostatic bond is understood precisely in Trinitarian terms. For Saint Paul and Blondel alike, the transmission (tradere) of tradition in the church is a participation in the communion of eternal love found in the Trinitarian life of God, which the Holy Spirit initiates, sustains,

¹⁵ Cf. Ibid., 18-19. Here the limitations of thinking about revelation in positivistic terms as information instead of transformation becomes clear when one tries to reconcile the claim that no new public revelation is to be expected before Christ comes again with the claim of doctrinal development.

aids and guides through persons in communion. The transmission of tradition that takes place from person to person in the church is an analogical reflection of the kenotic self-giving and the spontaneous receptivity that occurs between the life of the divine persons of the Trinity. In this way the church participates in the perfect transmission (traderes) of Christ that flows from the incarnation and its finality.

For Blondel, the life of action is the category of relation through which humanity participates in God’s life. God’s act of self-disclosure in human history through the person of Christ, according to Blondel, makes time in the world for the church more than simply a natural phenomenon. Through the perfect action of the Logos time for the church becomes the horizon within which finite reality encounters God.

Called to see all things in the unity of the divine plan, through the eyes of the Mediator, called to see himself in the permanent act of liberality and to love himself in loving the perpetual charity from which he has his being, he is the very act of his author...He has had a beginning; and it is this limit which forever remains his distinctive mark; but once appearances open up, without vanishing, to reveal all things in their universal reason to him, he participates in the truth of creative love.

In this respect Blondel considers the possibility of history to depend on the creative activity of God manifested through the genuine freedom with which God endows finite reality to embody its freedom in creation. That is to say, Blondel arrives at the place where the temporal reality of human freedom can exercise its autonomy upon tradition as

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18 Cf. ibid., 422-423.

19 Blondel, LA, 423.
an integral form of participation in God’s truth and not merely a “purely” historical tradition that musters evidence for religious belief.

Blondel understands tradition as “an experience always in act” which is “turned lovingly towards the past where its treasure lies.”20 Yet, in his account tradition does more than turn to the past. Tradition, he continues, always anticipates and illuminates the future by remaining faithful to the past.21 For the church to participate in the receptive and kenotic movements of the economy of tradition as Blondel’s account implies it does, it must remain open to the divine disclosure of truth in tradition. In order to discern the truth of tradition and the possibility of genuine change and development in tradition those actions which represent the truth of persons in communion with God must be directed toward the one who gives the gift of tradition. Thus, discerning the divine disclosure of truth in tradition is an exercise in hope that in faith the church will dispose itself to the gifts of the Spirit and the prospect of embodying a mode of charity that, Blondel declares, “insinuates a new order into the normal order.”22 Here Blondel’s own diary captures well the movement of receptivity and kenosis through which human existence enters into the Triune Life itself through the divine Mediator and in doing so participates in the new order of charity.

Being is love; we cannot know if we do not love. The Spirit of God is charity; without the charity that is poured out into our hearts, we cannot rise either to the

20 Ibid., HD, 267.
21 Cf. ibid., 268.
22 Ibid., 283.
Son or the Father; We cannot understand anything in the world of the Spirit’s operations. By the Incarnation, the world was created anew; but in a transcendent and ideal manner. In order for there to be real unity, an immanent life, *vinculum substantiale*, the Spirit of unity and of love must secretly penetrate the interiority of beings and therein complete reality, being; and being is always a presence of God; more than a knowledge, more than a production, it is love. The action of substances upon one another is at one and the same time a subordination of power, an influence of ideal persuasion, and an attraction of love.\(^{23}\)

Through the death and resurrection of Christ the church participates through grace in the Trinitarian life of eternal love that flows into the world, and the “new order” of love that enters into the historical order of creation. The synthesis of the facts of history and dogmas of faith reflect the effect of this new order. As Blondel puts it, “the synthesis of dogma and facts is scientifically effected because there is a synthesis of thought and grace in the life of the believer, a union of man and God, reproducing in the individual consciousness the history of Christianity itself.”\(^{24}\)

In the Blondelian horizon then, one can do more than simply detect a Trinitarian structure to history that can be discerned through the mystery of action. There is an observable analogy between all human liturgical action, and revelation of God’s Triune life in history. It is through the mysterious dynamic of action that humanity is given a genuine space (*analogia libertatis*) to make history happen.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{23}\) Ibid., *Carnets intimes*, vol. I, 222.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 287.

In created beings, the mystery of the Trinity is always represented, and the action of each of the eternal persons can be sensed there. The relation of these operations, this bond of the intimate constitution of beings is always synthetic and contingent. We always have need of experience to acquire the science of the real, the work of the freedom of choice; and in the human world, in the rule of the moral will, experience is action.26

For Blondel, this space is by no means void, awaiting, as with Kant, the categories of understanding imposed upon it in order to render it intelligible to consciousness. It contains an immanent intelligibility, but the content is mediated between the subject and the world not by “Observing Reason”27 in the sense Hegel envisions, where “[Reason] involves the Harmony of Being in its purest essence, challenging the external world to exhibit the same Reason which the Subject (the Ego) possesses.”28 Instead, the content of creation is rendered intelligible by virtue of its created status, which makes it receptive to its full realization through the Incarnate Word. Put another way, the hypostatic bond, which is the site of redemption in creation, mediates redemption in human history in such a way that the natural order need not abandon that which makes it distinctively other to its source of fulfillment, the supernatural. As Blondel writes, “the whole natural order comes between God and man as a bond and as an obstacle, as a necessary means of union and as a necessary means of distinction.”29

26 Ibid., *Carnets intimes*, vol. I, 125-126.


29 Blondel, LA, 410.
Should the genuine space to make history happen be shaped, structured, and conditioned by the *perichorésis* of finite and infinite being dwelling in human history in the person of Christ, then the categories through which one considers Christ’s earthly existence must remain open to the disclosure of the infinite dimension of His existence and attuned to His lasting presence in the world. The failure to do so, as historicism and extrinsicism each do in their distinct ways, reflects an impoverished theological horizon, one that fails to consider that Christ, as the hypostatic bond of history in whom the natural (reason) and the supernatural (faith) are perfectly united, is the deepest reality of time in the world.

Does the supernatural consist, as the extrinsicist thesis implies, in a notional relationship determined and imposed by God, there being no link between natural and supernatural but only an ideal juxtaposition of heterogeneous and even impenetrable elements which only the obedience of our minds can bring together? In that case the supernatural subsists only if it remains extrinsic to the natural, and if it is proposed to us from outside, its whole value residing in the fact that it is *above* nature. Or can it be reduced, as the historicist thesis implies, to being no more than another name for the divine or for a sort of concentration of it in nature itself, so that, if it is not entirely confused with nature, that is because after all one must have a word for the phase at present reached by our religious aristocracy? In short, should it be regarded more or less as an intellectual privilege which only exists as such, in opposition to, and as external to, the common state?…For the ‘state of pure nature’ is a pure abstraction which does not exist and never has existed; in studying the nature of man as it actually is, we do not get to know the ‘state of nature’ any more than we can abstract, in our lives, the radical and universal penetration of something which will always prevent us from finding our equilibrium in the merely human order.\(^\text{30}\)

The Trinitarian structure of tradition raises two distinct but interrelated questions: First, how does the hypostatic bond of the person of Christ furnish the idea

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\(^{30}\) Ibid., HD, 283-284.
of tradition with a concrete form? And second, how can one discern this form as the pattern of redemption in the world? In its multiplicity and diversity, the church (the body) forms together with Christ (the Head) the living subject of tradition by virtue of its relationship of similarity and difference to Christ. As the living subject of tradition, the church is given the content of tradition through its participation in the mission (missio) the Father gives to the Son for the salvation of the world, which is disclosed in history at various levels through the prophets, the Incarnation, the Apostles and the church. Yet, while the church is one with Christ (the Head) as Christ’s body, and therefore, the living subject of tradition, the church is at the same time other to Christ, as expressed form of the Incarnate Word which cannot articulate itself unequivocally apart from Christ. This unity-in-distinction provides the horizon from which the interplay or polarity between the acts of the church as both body (human) and head (divine) are rendered theologically intelligible, and the framework within which one can begin to understand the relation between deposit (preservation) and development (interpretation) in tradition.

