

THE NOTION OF TRADITION IN MAURICE BLONDEL

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AT THE END of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century two currents of thought were at work attempting to analyze the relationship that existed between Christian revelation and human history. Are these two to be considered as mutually exclusive of one another? On the one side, the movement known as extrinsicism answered yes. Historicism, on the other side, answered negatively, holding that they were related and that the relation is one of dependence of revelation on the investigations of historical science.

The quarrel offered Maurice Blondel the opportunity to work out his own approach to the subject of Christian tradition. It was an approach that blended the values inherent in both extreme positions, showing what each contributed to the formation of tradition, yet clearly demonstrating that it was the captive of neither.

EXTRINSICISM AND HISTORICISM

Extrinsicism was primarily theological in its stress. It conceived of the Christian revelation as a totality of doctrine given once and for all in its entirety at a given point in history to a Church divinely established as the sole authority responsible for the custody and teaching of this revelation. Aside from this double debt to history—owing to it a point of time at which revelation was given and needing it to establish the Church as divinely supported in her teaching authority—revelation owed nothing further to history. It is the task of the Church to preserve this original datum of revelation from degenerating in the course of time and from being contaminated by the flow of history. Her infallible magisterium is the instrument for conserving in its integrity this initial gift as it was initially given. Christian dogma, which is a supernatural datum quite extrinsic to man, is committed by the Church to her theologians for the purpose of development by means of theological speculation and systematic explanation. And this is done quite independently of history. Revelation is a closed system which allows no development from without, no influence by history on the Church, which nonetheless

lives its life in a historical context. Only from within can development come by way of explicitation ever more clear, by systematization ever more formulated, of the original deposit.

Historicism ranged itself at the opposite extreme with an emphasis that was primarily historical. This tendency saw history as the only truth. All truth, including that of the Christian faith, must submit to the judgment of history. Can the truth that Christianity claims to contain, they asked themselves, be proven in the real order of history? The right was claimed to treat the content of Christianity as a pure matter of history. The right was also claimed to draw, from this critical study, conclusions which might prove valuable at the level of rational knowledge, and this in complete independence of the dogmatic affirmations of the magisterium.¹ As Loisy put it: "If the history of religion is not established by means of historical research, if the biblical tradition, both Jewish and Christian, has not consistency of itself [i.e., as it appears in the light of historical research], then it is not necessary to count on the magisterium of the Church to give this to it."² Christian belief, in this view, is reduced to pure fideism, an acceptance of a body of doctrine on authority alone, without any rational justification for this blind act of faith. A distinction is introduced between faith, which is a matter of voluntary adhesion to a doctrine, and history, which is the realm of reason, of fact. There is no necessary correlation between these two orders of faith and history.

Among the voices in the Church raised against both extremes was that of Maurice Blondel, who in 1904 and 1905 set himself the task of showing the dangers to the Christian faith inherent in both.³ He proposed to find a link which would unite the elements of truth inherent in both positions. And the bond that he chose was that of tradition, the voice of the Church across the centuries, understood in all its fulness of meaning. He saw in tradition the means of reconciling the extremes by showing that both of them had very definite values but that these values had to be expressed in the service of the tradition of

¹ Yves M.-J. Congar, *La tradition et les traditions* (Paris, 1960) p. 265. ² *Ibid.*

³ A series of three articles in *La quinzaine* 56 (Jan.-Feb., 1904) entitled "Histoire et dogme, les lacunes philosophiques de l'exégèse moderne," and one article in *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique de Toulouse* (Feb.-March, 1905) entitled "De la valeur historique de dogme." All four articles have been reprinted in *Les premiers écrits de Maurice Blondel* 2 (Paris, 1956) 149-245. All subsequent citations of Blondel are drawn from this source.

the Church. It was in this service that their solidarity was assured without the sacrifice of their relative independence.

Here we will describe the thought of Blondel on the subject of tradition, attempting to do two things: (1) explain Blondel's notion of tradition; (2) show how he feels that it serves to unite the two extreme positions by eliminating their rigorous autonomy, which is erroneous, while preserving the real values inherent in them.