II. After Blondel: Tradition, Liturgical Action, and Time

The insight into the relationship of time in tradition and its connection to liturgical action remains one of the most profound yet undeveloped insights Blondel intuit in his account of tradition and Congar brings to theological expression. For Congar, the
transmission of tradition that takes place in the “sacramental order” requires a unique understanding of temporality. Indeed, Congar observed that

the sacraments have a peculiar temporal duration, in which past, present and future are not mutually exclusive, as in our chronological time. Sacramental time, the time of the Church, allows the sharing by men who follow each other through the centuries in an event which is historically unique and which took place at a distant time; this sharing is achieved not merely on the intellectual level, as I could commune with Plato’s thought, or with the death of Socrates, but in the presence and action of the mystery of salvation.31

Congar’s assertion about the horizon of time within which the sacraments are practiced contains the elements of time Blondel envisioned for the phenomena of tradition, elements that allowed tradition to anticipate and to illuminate the future by remaining faithful to the past.32 After Blondel, many theorists have begun to attend to the shifting sense of temporality in late-modern capitalist culture, while theologians have started to compare the structure of time in the market with the structure of the time of tradition (sacramental time). These developments show how remarkably prescient Blondel’s intuition about the interconnection between the time of tradition, liturgical action, and the problem of representation really was. After the publication of HD Blondel continued to consider the way in which the time of tradition disrupts ordinary signification, as, for example, when he suggests in his article on the historical value of dogma published a year after HD: “among the statements of faith that surpass the reach of historical proofs, there are some that aim so expressly at positive realities, I daresay


32 Cf. HD, 267-268.
brute facts, that one could not turn them into a starting point, a mere abstract expression or a metaphorical realization of a superior truth.”

While in the context of the discussing the dialectic tension between history (facts) and faith (dogma), Blondel’s comment here intimates at the need to be mindful of the misguided tendency to think presences and absences as spatial and temporal attributes, a tendency Augustine acknowledged well before Blondel in his meditation on the practice of memory in the book ten of *Confessions*.

People are moved to wonder by mountain peaks, by vast waves of the sea, by broad waterfalls on rivers, by the all-embracing extent of the ocean, by the revolution of the stars. But in themselves they are uninterested. They experience no surprise that when I was speaking of all these things, I was not seeing them with my eyes...Yet when I was seeing them, I was not absorbing them in the act of seeing with my eyes. Nor are the actual objects present to me, but only their images...But these are not the only things carried by the vast capacity of my memory. Here also are all the skills acquired through the liberal arts which have not been forgotten. They are pushed into the background in some interior place – which is not a place. In their case I carry not the images but the very skills themselves.

Both Blondel’s comment on the power of presence and absence in the articles of faith and Augustine’s remark on the power of memory point to the need to attend to the distinction between pictorial representation (pictures) and symbolic representation (symbols), particularly in the dialectic between now and then that obtains in liturgical action. For liturgical action facilitates the bond uniting the activities of remembering,

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imagining, and anticipating and distinguishes the time of tradition from calendar time and clock time\(^\text{35}\) by not merely referring to a contact in the past, but by making the past context there again as absent.\(^\text{36}\) Robert Sokolowski observes that the unique character of pictorial representation is that “pictures do not merely refer to something, but make something present.”\(^\text{37}\) As this distinction comes to expression in the practice of memory, Sokolowski maintains,

I appreciate that what I am remembering is not in the present of my life; I present earlier motions and events as having been lived through, but as not being lived through now, except as absent and ‘there again.’ Yesterday’s dinner is not being eaten now, but I am now remembering and reidentifying not an image of the dinner, but the dinner itself again, as absent.\(^\text{38}\)

In the time of tradition the past, present, and future are encountered in a manner distinct from chronological time. This form of time requires a living subject

\(^{35}\) Here we have in mind Husserl’s distinction between world time, the time of clock and calendar, and internal time, as the “Objective temporality that appears (for example: the temporality of this die) from the ‘internal’ temporality of the appearing (for example: that of the die-perceiving). See Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), 41.

\(^{36}\) Here it is important to keep in mind that “[w]e tend to takes presences and absences as further features of the thing, and often interpret them as the object’s being ‘here’ or ‘there,’ or ‘going on now’ or ‘all finished’; that is, we take them as spatial or temporal attributes. But presence and absence are not features of things, they are modes of presentation and require an appropriate articulation.” Robert Sokolowski, *Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions: Fourteen Essays in Phenomenology* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992), 24. Hereafter abbreviated P, D, Q.

\(^{37}\) Ibid., 21.

\(^{38}\) Ibid., 124.
(community) reenact the displacements of time, which are remembered and imagined not in abeyance but in the *action* of the event of historical happening. It is in this sense of time that the church’s Eucharistic action in the liturgy participates in the sacrificial action of Christ’s death and resurrection as the gift given to the church by Christ from the Father. It is in faith that the church participates in the fullness of the gift of the Son yet to come.

That the church’s liturgical action takes place in time but is not fully dependent upon the temporal reality of time, is reflected in the level of invariance that obtains in the liturgical act itself. That is to say, the liturgical act contains a level of invariance which stems from the reality that a preponderance of meaning resides in the form of the liturgical act itself and not simply in its function as a symbolic description of a deeper reality that remains hidden.\(^{39}\) Here the form of liturgical act is inextricably bound to its content such that the latter is unintelligible apart from the former. In this way the sacramental efficacy of the church’s liturgical action need not depend on the community’s rational comprehension of the liturgical utterances or the emotional quality it invests in the liturgical practice. Rather, the efficacy of the liturgical act is disclosed through faith as a gift given by the Spirit in the form of the community’s desire to receive the spiritual effect of the liturgical act.

\(^{39}\) For an example of an interpretive method that ignores the form of an action or ritual practice in its effort to discover how an action or practice symbolically represents the cultural ethos and shared value of a community, see Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. J. W. Swain (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968).
The linguistic shifts in the form of the liturgical act further reflect the multiple contexts and the temporal forms of the present, past, and future the community engages in while celebrating his Eucharist. For example, Sokolowski observes, that Jesus “celebrated the first Eucharist against the background of the Jewish Passover and its recollection of the past, and he anticipated the death he was about to undergo in the immediate future.”\(^{40}\) The church’s Eucharistic celebration, however, establishes a form of the present, past, and future that is chronologically later than the present and the past of Jesus’s celebration of the Eucharist. But the church’s celebration “takes place within them and blends with them temporally” through the re-enactment of Christ’s sacrificial action. Simply put,

When [the church] reenacts the death and Resurrection of Jesus, it also reenacts the action God performed in the Exodus. The Last Supper invoked the Passover, so when we invoke the Last Supper we also invoke the Passover that preceded and was drawn into it. Our Eucharist thus has a double revival of the past, with one of its reenacted pasts, the Last Supper, enclosed within the context set by the other, the Passover. The past of our Eucharist is the present of the Last Supper and the sacrifice of Calvary; in a deeper dimension, the past of the our Eucharist is the present of the Passover and the Exodus.\(^{41}\)

Here the problem of the multiple contexts of liturgical action and its relationship to time cannot be ignored, since the act of situating a practice (action) in its original context not only provides the historical background from which the practice is rendered intelligible, but it also initiates the interpretive process of that practice. For example, as


\(^{41}\) Ibid., 103.
David Cannadine’s observation about ceremonial coronations in the British monarchy suggests, “[u]nder certain circumstances, a coronation might be seen by participants and contemporaries as a symbolic reaffirmation of national greatness. But in a different context, the same ceremony might assume the characteristics of collective longing for past glories.” In Cannadine’s and Eric Hobsbawm’s view ritual practices (customs) are the interior reality of a tradition, the latter which at some point is invented in an effort to maintain the intelligibility of the practices of a tradition which are continually susceptible to change. In order to discover the real meaning of contemporary practices they must be resituated within their original historical context.

Hobsbawm’s view of tradition raises the often-neglected original historical context of a practice to the level of importance that makes it essential to understanding the meaning of a practice. However, the intention of the creator of the practice is by no means the sole condition of its intelligibility, as Cannandine’s and Hobsbawm’s account imply it to be. Their account stands to benefit from a corrective similar to that which Blondel sought to offer to Loisy. Blondel includes an ontological element in his account of tradition, which allows the practice (action) of a tradition to possess a considerable share of meaning itself, as well as represent an ongoing interpretation of

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the tradition it represents. As Blondel’s regressive analysis of the dialectic of the wills suggests, practices (action) always disclose a trace of both the insufficiency of human willing and the absolute necessity of it in the natural order. The heteronomy of the wills alludes to the important yet incomplete account of action (practice) the positive sciences offer. Should there be an internal principle of unity to action that always escapes positive knowledge, as Blondel’s account of action suggests there to be, then the original historical context of a practice will always be an important yet inadequate tool for understanding any practice. Lost in Cannandine’s and Hobsbawm’s horizon for understanding the practices of a tradition is the ontological value of action (practice). Were Cannandine and Hobsbawm to attend to the ontology of action Blondel’s dialectic discloses, their account of tradition would be open not merely to the past as the privileged horizon of meaning in tradition, but to the present and to the future and the way in which the former and the latter form a significant share of the meaning of tradition.

In many traditions the present and the future constitute the condition for the possibility of rendering the past intelligible. For example, the past in the Eucharistic action (memoriale passionis Domini) is only intelligible as the church’s present petition and anticipation of Christ’s return (Epektasis). In this way the “present of the

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45 Cf. ibid., LA, 62-93.

46 Cf. ibid., LA, 94-108.
Eucharistic gift is not at all temporalized starting from the *here and now* but as memorial (temporalization starting from the past), then as eschatological announcement (temporalization starting from the future), and finally, and only finally, as dailyness and viaticum (temporalization starting from the present). As the most visible action of God’s encounter with the world, the celebration of the Eucharist is the site where the transmission and the historicity of the truth in tradition is on display as a diachronic living reality. Within the framework of sacramental time the ontological value of tradition discloses itself through the interplay (or tension) between the past, present, and the future, the *anamnesis*, allowing tradition, as in Blondel’s account, to anticipate

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47 Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 172. It is important to note that Marion’s comment here about the Eucharistic presence are made in light of Heidegger’s critique of the ordinary conception of time in the final section of division two of *Being and Time*, where Heidegger argues that traditional metaphysics imposes the present, as here and now, as the only basis through which being discloses itself. In this horizon, Heidegger further argues, “time shows itself as a sequence of ‘nows’ which are constantly ‘present-at-hand’, simultaneously passing away and coming along. Time is understood as a succession, as a ‘flowing stream’ of ‘nows’, as the ‘course of time’.” See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 474. For Marion, the primacy of the present in the ordinary conception of time imposes itself on modern interpretation of the theology of transubstantiation, creating and facilitating the conditions for the possibility of Christ’s real presence in the Eucharistic action.

48 For a discussion of the liturgy as the “site” of the encounter between the finite and infinite its relationship to the church and how this encounter and relationship has been spatially construed in modern Eucharistic theology see Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing*, 158-166. Also see Lawrence Paul Hemming’s critique of Pickstock’s interpretation in *Worship as Revelation: The Past, Present and Future of Catholic Liturgy* (London: Burns & Oates, 2008), 77-79.
and to illuminate the future through its fidelity to the past. 49 “We are and we act always ‘now,’ but our now is always the recapitulation of a past and the anticipation of a future.” 50

Despite the normative interplay between the past, the present and the future in tradition, one cannot ignore the ideological obstacles the phenomena of tradition confronts in modernity. In the culture of late-global capitalism, whose logic is premised on the inexhaustible process of introducing and forgetting, the “ceaseless transformation of the innovative into the obsolescent,” liturgical action, as a repeated practice that celebrates memory, is envisioned as a “compensatory device” that offers a fictive structure of recurrence and reassurance. 51 This logic of the global market is sustained by a form of temporality that constructs time as successive quantity situated chronologically in terms of the polarities of “old and new, earlier and later.” 52 Within this horizon “time is compressed into an ever more narrowly defined present” 53 in which the modern self is unable to imagine the distinct and the deeper form of time as a

49 Cf. Blondel, HD, 268.

50 Sokolowski, Eucharistic Presence, 105.

51 Paul Connerton, How Societies Remember (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 64.


“structure of exemplary recurrence.”54 Were it not for the inherent practice of
forgetting, it would be tempting to see the logic of innovation and dissolution in global
capitalism as a form of rupture characteristic and essential to the development of a
tradition. Yet, the internal logic of consumption in global capitalism continually elides
the past as a referent. Put another way, when “what matters is the choice and the
performance now – past choices matter only as a guide to present behavior, future
choices matter only as the objects of present calculation,”55 the mode of continuity
(concept of truth) by which a tradition might survive a genuine rupture of development
either to flourish or to perish either exists in a attenuated form or is non-existent, and, in
turn, renders the process through which the self discerns and sustains its identity,
irrelevant.56

The time of tradition, sacramental time, conceives time precisely in the way that
the logic of the market contends it cannot; namely, as the “celebration of recurrence” of
the life, the death, and the resurrection of Christ.57 As the inner nature of tradition,
sacramental time displays that the action involved in memory has the unique capacity to


55 Boyle, Who are We Now?, 79.


57 This is most evident in the way in which the liturgical calendar interrelates the
temporal and the sanctoral cycles and in doing so celebrates the recurrence of the saints,
martyrs, and prophets who now participate in the sacrificial death and the new life of
Christ. For an account of how the liturgical calendar has changed see Alcuin Reid, The
be the same action we once perceived, yet, not the same action in perpetuity, since actions are bound to their present and cannot be in another action in the same present.\textsuperscript{58}

For the same action to appear again in memory requires “‘another temporal context’…originally given to us when we memorially or imaginatively place ourselves at a time, at a then, different from the one we are in now.”\textsuperscript{59} Sacramental time discloses a mode of representation in which the self enacts displacements creating for it an interplay or polarity between the present, past, and future that is central to its identity. Indeed, such displacements are the central feature of what it means to be a human being. For through the process of enacting the liturgical displacements of the church the self discovers an anthropology that discloses the radical non-necessity of the self’s being\textsuperscript{60} and affirms finite reality (creation) to be the location and matter (bread and wine) through which God encounters the world.

To reach man, God must go through all of nature and offer Himself to [man] under the most brute of material species. To reach God, man must go through all of nature and find him under the veil where He hides Himself only to be accessible. Thus the whole natural order comes between God and man as a bond and as an obstacle, as a necessary means of union and as a necessary means of distinction.\textsuperscript{61}

As God’s concrete encounter with the world, liturgical action is the deepest sense of tradition for the church as a living reality which, simultaneously relives (past), embodies

\textsuperscript{58} Cf. Sokolowski, \textit{Pictures, Quotations, and Distinctions}, 126.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{60} For Blondel’s reflections on the contingency of self see \textit{L’Action}, 314-329.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid, 410.
(present), and transmits (future) tradition and realizes its present identity through the interplay between “deposit” (past) and development (future). In practicing the liturgical displacements of the church, the self is reconfigured by being unable to imagine itself as the source of its own existence. In this manner, liturgical action becomes the true source of being and the concrete way in which humanity comes to participate in the eternal life of God. It is the reason Blondel maintained the Eucharistic action of the church to be the “act par excellence” which seals the synthesis between God and man in a “true communion.”

It is this reality of liturgical action and its relationship to the phenomenon of tradition that Blondel’s remarks intimate. Tradition, he writes, “is indeed like an umbilical cord that prevents the Church from being stillborn. Through it, divine blood really flows; and this divine blood feeds the Church and allows the spiritual birth of souls who are called to grow into divine maturity.”