BLONDEL'S NOTION OF TRADITION

Blondel begins his discussion of tradition by showing what it is not. He is at great pains to free it from incomplete formulations, to release it from being merely a reflection of the past, a simple conservation of the original deposit of revelation given to the apostles, which it teaches intact over and over again to succeeding generations. "It cannot," he says, "be reduced to fighting the alterations and the forgetfulness that time brings."⁴ And again: "It is not a transmission, principally oral, of historical facts, of truths received, of teachings communicated, of consecrated practices and of ancient customs."⁵ He condemns as inadequate the view of it which would hold that "it reports nothing but things said explicitly, prescribed expressly, or done deliberately in the past by men whose considered ideas alone are sought for, and sought as they have formulated them themselves; it furnishes nothing which could not have been or which cannot be translated into written language, nothing which is not immediately and integrally convertible into an intellectual expression."⁶

If it were true that its one task is "to report *de ore in aurem* what the first confidants did not write," then it would seem that it is condemned to a sterile task and one almost certain to fail.

The long interval which separates us from the beginnings, the ingenious inaccuracy of popular memory, the growing effort of humanity to fix literally all the remembrances of its past and all the nuances of its thought, the uprooting of modern life which is losing the sense of continuity, the habit of committing everything to writing and to print, as it were to a paper memory, does there not result from all these causes a progressive weakening of traditions and an extenuation of tradition itself?⁷

In this preliminary analysis of what tradition is not, Blondel would seem to be making two points: (1) tradition is not simply a process of

⁴ *Les premiers écrits* 2, 210.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

recall; it is certainly that but not only that; (2) the elements which contribute to the formation of tradition are not totally in the order of the rational, nor is it only truth in the intellectual order which is expressed by it.

He passes then to his positive exposition of what tradition is, and begins with a description of it which is to serve as the basis of his analysis. "It is a preserving power [which is] at the same time conquering; it discovers and formulates truths which the past lived, without being able to articulate them or define them explicitly; it enriches the intellectual patrimony by minting little by little the total deposit and by making it fructify."⁸ Let us look at each element of this description in turn to see what he means by it.

1) *It is a preserving power*: "it knows how to guard from the past not so much the intellectual aspect as the vital reality. . . . Without doubt she bases herself on texts but she also bases herself at the same time and first of all on something other than them, on an experience always in act. . . ."⁹ To be noted again is his strong insistence that tradition is not merely intellectual; it is rather a vital, real experience which endures unbroken from age to age.

2) *Which is at the same time conquering*. Here it seems that Blondel is expressing two ideas. First, tradition is not dominated by the elements from which it fashions itself—facts from the past, Scripture, theological speculation, contemporary needs, the life of the members of the Church as expressed in their actions—but rather makes use of them all as they serve her purpose, which is to produce a living synthesis of them always applicable to the present.

Secondly, tradition not only conquers the past, reducing all the elements of its history to the service of itself, but it is also conquering with respect to the future. "As paradoxical as such an affirmation may seem, one can maintain that tradition anticipates the future and disposes herself to illumine it by the same effort that she makes to live faithful to the past."¹⁰

In other words, tradition is a living, ever-present experience which looks to her past, relying on it to supply her with its richness, yet never completely subject to it, teaching men today in a language which they understand and ever facing the future and its needs and problems

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 204.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

with serene confidence in her possession of the truth which she is and will ever be in the process of bringing from the implicitly lived to the explicitly known and aptly communicated. She is conquering of both the past and the future.

3) *It discovers and formulates truths which the past lived, without being able to articulate them or define them explicitly.*

At every moment when the witness of tradition has need of being invoked to resolve the crises of growth of the Christian people, tradition brings to distinct consciousness elements till then retained in the depths of faith and practice, rather than expressed, stated, and reflected. . . . She has nothing to innovate, because she possesses her God and her all, but she must ceaselessly teach us anew, because she makes something pass from the implicitly lived to the explicitly known.¹¹

Her task is constantly to reflect (rumination, Blondel calls it) on what she has always possessed. And that constant reflection, which goes on in a memory not exclusively intellectual, leads her, in the course of time and in the face of circumstances which demand it, to the explicitation of truth always deep within her.

4) *It enriches the intellectual patrimony by minting little by little the total deposit and by making it fructify.*

For her works whoever lives and thinks as a Christian, as well the saint who perpetuates Jesus among us as the scholar who goes back to the pure sources of revelation, or the philosopher who strives to open the roads of the future, and to prepare for the perpetual giving birth of the Spirit anew. And this diffused work of the members contributes to the health of the body under the direction of the head, who alone, in the unity of a consciousness divinely assisted, arranges and stimulates the progress of this work.¹²

Here Blondel turns to the notion of the Church as the Body of Christ to clarify his idea. The Church has always been made up of many members, each with different gifts and diverse functions. All of these, in living the Christian mystery, in experiencing in their lives the Christian revelation, bring to the living body the components of its memory, the elements of its life. And under the ever-active direction of Christ, its Head, the Church is always at work coming to understand more fully the rich treasure she possesses and dispensing it ever more completely in the course of centuries.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 204-5.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 205.