Here, in the encounter with Christ in tradition, Blondel sees an irreducible element that continually eludes literal (and textual) formulation. It is the index which points to the way in which the communal life of action becomes the vessel through which the truths of tradition transform “what is implicit and ‘enjoyed’ into something explicit and known.”

The essence of Tradition should not be considered under the material aspect of Scripture or that which can be expressed with words. For what it transmits is

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62 Blondel, LA, 387.

63 La philosophie et l’esprit Chrétien, 2:82.

64 Ibid., HD, 268.
precisely what cannot adequately be named or mummified under sensible or intellectual aspects; we are dealing here with a living transmission, not only through words but also through actions, signs, contacts between living persons, gestures that exclude all doubts and hesitations for they surpass mental deliberations.\textsuperscript{65}

It is this inner and deeper understanding of the ontological reality of tradition in the life of each individual Christian within the mystical body of Christ, that comes to concrete expression in the liturgical action of the church, which Blondel sought to give expression to his idea of tradition and without which, he maintained, the fullness of truth contained in God’s revelation could not be represented in human history.

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., \textit{La philosophie et l’esprit Chrétien}, 2:80.
CHAPTER SEVEN

ACTION AS ONTOLOGICAL RETURN:
BLONDEL’S CHALLENGE TO MODERN HERMENEUTICS

Introduction

Thus far, the dissertation has examined the conceptual history of the idea of
tradition, its capacity to represent God’s presence in modern Catholicism, and its
relationship to the problem of representation. The dissertation has suggested that the late-
medieval shifts in the notion of God’s power, ecclesial power, and political power created
the conceptual climate within which the modern notion of tradition became less an
expression or representation of God’s presence embodied in the church (paradoxis,
traditio) and more a procedural reality in Catholic culture, which sometimes was
reflected through the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office, having the unintended
effect of reducing the sacramental character of the church as Host and obscuring its
vocation to invite humanity into the liturgical action of God’s body. The tension between
the problem of representation and tradition in modern Catholicism is most acute in such
figures as Loisy, whose thought attempts to reconcile the tension between the problem of
representation and tradition through the category of critical history. In light of his debate
with Loisy, the dissertation argued that Blondel’s notion of tradition offered a corrective
to the juridification of modern Catholicism’s idea of tradition, by attending to the way in
which tradition, mediated through liturgical action, is the bond uniting history and dogma
through the interplay between the past, present, and future. Through the interplay of time
between the past, present and future that comes to expression in the liturgical action of
the church, the practice of tradition relies on history not to conserve or retrieve the past, in a manner akin to the modern practice of historiography, but instead to draw out the living reality of the past into a living synthesis of the present which illumines the future. Blondel’s argument, especially when seen against the more juridical concept of tradition that had been developing in modern representational thinking, enables a recovery of an older view of tradition, but also one that is fitted for the future. His work sets new parameters for thinking about the liturgical action of the church as the privileged site where tradition represents the vital reality of truth present in the past as a living reality for the present and guide for the future.

In displaying tradition’s synthetic role of mediating the past to the present, history to dogma, of actualizing what is “implicit and ‘enjoyed’ into something explicit and known,” and discerning action’s relationship to representation, Blondel discloses the unique role tradition plays in the relationship between ontology and epistemology. The philosophical debates surrounding the practice of modern hermeneutics have almost exclusively focused on questions of epistemology, privileging the “order of knowing” over the “order of being.” However, the priority of epistemology over ontology began to

1 Blondel, HD, 268.

shift in the twentieth century. This chapter traces the shift in emphasis in twentieth-century hermeneutics from epistemological method to fundamental ontology before exploring how Blondel’s idea of tradition (philosophy of action) opens up and clarifies questions posed in that particular discussion. Blondel’s account of tradition suggests that the resolution to the modern problem of representation in human understanding resides not in the shift to epistemological method at the expense of fundamental ontology, as with Schleiermacher, nor with the exclusive shift to fundamental ontology, as with Heidegger. Instead, what is required is the mediation of these two distinct yet interrelated categories of human understanding. In Blondel, tradition facilitates the “movement of return,” to use Paul Ricoeur’s phrase, whereby the ontology of liturgical action draws one out of the circularity of human understanding through its transcendent referent that is never divorced from the contingent nature of human rationality (epistemology). Just as tradition is the bond that unites history and faith, here it functions as the bond between ontology and epistemology in the practice of human understanding.

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5 Here the term “ontology of liturgical action” is used to suggest not that Blondel’s idea of tradition foreshadows the foundational ontology of Heidegger, but rather that Blondel’s account of action, as it comes to expression in the sacramental life of the church, links the past with the present and the historically contingent with the transcendent.
I. Blondel, Tradition, and the Rise of Twentieth-Century Hermeneutics

In the early part of the nineteenth century David Friedrich Strauss’s (1808-1874) *Life of Jesus*\(^6\) managed to direct biblical hermeneutics away from questions related to the interpretation of Scripture and toward those concerning the positivity of Scripture, specifically whether the written sources of Scripture are reliable sources for discerning the life and ministry of Jesus. While scholars debated the reliability of the gospels, the great Prussian reformed theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768-1834) put forth a notion of interpretation whereby the interpreter represents the historical context of the text through analysis and research of its cultural and ideational context, but the interpreter also participates psychologically in the author’s horizon in order to become conversant not only with the language and grammar of the author but with “the spirit of the author as well.”\(^7\) This method raised the prospect of understanding “the text at first as well as and then even better than its author.”\(^8\) Here one sees the practice of hermeneutics in transition “from determination of the rules and principles of interpreting texts to inquiry


\(^8\) Ibid., 112.
into the nature of understanding discourse and what is manifest in it.\footnote{Frei, *The Eclipse of the Biblical Narrative*, 282.} The framework for understanding the nature of textual discourse in Schleiermacher’s thought is a dialectic or interplay between the objective representation of the text in its historical context and the interpreter’s intuitive encounter with the text, the “double mark,” of “Romantic and critical,” the former “by its appeal to a living relation with the process of creation, critical by its wish to elaborate the universally valid rules of understanding.”\footnote{Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” 46.}

Schleiermacher’s dialectic, however, frustrated commentators with its speculative ventures outside the realm of history. This frustration was palpable in the reception his treatment of the historical questions of the life of Jesus received. As one commentator put it: “all the historical questions involved in [Schleiermacher’s] life of Jesus come into view one after another, but none of them is posed or solved from the point of view of the historian; they are ‘moments’ in his argument.”\footnote{Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress From Reimarus to Wrede*, 2nd ed, trans. W. Montgomery (German original, 1906; London: A. & C. Black, 1936), 63.} Schleiermacher did succeed in directing attention to the reality that understanding occurs by having an internal connection to what is understood. Yet, what exactly the internal connection between the “moments” was in Schleiermacher’s account was unclear.\footnote{Cf. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics: Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 151.} Nevertheless, concern with Schleiermacher’s treatment of history was voiced at the end of the nineteenth century from a different but
related sector of thought than the one mentioned above. Wilhelm Dilthey’s (1833-1911) attempt to develop Schleiermacher’s “romantic subjectivism” retained Schleiermacher’s deference to human consciousness as the apex of Verstehen.\(^\text{13}\) However, Dilthey’s decisive contribution to hermeneutics is to subordinate the philological and exegetical questions of interpretation to the science of history which, by the end of the nineteenth century had attained the status of a science of “the first order.” As a preliminary aporia to understanding a particular historical text Dilthey was required to give an account of the fundamental intelligibility of the science of history itself (historical reality).\(^\text{14}\) Writing within the milieu of philosophical positivism, Dilthey posited a distinction between the mental world (psychology) and the physical world that, in turn, allowed him to construct the epistemological conditions for the possibility of understanding. For from the mental life of man he was able to draw on the phenomenon of interconnection (Zusammenhang), which permits one to explore and to understand the forms and the expressions of the lives of others. Yet, the pliable reality of human experience required a logical structure within which the phenomenon of interconnection in the mental life could show itself and provide meaning.\(^\text{15}\) Despite the difference in trajectory of thought,\(^\text{16}\) Dilthey was able to


\(^{15}\) Cf. Paul Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning (Fort Worth: Texan Christian University Press, 1976), 73.
evaluate critically the notion of subjectivity and its inner relation to objectivity with the help of Edmund Husserl’s (1859-1938) idea of intentionality and his account of consciousness as a synthetic process of repeatability in which objects are given. The connection between Dilthey and Husserl is important because it is through Husserl’s “concept of life,” and the way in which this concept relieves subjectivity of its opposition to objectivity, that Dilthey was able to endow human experience with coherence. As Gadamer explains,

[Husserl’s] concept of life clearly plays the same role as the concept of the coherence of experience (Erlebnis) in Dilthey’s investigations. Just as Dilthey begins with experience only in order to reach the concept of psychic coherence, so Husserl shows that the unity of the flow of experience is prior to the discreteness of experiences and essentially necessary to it. As in Dilthey, the thematic investigation of conscious life must overcome the tendency to base itself in individual experiences. To this extent there is a genuine parallel between the two thinkers.17

Husserl contributed the important epistemological insight into the structure of science in which Dilthey sought to anchor his account of the Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences).18 There is, however, for Dilthey, despite his sensitivity to the concrete order as

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16 See Chapter 1 of Part II in Edmund Husserl, Formal and Transcendental Logic, trans. Dorion Cairns (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 149-175, where Husserl attempts to respond to some of the criticisms related to the charge of psychologism in the Investigations.


18 For example, see “Fragments for a Poetics (1907-1908),” trans. Rudolf A. Makkreel; “Goethe and the Poetic Imagination (1910),” trans. Christopher Rodie; and “Friedrich
the dynamic horizon of philosophical meaning, an overarching psychological horizon that represents the condition for the possibility of hermeneutics. Within this horizon the practice of interpretation is and remains not about “what a text says, but who says it.”

As Gadamer suggests, the most important question is whether both Dilthey and Husserl do justice to the theoretical demands of the phenomenon of life; he wonders whether the “genuine content of the concept of life does not become alienated when it is articulated in terms of the epistemological schema” that derives its data from consciousness, data which “do not include the ‘Thou’ in an immediate and primary way.” Thus, the “other person is first apprehended as an object of perception which then, through empathy, becomes a ‘Thou’… but is still orientated to the interiority of self-consciousness and fails to orient itself toward the functional circle of life, which goes far beyond consciousness, to which, however, it claims to return.”

Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) recovery of the forgotten question of Being in *Being and Time* (1927), though indebted to Dilthey’s *Lebensphilosophie*, signaled that hermeneutics in the twentieth century needed “to disengage itself from the psychological

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21 Gadamer, TM, 250.

22 Ibid. See also Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory*, 75-76.
problems of transfer into another’s life, and come to grips with the more ontological
problems involved in comprehending ‘being-in-the-world.’”23 This ontological shift in
understanding suggested that hermeneutics was no longer primarily concerned with
methodology and epistemology, as it had been for Schleiermacher and Dilthey. In light of
Heidegger’s account of Dasein, Schleiermacher’s and Dilthey’s understanding of
hermeneutics seemed to be enthralled by the Cartesian thinking subject who escapes the
temporal distance between the interpreter and the text. What is more, achieving any
understanding at all, according to Heidegger, would be a matter not of Husserl’s
transcendental subjectivity, but of the facticity of Dasein, as it comes to terms with
being-in-the-world through its various modes of “attunement,” “discourse,” and
“falling.”24 Thematizing understanding, then, requires clarifying the Being of time,
matter, space, and history presupposed by the sciences.25 Starting from the facticity of
Dasein means “inquiry into being, but in a direction that necessarily remained
unconsidered in all previous inquiry into the being of beings – that was indeed concealed
by metaphysical inquiry into being.”26 Heidegger’s account of Dasein shifts philosophy
in the twentieth century by resituating the problem of representation from an
epistemological context to that of fundamental ontology. When the question of the

23 Paul Ricoeur, Main Trends in Philosophy (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1979), 266.


25 Cf. Ibid., 28-35.

26 Gadamer, TM, 257.
“world” takes precedence over the question of the “other,” analysis of the practice of exegesis goes beyond the theory of knowledge.\textsuperscript{27}

In interpreting, we do not, so to speak, throw a “signification” over some naked thing which is present-at-hand, we do not stick a value on it; but when something within-the-world is encountered as such, the thing in question already has an involvement which is disclosed in our understanding of the world, and this involvement is one which gets laid out by the interpretation.\textsuperscript{28}

Heidegger showed that “[a]n interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us,”\textsuperscript{29} by demonstrating that \textit{Dasein’s} particular way of Being presupposes an anticipatory grasp of Being in general. He defended his architectonic analysis of human understanding against the charge of circular reasoning, as follows:

[I]f the problematic of fundamental ontology is to have its hermeneutical situation clarified, our investigation must now come back explicitly to this “circular argument.” When it is objected that the existential Interpretation is “circular,” it is said that we have “presupposed” the idea of existence and of Being in general, and that Dasein gets Interpreted “accordingly,” so that the idea of Being may be obtained from it. But what does “presupposition” signify?\textsuperscript{30}

According to Heidegger’s articulation of “presupposition” there is no neutral site from which one can engage in exegesis. \textit{Verstehen} is \textit{Dasein’s} basic way of being so that the “fore-structure” of Being is the horizon that enables the practice of interpretation: “to

\textsuperscript{27} Cf. Ricoeur, “The Task of Hermeneutics,” 57.

\textsuperscript{28} Heidegger, BT, 190-191.

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 191-2.

\textsuperscript{30} Heidegger, BT, 362.
deny the circle, to make a secret of it, or even to want to overcome it, means finally to reinforce this failure. Instead, we must rather endeavor to leap into the ‘circle,’ primordially and wholly, so that even at the start of the analysis of Dasein we make sure that we have a full view of Dasein’s circular Being.”

Heidegger requires the philosopher to acknowledge the fruitfulness of being situated in the worldliness in which she finds herself. Within the ontological structure of Being, however, embracing the circularity of human understanding need not imply that one “existentiell” form of understanding is as authentic as the next. Heidegger’s moving account of the self’s “authentic” existence advances no compelling, non-narcissistic reason for undertaking the existentiell transformation that being-in-the-world seems to demand of the self. As Ricoeur points out regarding Heidegger’s philosophy, we are “always engaged in going back to the foundations, but we are left incapable of beginning the movement of return which would lead from the fundamental ontology to the properly epistemological question of the status of the human sciences. Now a philosophy which breaks the dialogue with the sciences is no longer addressed to anything but itself.” As Ricoeur’s comment suggests, Heidegger has just collapsed the order of knowing into the order of being rather than delineating their proper relationship.

What Ricoeur regarded as an insurmountable obstacle, Gadamer (1900-2002) insisted was the decisive impetus behind the development of Heidegger’s thought. To be

31 Ibid., 362.

sure, Heidegger’s descriptive account of the way in which human understanding occurs does not unfold the prescriptive conditions for the practice of the historicity of understanding, but liberates hermeneutics from the metaphysical obstructions of the scientific concept of objectivity, and takes up the task of showing the ontological significance of the way in which understanding is achieved, namely, according to Gadamer, by mooring interpretation in the things themselves by the process of working out the various “fore-projections” of meaning that show themselves as the interpreter encounters the text. Understanding takes place when we pay attention to the “fore-meanings” of the text we want to understand. This calls for an openness to the text’s alterity and the multiplicity of other meanings that disclose themselves. Heidegger’s account of the concretization of Dasein reveals that historical consciousness “is not a matter of securing ourselves against the tradition that speaks out of the text then, but, on the contrary, of excluding everything that could hinder us from understanding it in terms of the subject matter. It is the tyranny of hidden prejudices that makes us deaf to what speaks to us in tradition.” This unMASKs the central concern of the Enlightenment being “to understand tradition correctly – i.e., rationally and without prejudice.” In reaction to the Enlightenment’s understanding of tradition, Romanticism reverses the Enlightenment’s philosophical schema of history (i.e., the conquest of mythos by logos).