For Blondel, the interplay between the faithful supplying the Church with data for the construction of its tradition out of the fabric of their actual living and the Church in its turn using this to develop her tradition which she then uses for the enrichment of their lives, is the very center of the notion of tradition. We will return to it later in this analysis, but it should be noted here as being central to his thought.

Without the Church, the faithful would not decipher the true writing of God in the Bible and in his soul; but if each faithful did not bring his small contribution to the common life, the organism would not be entirely living and spiritual. The infallible magisterium is the superior and truly supernatural guaranty of a function which finds its natural foundation in the concourse of all the forces of each Christian and of the entire Christianity: *viribus unitis docet discendo et discit docendo semper*.¹³

Such is Blondel's initial concept of tradition. He now goes on to a further clarification of it. One area needing more light is the role of the rational in the formation and exercise of tradition. From what he has said it would appear, at first glance, that tradition exempts itself from rational procedures in coming to formulate itself. This calling on all its forces, all the components of its life, does it follow logical methodology or does tradition simply grow haphazardly, drawing on its treasure as occasion requires, refusing to base itself on any regular law of growth and expression?

Blondel must then undertake a justification of the rational foundation on which tradition rests and according to which it exercises itself. His procedure will be to examine the way in which the Church proceeds in developing and explicitating her tradition. In the process of the analysis it will become apparent that a very definite law of logic is at work in the formation of tradition. He begins with a general statement: "It [tradition] does not work as a blind man, without reasons for judgments, without a rule of action, by blind instinct." Rather, "tradition obeys procedures reasonable as well as rational, the laws of which can be explained."¹⁴

Then a series of careful statements are made to underline two points quite clearly: first, that the Church relies on research, on science, on philosophy, on all human means necessary to render her doctrine clear

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 216.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 207.

and intelligible; but secondly, in the use of all of these means she does not become their servant. She remains mistress, using them only in so far as they serve her purpose, which is "to help us reach . . . the real Christ, whom no literary portrait can exhaust or take the place of."¹⁵

She [the Church] does not proceed by erudite research nor by appealing principally to science. As attentive as she may be to all the results of criticism, as interested as she can be in acquiring new strength from the pure sources of her origin, she knows that she does not have to revise, to reform her essential teaching according to whatever the discovery may be.¹⁶

She does not proceed dialectically in the manner of a philosophy, which constructs balanced concepts by an analysis and a synthesis. Certainly she adapts herself to the different forms of intellectual culture; she borrows from systems the language she needs to give her own doctrine all the precision that the state of a given civilization calls for; but she does not give her allegiance to any system, and the formulas of a philosophical terminology . . . are never for her anything but a scientific and perfectible language.¹⁷

She speaks with an authority independent of all grounds of judgment; but she addresses herself to intelligence as much as to docility, asserting the right of reason because she wishes to teach a communicable truth. She does not have to take account of human contingencies and she does not preoccupy herself with being clever, opportune, adapted; but she uses all human means to be understood, and to find in men the points of insertion prepared for her action. Everywhere her supernatural wisdom lights itself with lights, surrounds itself with precautions, determines itself with natural operations.¹⁸

And he concludes: "The magisterium is guided in the infallible exercise of her teaching not by revelation, nor even by inspiration, but by assistance, a simple negative concursus."¹⁹ This assistance, as Blondel sees it, is God insisting that man use all the resources of science and of reflection to arrive at conclusions. Behind this use of natural means stands (or hides) the regulative action of God assuring the truth of the conclusions arrived at.

In brief, the Church relies partly on reason as her handmaiden in discovering and formulating her teaching; she does not rely on it as the guarantee of the truth of her teaching; that guarantee is the supernatural wisdom of God.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 205.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 208.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

METHODOLOGY OF A PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION

Blondel now moves to a consideration of the process by which tradition works itself out in the actual order. Here we see him introducing the methodology of his famous philosophy of action as the tool to be used in the delineation of a theological truth. It is a good example of the manner in which a philosophical insight can be used to illumine the truths of faith. Before approaching his description of the process by which tradition develops and unfolds itself, it will be helpful to glance briefly at his philosophy of action, particularly its methodology. Some comprehension of this will help to understand its application to tradition.

The object of Blondel's first work, *L'Action*, is human action inasmuch as it constructs the destiny of man. The initial question he asks himself is: "Yes or no, has human life a meaning? Has man a destiny?" For him, action is the key to the answer. As he uses the term, action is meant to designate all human action, including the activity of thought.²⁰ To find the answer to his question, he proposes to study not the idea of action, nor the action that is done, but the "to act" (*agere, agir*), the subject acting as such (*ipsum subjectum agens, le sujet agissant en tant que tel*). The problem of human destiny is inevitable and the answer to it is arrived at by each one in his actions.

The method that he uses to study human action is essentially a reflexive, phenomenological analysis. He studies man acting in all of his actions as well as in his reflections on these actions and the further actions that are implied in action and reflection; and he carries his study up to the point of man's recognition of the need of the infinite. Action is the unifying thread running through the whole of man's life, and it is the study of it which leads to an understanding of man and his need of something beyond himself, beyond the finite, to complete both it and himself.

It is important to see that, in his perspective, action (really the

²⁰ Fuller development of this brief summary of Blondel's philosophy of action may be found in the following: A. Cartier, "La philosophie de L'Action," *Archives de philosophie*, Jan.-Mar., 1961, pp. 5-20; R. Aubert, *Le problème de l'acte de foi* (Louvain, 1945) pp. 277-94; H. Bouillard, *Blondel et le christianisme* (Paris, 1961) pp. 18-48; E. Sponga, "The Philosophy and Spirituality of Action," in *Proceedings of the 18th Annual Convention of the American Jesuit Philosophical Association* (Woodstock, Md., 1956) pp. 42-75.

subject in action) cannot be known from without and in advance. It must be lived in order to be reflected. It should be noted likewise that it would be an illusion to believe that a science, a knowledge, of action can be set up by a thinker and accepted by his readers without an engagement on the part of both. Reflection builds the system only if at each step engagement sustains it; the truth—absolute and objective—of action reveals itself to a rigorous reflexive analysis only if action constitutes it. It is necessary “to do the truth in order to see the truth,” to consent to it in order to discover it.

One author has summed up the objective aimed at by Blondel in the use of this methodology as follows:

In the philosophy of Action, philosophy is given its complete role, that of being a way of life and not a mere system of ideas. It will have nothing to do with those who conceive of philosophy as some sort of inviolate realm of pure thought not to be stained by the concrete loves, hatreds, fears, failures, and aspirations of the living human being as he works out in history and in himself the destiny of the human race. For while human nature is essentially the same, it is existentially ever changing, and so essence must always be discussed in the real world on all levels, theological, historical, biophysical, and not merely on the metaphysical. The philosopher, then, must join hands with the mystic and the saint, with the artist, the scientist, the economist, the sociologist, the laborer in field and factory, in a living expression and unfolding of truth.²¹

Blondel's method is, then, a study of action as it occurs in the concrete order of existential reality. Man is constantly in reflection on this action, and from his reflection is constantly concluding to alterations and adjustments in his action in the light of the existential situation of history. Action, reflection, reaction, and further action go on in a constant process.

APPLICATION OF THE METHODOLOGY OF A PHILOSOPHY OF ACTION TO THE NOTION OF TRADITION

With this brief view of Blondel's method we are in a position to follow him as he applies the method to the concept of tradition. The conclusion at which he is aiming, as will become apparent, is that tradition is the life, the action, of the Church; it is the Church acting and reflecting, reacting and acting again; not merely the Church as an abstract

²¹ Sponga, *op. cit.*, pp. 72-73.

collectivity but as made up of many members each of whom in his turn acts and contributes that action to the total consciousness of the Church. It is out of this multiply-constituted consciousness that the Church constantly draws to formulate her tradition. The divine deposit has always been possessed, but there is need through the centuries of her life to bring this more and more to full, explicit conscious possession in the face of succeeding and changing existential situations. And this natural process (as natural to the Church as it is to the individual) is constantly assisted by the suggestion of the Holy Spirit, who is the soul of the Church; it is ever directed by Christ, the Head of His Body the Church; it is perpetually regulated by the assistance of God the Father. This is, in brief, his thesis; let us turn now to his explicitation of it.