34 Ibid., 269-270.

35 Ibid., 272
by “seeking to establish the validity of what is old simply on the fact that it is old,”\textsuperscript{36} and thus ironically sharing the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudice.” As Gadamer notes,

the great achievements of romanticism – the revival of the past, the discovery of the voices of the peoples in their songs, the collecting of fairy tales and legends, the cultivation of ancient customs, the discovery of the worldviews implicit in languages, the study of the “religion and wisdom of India” – all contributed to the rise of historical research, which was slowly, step by step, transformed from intuitive revival into detached historical knowledge.\textsuperscript{37}

For Gadamer, modern consciousness polarizes temporal distance and belonging in order to meet the putative demands of objectivity in the sciences. However language is the reality immanent and operative in all the human sciences; language mediates historical consciousness and is the site where “we meet what we never ‘encounter’ in the world, because we are ourselves it (and not merely what we mean or what we know of ourselves).”\textsuperscript{38} In this way, the so-called historical alienation or temporal distance between the text and the interpreter cannot be reduced to simply a “reproductive” act, but is instead the source of hermeneutical productivity generated in the “fusion of horizons” that occurs in the interpreter’s encounter with the text.

To be sure, the Christian idea of the Incarnation, the Word of God, for Gadamer, introduces the phenomenon of language as pure event of meaning for philosophical

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 273.

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 275.

reflection into Western thought. Gadamer uses the Trinitarian analogy of the procession of the divine Word to display the structural reality of the relationship between thought and speech.\textsuperscript{39} This prepares the way for Gadamer’s metaphysics of finitude which rehabilitates Hegel’s “bad infinity” grounded in the hermeneutical experience.\textsuperscript{40} However, Gadamer’s account of history and the role of tradition make history, as one commentator put it, a “place where ‘we’ can always and everywhere be at home.”\textsuperscript{41}

In contrast to Gadamer, Blondel sees history as the place where humanity discovers it is not “at home”; it is the time within which it discovers its own contingency through human action. Indeed, the phenomenon of action, which goes beyond both the intellect and the will, yet as the source of power for the intellect and the will action mediates humanity’s desire for transcendence and discloses its inability to achieve it through the asymmetry of the “willed will” (“\textit{la volonté voulue}”) and the “willing will” (“\textit{la volonté voulante}”). Unlike Blondel’s, Gadamer’s notion of tradition is unable to break out of the circle of human understanding to facilitate the “movement of return” from ontology to epistemology. Blondel analyzes how the liturgical mediation of tradition opens the circle of human understanding to genuine transcendence through its concrete encounter with Incarnate Word present in the liturgical action of the church. Gadamer’s account of Western thought lacks the concrete liturgical referent that for

\textsuperscript{39} Ibid., 418-428.

\textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 428-438.

\textsuperscript{41} Terry Eagleton, \textit{ Literary Theory: An Introduction} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 72.
Blondel opens the circle of human understanding to the soteriological effect of the Incarnation on language, even though Gadamer’s account of the hermeneutical experience seems to be open to genuine transcendence.

In an effort to go beyond Gadamer’s account, Paul Ricoeur (1913-2005) has suggested that a new aspect of the dialogical structure of human experience presents itself as the polarity between public and private within the dialectic of meaning and event.

An event belonging to one stream of consciousness cannot be transferred as such into another stream of consciousness. Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you. Something is transferred from one sphere of life to another. This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning, becomes public.42

For Ricoeur, discourse is itself the process by which private experience is made public. Real history outside the text precedes the narrativity of the text. Thus, history is not simply a narrative construct but leaves its trace in the form of a narrative that stands in the place of what was and no longer is. In this respect, Ricoeur appears to be open to the prospect that the deepest reality of history is its theological dimension in the sense that God has acted and continues to act in history outside of or, as Ricoeur puts it, “in front of” the text.

In this sense, we must say the naming of God is first of all a moment of narrative confession. God is named in “the thing” recounted. This is counter to a certain emphasis among theologies of the word that only note word events. To the extent that the narrative genre is primary, God’s imprint is in history before being in speech. Speech comes second as it confesses the trace of God in the event.43

42 Ricoeur, Interpretation Theory, 16.
As a Barthian philosopher Ricoeur seems to have discovered how the introduction of the Incarnate Word into the phenomenon of language is more than pure event of meaning, as in Gadamer who restricts himself to philosophy alone, in accord with Kant’s transcendental dialectic. As Ricoeur acknowledges, for believers the order of knowing is secondary to the order of creation, and everyone has some inner experience of being prior to speaking. The practice of interpretation discloses to the self new modes of being-in-the-world through the networks of metaphors that constitute the world of the text. “If the reference of the text is the project of a world, then it is not the reader who primarily projects himself. The reader is enlarged in his capacity of self-projection by receiving a new mode of being from the text itself.”44 Here the process of understanding is “a moment of dispossessing of the egoistic and narcissistic ego”45 initiated by the “universality” and the “atemporality” of the explanatory process; and these two realities are integrally connected with the disclosive power of the text as distinct from any kind of ostensive reference.46

What gives rise to understanding is that which points towards a possible world, by means of the non-ostensive references of the text. Texts speak of possible worlds and of possible ways of orientating oneself in these worlds. In this way, disclosure plays the equivalent role for written texts as ostensive reference plays in spoken

44 Ibid., Interpretation Theory, 94.

45 Ibid.

46 Cf. Ibid.
language. Interpretation thus becomes the apprehension of the proposed worlds which are opened up by the non-ostensive references of the text.\footnote{Ibid., “Metaphor and the Central Problem of Hermeneutics,” in \textit{Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences}, 177.}

In disclosing the distinction between the text and the possible worlds opened up by the text, Ricoeur offers a corrective to Romanticism and adds a clarification to Gadamer. As he puts it: “the hermeneutical circle is not repudiated but displaced from a subjectivist level to an ontological plane. The circle is between my mode of being – beyond the knowledge which I may have of it – and the mode opened up and disclosed by the text as the world of the work.”\footnote{Ibid., 178.}

Ricoeur’s reconfiguration of the relation between the text and the self preserves the epistemological conditions necessary to conceive of the discipline of history without reducing historical discourse to fictional literature. Despite the receptive relationship Ricoeur’s self has to the text, is that self really engaged in a true exercise of human understanding? Put another way, in Ricoeur the process of understanding is a “moment of dispossession” of the narcissistic ego, a moment when the self becomes receptive to possibility. But in the process of dispossession that takes place in the self, the self seems to rediscover itself in a tyrannous relationship with the text, as it becomes endlessly receptive to the indefinite number of possible truths disclosed in its encounter with the text, but it is not clear whether that self is also open to the Truth. That is to say, the grammar animating Ricoeur’s account of the event between the self and the text only
appears to permit the subjunctive mood at the expense of the indicative. As a philosopher Ricoeur seems to surrender to the tyranny of possibility opened up and disclosed by the text. This may shed light on two distinct yet related criticisms, namely, that Ricoeur conflates metaphor and metonymy,\textsuperscript{49} and that he reduces the subject of the narrative to consciousness rather than agent.\textsuperscript{50} Thus, the historical and literal senses of the text are, in Ricoeur, merely the occasion by which the self encounters the disclosive possibility of the worlds opened up through the metaphorical sense of the text, and not the ostensive referent of those possible worlds.\textsuperscript{51} Thus, the self takes on a docetic nature where its personal world becomes a “carnal [shadow] of the true ‘secondary’ world of ‘meanings’ ‘understood’ in ‘disclosure.’”\textsuperscript{52} In its application to Scripture, Ricoeur’s hermeneutical theory makes Jesus the verbal expression of a certain “preconceptual consciousness” which he then in a secondary sense exhibits in action.\textsuperscript{53} As Hans Frei observes, “that


\textsuperscript{52} Frei, “The ‘Literal Reading’ of Biblical Narrative in the Christian Tradition: Does It Stretch or Will It Break?,” 126.