First he states his general intent:

Since the tradition of the Church supposes, in a certain measure, a normal use of natural activity, and since, as a consequence, it calls for a rational justification, where should one look for the secret of that work and the principle of this explanation? Without doubt, a doctrine which would not have any sense of what the moral and religious life contains, not indeed of the unconscious and irrational but of the subconscious, the unreasoned, the provisory, and partially irreducible to explicit thought, could not succeed in finding it. It is, however, quite otherwise in a philosophy of action which studies the multiple ways, regular, methodically determinable, by which clear and formulated knowledge comes to express more and more fully the profound realities on which it nourishes itself.²²

It is his intention to use the methodology of action to explain the manner in which tradition is developed. He now proceeds to explain the actual process by which tradition is engendered in a closely reasoned set of statements.

1) It is clear that Christ did not from the beginning commit to His Church a totally explicit, absolutely rigid, completely formulated truth. He made it clear that there was much He wanted to tell them but He could not, since they were not ready for it at that time and would not have understood it if it had been given. "Many things yet I have to say to you, but you cannot bear them now" (Jn 16:12).

2) He saw clearly that the deposit of truth which He wanted to commit to His Church could not be given to it under a completely

²² *Les premiers écrits*, pp. 209-10.

intellectual form; for if it were, then the faithlessness of man's memory and the narrowness of his intelligence would inevitably deform it.

3) He saw, likewise, that the truth He was communicating was divine truth and could not therefore be contained in any one set of human formulations. "There can be no given moment of history when the mind of man has exhausted the mind of God."²³ "A teaching which is truly supernatural is conceivable and capable of living only if the initial gift is a seed capable of progressive and continuous growth."²⁴

4) In the light of these facts He promised to His Church the Holy Spirit, whose work would be to suggest to the Church all that Christ would have to say to it in the course of its life. "The Spirit will bring to your mind whatever I have said to you" (Jn 14:26).

5) And what is the human means provided whereby and wherein the suggestion of the Holy Spirit might operate? Live what I have taught you. "Keep my commandments." And if this observance of the law is performed in love God Triune will come into the soul of the one so acting. "If anyone love me, he will keep my word . . . and we will come to him and make our abode with him" (Jn 14:23).

Here Blondel finds the point of insertion for his own philosophic approach: "What a man cannot understand totally, he can do fully, and it is in doing it that he keeps living in him the consciousness of that reality still half obscure in him."²⁵ To preserve the word of God calls first of all for the living of it. And the more one lives this word, the more he comes to understand its meaning. "It is from acts at first perhaps painful, obscure, and forced that one mounts to the light by a practical verification of speculative truths."²⁶ And the reason why we come through action to understanding ever more fully the content of the Christian mystery is this: "There is a memory in us [and in the Church] which is always at work, which is not completely intellectual, and in the end, by a sort of rumination, we seize that which had at first escaped us."²⁷

One example may serve to clarify the thought which Blondel is here conveying. It is clear that from the beginning Christ intended that His Church should be universal. It is easy for us, reading the Gospels from the vantage point of history, to see His intent clearly expressed there. But the Acts of the Apostles make it equally clear that this point was

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 213. ²⁴ *Ibid.* ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 211. ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212. ²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

not grasped by the apostles at the beginning of the Church. It was only as the life of the Church unfolded in the existential context of its first few years that little by little under the suggestion of the Holy Spirit certain members (e.g., Stephen and Philip) did certain acts which led in the direction of universality, perhaps even without their realizing it. Finally, after this series of preliminary steps, Peter admitted Cornelius the Gentile into the Church and thus by implication the whole Gentile world into it. The Council of Jerusalem then provided the mature reflection on this series of actions and under the suggestion of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 15:28) it brought the *de facto* acceptance of universality from the implicitly possessed to the explicitly formulated and lived, and consequent actions immediately followed—missionaries were for the first time deliberately sent to the Gentiles.

Newman, in viewing this gradual development of universality in the Church, puts Blondel's thought quite succinctly: "It was in the course of becoming actually universal that the Church became aware of its own universality." Blondel's thought here is quite obviously meant to mean: it is in doing the truth that we (and the Church) come to see the truth.

His analysis goes on to develop more fully this theme of how, by action, the Church comes to form its tradition.