\textsuperscript{53} Cf. Ibid.
Jesus was crucified is not a decisive part of his personal story, only that he was so consistent in his ‘mode-of-being-in-the-world’ as to take the risk willingly."\(^{54}\)

In contrast to Ricoeur, Blondel considers metaphor to be an insufficient linguistic and rhetorical reality unable to express adequately the disclosive power of the truth the world of the text opens up. This is not to deny the disclosive power of metaphorical discourse in Scripture. Rather, what Blondel seems to suggest is that metaphorical discourse lacks the ontological purchase to represent and to preserve the truth the world of Scripture opens up. “For the procession of images that have always surrounded or prolonged faith, such as the dream of parousia is one thing; but the reality of divine truth supernaturally incarnated in a historical past and perpetuated as an act that is present in all its consequences is another thing altogether.”\(^{55}\) What is more, history in Blondel’s horizon is the site where the insufficiency of all finite reality is disclosed through the polarity between the autonomy ("la volonté voulue") and necessity ("la volonté voulante") of the wills. Simply put, history is the place where the self discovers it is ill-suited to achieve on its own the transcendence it ineluctably desires. Here the self discovers it is the agent of its action, action which does not first represent a secondary world of meaning, as in Ricoeur. Instead, the will’s journey from created to uncreated truth in Blondel’s dialectic shows the action of the self to be a micro-recapitulation of the

\(^{54}\) Ibid.

various stages through which the process of salvation has played out in the world and recounted in Scripture.

In the Blondelian framework, then, the resolution of the problem of representation in human understanding does not reside in the disclosive power of metaphor, but in the synthetic bond of tradition. Tradition is not simply a state of consciousness, which orientates the subject toward the possible worlds opened up by the text, as with Ricoeur. Nor, as with Gadamer, is tradition only the ontological fore-structure\(^56\) through which the subject encounters the text and is able to represent the truth to human understanding. Instead, tradition is the “source of movement,” the metaphysical bond between faith (dogma) and reason (history),\(^57\) the synthetic living reality that both facilitates and mediates, through the liturgical action of the church, the interplay between the ontological and epistemological polarities of human understanding.

Beyond its immediate context Blondel’s account of tradition contains more than simply the attempt to show the methodological flaws of both early twentieth-century Scholasticism (extrinsicism) and historicism (Loisy). It endeavors to delineate the process

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\(^{56}\) Here the term “ontological fore-structure” refers specifically to Gadamer’s understanding the role tradition plays in the practice of human understanding.

\(^{57}\) The reader needs to be aware that I am engaging modern hermeneutics, and therefore the terms “faith” and "reason" does not immediately refer to their original context in Blondel’s discussion of Loisy’s positivism (historicism). I am trying to bring Blondel's particular understanding of faith and reason and his account of tradition into conversation with philosophical debates surrounding the modern practice of hermeneutics and, in this way, I am trying to move Blondel's thought beyond its historical context into a new speculative debate. Nevertheless, I have supplemented the terms faith and reason with the parenthetical terms “dogma” and "history" in order to remind the reader of the original context of Blondel’s use of these terms.
by which tradition, as it is mediated through the ontological reality of action, sets the epistemic conditions for the possibility of true human understanding. For in his account of tradition is a philosophy of history which displays how the historical, as a reality mediated through the dynamism of action, contributes to the salvation of the world. In the Blondelian horizon, faith, which in modernity had become separated from historical truth, is re-historicized, but not simply in a way that privileges practice as divorced from the theoretical. For Blondel, such a divorce would render action fundamentally unintelligible. As he notes in LA:

It is thanks to this practical union that men, causing their certitudes and their affections to rise from a depth they know not, become attached to one another through a bond so powerful and so gentle that they form only one spirit and one body. Yes, only practice works this wonder of forming, with the diversity of spirits, a single body, because it uses and fashions that by which they are tied to one another. That is why there is unity of doctrine only as a result of a common discipline and a conformity of life. And that is why the dogmas and beliefs are teachings for thought only in view of becoming principles of action. This is the point we must come to in order to understand that intellectual union remains impossible among men, who nevertheless need it and need that it be free and total, impossible as long as it claims to remain independent of a discipline and a tradition.  

Rather, Blondel’s philosophy of action witnesses to the historical character of the content of tradition and grounds that content in the hypostatic bond of God’s Perfect Action in the Christ represented through the liturgical action of the church.

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58 Blondel, LA, 379-380.
II. Toward a Blondelian Hermeneutics of Tradition

The important role of subjectivity in Blondel’s account of the historicity of human understanding appears to resonate deeply with the way in which Gadamer considers the phenomenon of time after Heidegger.

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naïve assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity. In fact the important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding. It is not a yawning abyss but is filled with the continuity of custom and tradition, in light of which everything handed down presents itself to us.\(^{59}\)

Yet the Blondelian horizon enables one to appreciate how “true tradition” simultaneously develops and preserves through the ongoing interplay between history and faith. Blondel’s resolution of the problem of representation in modern Catholicism was to provide a new hermeneutic with which the Christian life and Scriptures could be approached. Where thinkers like Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur failed to come to terms with the absolutely supernatural dimension of human history, Blondel moved towards a more Catholic and sacramental hermeneutics of tradition, which did not jettison all the epistemological insights of the historical-critical method but instead retained many of its aspects. In short, Blondel was interested in moving Catholic exegesis beyond the ideological narrowness that it had fallen into at the beginning of the twentieth

\(^{59}\) Gadamer, TM, 297.
century. In his correspondence with Loisy prior to the publication of HD he hints at this intention:

It is just not enough to discard distasteful dogmatism and a priori theology in an effort to barricade oneself, even if legitimately, within the methodological skepticism of the historian. The question is more complex: what we need is a “prolegomena to all future exegesis,” that is, critical reflection on the very conditions of the science of revelation and of all sacred literature; lacking such a systematic investigation we run the risk of rudely absorbing what is in question or of excluding implicitly and a priori what we think we are reserving for an a posteriori investigation (and, it seems to me that the latter case is yours).  

The prolegomena to all future exegesis is, for Blondel, constituted by the polarity between critical exegesis (history) and dogmatic theology, a polarity that attends to both history and theology in an effort to bring about a synthesis of these two realms as the true horizon of Catholic exegesis. Attending to the insights of modern history while, at the same time, reading Scripture from within the church opens up the space of tradition, a space where the sacramental realities of faith can disclose themselves as God’s eternal truth continually present in human history. It is the dogmatic space where the church actively transmits the content of revelation, and where tradition is the relationship between the revelation of Truth and the church’s participation in Truth that occurs through liturgical action.

In Blondel’s account the synthetic reality of tradition means that the interpretation of Scripture gives rise to a surplus of meaning that exceeds the literal and the historical

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60 Marlé, AC, 90.

character of revelation, yet still requires them, is never opposed to them, and does not abolish them.\textsuperscript{62} The practice of interpretation is an exercise in discerning how certain facts refer substantially to real events, and, at the same time, disclose divine realities within the historical event. Far from deducing facts from faith or historical events from Christian doctrine, the task of a hermeneutics of tradition is to give an account of how Christians “justify dogmatically historical beliefs which can neither be founded on mystical inspiration, nor be reduced to simple subjective and symbolic statements, nor be satisfied with objective data which criticism justly finds insufficient.”\textsuperscript{63}

The practice of exegesis within the ecclesial space of tradition encourages the interpreter to remain open to the possibility that God truly continues to reveal Himself through the Spirit in the action of the Church. But here “possibility” is no longer the tyranny of the subjunctive mood; it is openness to the possibility of the One Thing Necessary: that is, faith in God. In the Blondelian horizon, revelation is conceived within the foreground of the conceptual interplay of revealing (presence) and concealing (absence) in the dialectic of action. The dialectic of action discloses the simultaneously contingent and insufficient nature of human rationality to God’s revelation, and, in so doing, adduces the eschatological horizon of the biblical text and the surplus of meaning that resides within it. Within this framework a hermeneutic of tradition need not preclude philological and literary methods of interpretation. Indeed, these methods are essential to