From the beginning of Christianity the love of Christ has served as a vehicle for a doctrine that literature does not relate entirely; since then the century-old experimentation of His law, His spirit, His life in us, has been perpetually enriching for the Church. Thus, in the face of all intellectual innovations or of all exegetical hypotheses, there is in the total experience of the Church an autonomous principle of discernment; in taking account of ideas and facts, the traditional faith takes account equally of proven practices, of habits confirmed by the fruits of sanctity, of lights acquired by piety, prayer, and mortification. This witness is not alone, without doubt, but it has a proper and imprescriptible worth, because it is founded at one and the same time on the collective and century-old action of men and on the action of God in them.²⁸

Tradition, then, forms itself by the use of a methodology of action. And the application of a philosophy of action to tradition can be fertile because it is always in act, always in the process of acting and reflecting on the action which has made up the history of the Church. This

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

infinitely variable approach to the understanding of truth is the ideal instrument for bringing us to an ever-deeper understanding of divine truth, which is in itself open to ever-new understandings, ever-fresh interpretations.

It [tradition] is a progressive and synthetic movement which alone can, by bringing us back from all the effects produced to the cause, and by projecting to their source all the rays diffused in the Christian consciousness in the course of centuries, imitate by its indefinite progress the infinite richness of God revealed and always hidden, hidden and always revealed.²⁹

Finally, he brings his analysis to its conclusion by showing how admirably suited tradition is, in such an understanding of it, to draw together into a unity all the varied strands that are woven together to compose it.

Behold in what a profound sense, whenever there is a question of finding the supernatural in sacred history and in dogma, the gospel is nothing without the Church, the teaching of tradition nothing without the life of Christianity, exegesis nothing without Christianity. Catholic tradition appears to us here no longer as a limiting and retrograde power, but as a force of development and expansion. By its fidelity in making fructify the talent which it is careful not to bury, it preserves less than it recovers, it attains the Alpha only in the Omega.³⁰

TRADITION AS A PRINCIPLE OF SYNTHESIS

We have seen how Blondel conceives of tradition and how he applies his methodology of action to show how it develops in the course of the centuries. One last point remains to be treated: how tradition serves as a point of unity between the facts of history on which historicism insisted so strongly and the construction of dogmas into doctrinal systems which extrinsicism saw as essential.

Blondel is careful to stress that both facts and systems have their own contribution to make to the tradition of the Church, that there is always need of careful historical investigation, and that theological syntheses are indispensably important. But neither the one nor the other, indeed no single element in her life, is the be-all and the end-all of the Church's existence. Neither the one nor the other is the sole or dominant constitutive of tradition. The Church relies on them, needs their data, will always use and respect their competence. But their role

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 214.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

is ancillary, subsidiary, contributory always, and never dominating or exclusive of the other. For there is "something of the Church [which] escapes scientific control; and it is that which without ever dispensing with or neglecting them controls all the contributions of exegesis and history; for she has in the very tradition which constitutes her, another means of knowing her author, of participating in His life, of binding fact to dogma and of justifying the foundation and the additions of ecclesiastical teaching."³¹

The capital notion of tradition, it cannot be stressed too often, is the Church living her life. She is a living organism, a body, and hence always in action; she lives in the collective lives of her members, and she has need of living her life in order to come to ever-deeper and fuller understanding of the truth entrusted to her. "To pass from facts to dogma, the most exact analysis of texts and the effort of individual thought is not enough. There is need of the mediation of the collective life and the slow progressive work of Christian tradition."³² And again: "The intellectual formation of Christian doctrine is only determined in the bosom of a believing society, can only be vivified and developed by a living faith, and in order to fully understand dogma there is need of carrying virtually in oneself the fulness of the tradition which has given it birth."³³

‡ All the elements of the Christian Church, all the members of the Body, have their contributions to make to the life of the Body. Each one's work is important; each one's contribution to the general welfare is needed. But for the gathering together of all the elements, for the synthesizing and unifying of every contribution and all action, God has provided the Church with tradition. "The principle of synthesis is neither in the facts nor in the ideas alone; it is in tradition, which resumes in itself the data of history, the effort of reason, and the accumulated experience of faithful action."³⁴

Certainly, history has much that is valuable to offer the Church, and the formulations of theological speculation are of immense service to her, but neither is the total view. Each takes a particular stand vis-à-vis the Church, and because it does it sees the Church only from that angle. But what the Church is cannot be seen from any single side. She must be seen from every side. Nay more, she must be entered into; one

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 205-6.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

must live his life in her, the "believing society." Then one comes to see her as she sees herself, always alive, always in act, always becoming more conscious of what she is and has.

Each side, history and dogma, must bring itself to see that if left to itself as the sole norm of truth, it can only give a false, because incomplete, picture of the Christian reality. Blondel is sharp in his condemnation of both extremes. Of extrinsicism:

The supernatural does not consist, as the extrinsicist thesis implies, in a relation of notions determined and imposed by God, without there being between nature and supernature any other link than an ideal juxtaposition of elements which are heterogeneous and even impenetrable by one another, between which our intellectual obedience makes the connection, so that the supernatural subsists only if it remains extrinsic to the natural and if it is proposed from the outside like something whose whole interest resides in the fact that it is a supernature.³⁵

Of historicism:

Will one have remedied [the extrinsicist position] by offering as the foundation for the temple of souls all the sediment accumulated by centuries of human thought? What can one say of all these stratifications without homogeneity, if not that they bury Christ under debris which is said to be fecund but which is really only like dead leaves.³⁶

These values must be preserved, but they can only be used as they should be by the unifying force of tradition.

There can be no final separation of historical conclusions, of ecclesiastical definitions and of pious practices, each order, critical science, theological speculation, moral asceticism, evolving apart. Rather, it is necessary to say that the problem consists in taking them in their real interdependence to determine the original contribution of each, its relative autonomy, and its compensatory action with regard to the others, so that their legitimate independence, the condition of their useful concurrence, is constituted by their very solidarity, and that to wish to isolate the science of facts or of Christian dogmas from the science of the Christian life would be, while tearing out the heart of the spouse, to ask her to go on living and living for her spouse.³⁷

And this unification of all elements into a single life corresponds to the real order of actual living. The Church is not an abstraction. It is a

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 223.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-18.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

vital living reality, and out of its total living experience it produces its tradition.

One feels by the practice of Christianity that its dogmas have been drawn from reality. One does not, therefore, have the right to place facts on one side and theological data on the other, without returning to those sources of life and action where there is the indivisible synthesis of which the facts and the formulas have been only a double and faithful translation in different language. . . . Between dogmatizing and exegesis there is a knowledge, a true knowledge of action, capable of disengaging for the profit of an experimental and progressive theology the lessons drawn from history by life.³⁸

Speculative theology certainly plays its part, but it must be a part in a totality.

The Christian practice nourishes the thought of man about the divine and brings to his action what theological initiative progressively brings out of it. The synthesis of dogma and facts takes place in knowledge, because there has been, in the life of the faithful, a synthesis of thought and of grace, a union of man and of God, a reproduction in the individual consciousness of the very history of Christianity.³⁹

And the same may be said of history.

If it is true that Christian knowledge does not dispense with its historical supports . . . history could not, without bringing us to the shipwreck of the faith, dispense with Christian knowledge. I mean by that the results methodically acquired by the collective experimentation of Christ, verified and realized in us.⁴⁰

But when theology, history, and the life of the faithful are welded together by an infallible magisterium, you have what Blondel means by tradition.

Dogmas are not justified by historical science alone, nor by dialectic, no matter how ingeniously applied to the texts, nor by the effort of individual life; but all these forces contribute to it and concentrate themselves in tradition, of which the divinely assisted authority is the organ of infallible expression.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

Blondel's treatment of tradition is essentially simple—the application of a philosophical methodology to the realm of theology—yet it has contributed a real insight into the problem. Its elements are few:

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 227–28.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 228.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 218.

the historical approach is too one-sided, and the same is true of the approach of theological speculation. The full view is to see the Church totally and in act, living her life in all her members and ever more fully explicitating that life. The insight has been to see the Church in the existential order, in act. Theology owes him a debt for this contribution.⁴²

⁴² As an instance of how theologians admit their indebtedness to Blondel one might read, for example, the two most recent French works on tradition: Congar, *La tradition et les traditions* (Paris, 1960), and H. Holstein, *La tradition dans l'église* (Paris, 1960). The former quite frankly states (p. 266): "Nous retrouverons, dans notre étude spéculative, la conception suggestive et profonde de la tradition que Blondel proposait, car nous y trouvons des thèmes essentiels de notre propre interprétation." The latter gives a full treatment of Blondel (pp. 134-40) and, in constructing his final synthesis (pp. 287-99), gives frequent references to him.