\textsuperscript{63} Blondel, “De la valeur historique du dogme,” 232.
the correct interpretation of a text. A hermeneutic of tradition does preclude, however, the 
synchroic and detached manner of historical consciousness with which these methods 
are often applied to the text. That is, exegesis cannot be performed in isolation from the 
synthetic living reality of tradition, which displays, unfolds, and critiques, through the 
concrete reality of “faithful action,” the truths disclosed in the texts of Scripture.64

After Blondel, then, to fail to be mindful of the philosophical presuppositions and 
attentive to the historical situatedness within the living tradition in the encounter with the 
biblical text, is to fail to recognize a fundamental truth about finite reality. It is this 
fundamental truth of finite reality revealed through the life of action that is the occasion
of the “movement of return” in tradition from fundamental ontology to epistemology.
That is, in tradition human understanding only discovers its complete and final form to 
the degree that it allows itself to be drawn deeper into the mystery of God’s encounter 
with the world through the liturgical action of the church dwelling in its tradition. For in a 
Blondelian hermeneutics of tradition the transmission of tradition is a genuine 
participation in the kenotic self-giving and the spontaneous receptivity revealed in the life 
of the divine persons of the Trinity. Here, in the ecclesial space of tradition, the practice 
of exegesis enters into the economy of tradition (the true movement of return), the transit

64 It is worth noting that the Church too must guard against its own temptation to obstruct 
the transmission of truth in tradition by “temerity” and “pusillanimity.” As Blondel puts it, “that of temerity properly speaking, and that of pusillanimity, which favors silence or 
silent conformism over the difficult witness to truths and duties that are not yet clearly 
discerned.” (Blondel., *La philosophie et l’esprit Chrétien*, 94).
between history and faith, and, in doing so, remains open and receptive to the continual
disclosure of God’s presence in history.\textsuperscript{65}

\textsuperscript{65} Cf. Blondel, \textit{La philosophie et l’esprit Chrétien}, 77-80, where the theological
etymology of the term tradition discloses its Trinitarian origins and accounts for it
distinct use, sense, and reference in Christianity.
CONCLUSION

This dissertation has shown that tradition plays a mediating role in the disclosure of divine revelation. In a premodern cultural context it was presumed that human understanding had access to reality and indeed, ultimate reality (God), via the mediation of being; we have called this view “ontology.” It was also assumed that divine revelation manifested the reality of God, and that revelation was secured by a unified vision of the church with it institutional authority, its liturgical life, and its proclamation of Scripture. In these ways God was considered to be represented in the world. We also have described the late-medieval process of separation between the church and Scripture, the process by which the idea of tradition became more a procedural reality concentrated in the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office. As a consequence of the process of separation the question arose whether there is anything in the world that can represent God, and, if there is, how can we know this representation. The problem of representation was rendered even more complex with the emergence of “historical consciousness,” and the question of how God could be present in the contingent events of history and how could this presence be known. Thus, the “epistemological” question emerged and became a dominant interest in philosophy, especially in hermeneutics as well as impacting on theology.

In this context, the dissertation has argued that Maurice Blondel’s notion of tradition in the text History and Dogma offered a theological resolution to the problem of representation in the form in which it manifested itself in Catholic theology in the modern era, by tradition’s ability to re-present God’s truth in human history through the liturgical
action of the church. In part one we surveyed the conceptual, exegetical, and theological transformation of western thought through the category of representation and its effect on the Christian concept of revelation. This part of the dissertation established the connection between the problem of representation and the notion of tradition in modern Catholicism, by tracing the late medieval shifts in the notion of God’s power, ecclesial power, and political power and how these theological shifts created the conceptual climate for the idea of tradition in modern Catholicism to become less a re-presentation of God’s presence embodied in the Church (paradosis, traditio) and more a procedural reality that reflects the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office. This part of the dissertation also examined the immediate historical and theological contexts of Blondel’s notion of tradition in the pontificate of Pius IX, the Thomistic renewal of Catholicism in the pontificate of Leo XIII, and the intellectual life of the Church in France at the dawn of the Modernist crisis. Chapter three of part one maintained Alfred Loisy and John Henry Newman provided two contrasting examples of how the intellectual developments observed in chapter two came to theological expression in modern Catholicism. Chapter three, then, explored the thought of Loisy and Newman as two figures in modern Catholicism who understood that the relationship between theology and history is central to the representation of tradition.

Having explored the historical and conceptual development of tradition in modern Catholicism in part one, part two introduced the thought of Maurice Blondel and his contribution to the development of the notion of tradition, by examining the speculative
and conceptual context of his idea of tradition in his philosophy of action. Drawing on the philosophical resources of Blondel’s account of action and the key role it allots to liturgical action, part two also described and analyzed Blondel’s notion of tradition in the text *History and Dogma*. The final and constructive part of the dissertation explored the import of Blondel’s idea of tradition for contemporary philosophical and theological debates about the modern understanding of history in the development of Christian doctrine, as well as the philosophical debates surrounding the practice of modern hermeneutics outside of Catholicism. In this part of the dissertation, the dialectical tension between receptivity and kenosis, deposit and development, and ontology and epistemology in Blondel’s theory of tradition displays the significance Blondel envisioned for it. In chapter six we examined how tradition, as a synthetic living bond which mediates between history and faith, concretely participates in the substantial bond that exists between the Creator and creature in the liturgical action of the church. His theory of tradition, as a “sacramental” representation of God’s presence, shows human understanding how God’s revelation is represented in history through the liturgical action of the church. Chapter seven argued that Blondel’s notion of tradition opens up and clarifies the philosophical debates surrounding the problem of representation in modern hermeneutics. In this chapter Blondel’s notion of tradition was shown to facilitate the “movement of return” from fundamental ontology to epistemology, which had become the principle obstacle to reconciling the tension between these two distinct yet interrelated categories of human understanding.
Thus, chapters six and seven of the dissertation demonstrated the “vital role,” to use Blondel’s phrase, the idea of tradition plays in the life of the church. For Blondel, tradition opens the church to the pluriform sign of God’s truth manifested through the Holy Spirit. In its liturgical action the church encounters the revelatory nature of tradition as the community participates in the truth of God’s self-gift. Here we have arrived at the central theme in the development of the notion of tradition in modern Catholicism, its relationship to the problem of representation, and Maurice Blondel’s role and contribution to this development. Tradition, far from being an ersatz form of historiography, a social phenomenon that could be adequately interpreted by the social sciences, or a collection of texts and practices that are invoked to supplement Scripture, is the synthetic bond that draws the incarnational and spiritual dynamisms of history into the life of the church. That is to say, the importance of tradition is manifested in its capacity to illuminate the divine truth of God’s constant presence in human history through the doctrine, life, and worship of the church. Tradition calls the church to discover God’s presence in human history not merely as facts and linear phenomena or as a social and cultural reality, but as the event of salvation. It is in its ability to discern the spiritual dimension of history that Blondel’s notion of tradition makes its most important contribution to modern Catholicism. Indeed, tradition, which always is bound to the historical reality of God’s concrete action in human history through Christ and his church, is the mirror which “re-presents” the vital and eschatological truth of God’s presence in the world.
In this way tradition is, for Blondel, the bond that intimately solidifies “the letter” (Scripture) and “the spirit” (tradition) and facilitates their continual exchange: “If the spirit demands and evokes the letter, the true letter inspires and vivifies the spirit.”¹ In the liturgical action of the church, the continual exchange and “intimate solidarity” of Scripture and tradition becomes, as the Second Vatican Council would suggest half a century after Blondel published his reflections on the idea of tradition, both a “mirror, in which the Church, during its pilgrim journey here on earth, contemplates God,”² and the Church’s encounter with the visible form of God’s truth that makes “the People of God live their lives in holiness.”³ That is to say, tradition, in its liturgical mediation, represents the full breadth of the economy of revelation realized by deeds and words, and draws us deeper into the perfect Communion of love to which we are called by virtue of our creation.

¹ Blondel, L’Action, 373.


³ Ibid., # 8, 754.
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