

# The Symbiosis of Philosophy and Theology in Blondel's Supernatural Hypothesis

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## Abstract

Maurice Blondel's philosophy makes strong claims about the theological enterprise. Namely, philosophy and theology achieve their fulfillment only in mutual dependence and both court superstition to the extent that they attempt self-sufficiency. This symbiotic relationship drives Blondel's seminal work *Action*, which not only deduces a hypothetical necessity for the supernatural from a realist phenomenology but also establishes strictly philosophical exigencies with theological import: a true revelation in sensory signs, a historical Savior as Mediator, and a sacramental practice, a robust response to the Enlightenment critique of the Christian religion.

## Keywords

*Action*, Maurice Blondel, Enlightenment, Kant, philosophy of religion, sacrament, supernatural, superstition, symbolism, theology

It is well known that Maurice Blondel had an enormous impact on the theology of grace in the twentieth century, as well as on the understanding of tradition in Catholic thought.<sup>1</sup> Yet, less widely appreciated is the fact that Blondel always claimed to remain a philosopher, not a theologian. While his philosophy of action has

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1. Peter J. Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism & Action Française: The Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernist Era* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 145–73.

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much to say about the theological enterprise in its relation with philosophy, and even about the nature of theology itself, Blondel claims to speak from a strictly philosophical footing. Yet Blondel is often mistakenly understood as arguing from the foundation of Christian belief. A primary task of this article is to show how Blondel's method remains philosophical, even if he philosophizes as a believer, and even if his philosophy has much to say about what theology is and what theology is not.

In Blondel's view, philosophy and theology enjoy a necessary relation of mutual dependence that especially comes to light in facing the "religious" question, that is the question of the supernatural, as elaborated in his seminal work *Action*. Here, the fecundity of Blondel's philosophical thought for theological reflection is particularly prominent. Not only does his dialectic conclude that a supernatural complement to human action is a hypothetical necessity, but it also draws out the necessary *means* by which the supernatural gift enters human life and practice. Yet all the while, Blondel never strays into theological territory.

Blondel's philosophical acumen provides real insights into theological questions, such as the fundamental difference between sacraments and superstition in the wake of the Kantian critique, an issue left entirely unaddressed in Catholic theological circles. In a real sense, *Action*, through its vision of a necessary symbiosis of philosophy and theology in the treatment of the question of the supernatural, concludes to a comprehensive rebuttal of the Enlightenment critique of the Christian religion and the Kantian accusation of superstition against the sacraments, above all.<sup>2</sup>

It achieves all this, however, through autonomous philosophical reflection without any conflation or confusion with the theological enterprise, which is a remarkable achievement. In fact, all that is scandalous about the Christian religion in the eyes of Enlightenment philosophy of religion, all that falls under the rubric of what we might loosely call the "scandal of particularity," Blondel rehabilitates on a purely philosophical footing, by establishing exigencies for a true historical revelation in sensory signs interpretable to human beings, a historical Savior or Mediator, and a sacramental practice, all part of the supernatural hypothesis that is necessary to bring the dialectic to a resolution.

In Blondel's methodology, theology and philosophy are, in practice, inseparable disciplines that cannot be pulled apart entirely, as rational human activities. That is, analogous to the relation of nature and grace, philosophy and theology, while remaining distinct and heterogeneous, are not at all extrinsic to one another. Philosophy is no mere *ancilla theologiae* (handmaid of theology), therefore, but is more like a spouse, a helpmate, intertwined in a "conjugal" or "symbiotic" relationship with theology, as a true *adjutrix theologiae* (helpmate of theology).

Accordingly, while philosophical reasoning has systematically illumined theological thinking since the earliest centuries, in helping to articulate the internal coherence

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2. Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Human Reason*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009), §193–94: "The delusion that through religious acts of cult we accomplish anything in regard to justification before God is religious *superstition*, just as the delusion of wanting to bring this about by striving for a supposed interaction with God is religious fanaticism."

of revelation and the articles of faith, the Blondelian view is that theology and revealed doctrine may also shed light on the philosophical enterprise. That is, while for many scholastics, the philosophical enterprise, as human reason unaided by revelation, points “upwards” reaching towards the articles of faith, for Blondel, theology and the articles of religious faith also shine light “downwards,” guiding the philosophical enterprise, but without confusion and without threatening the essential autonomy of philosophy and theology in any way.

On the one hand, theology, as a rational discipline, clearly needs philosophy to fulfill its mission. On the other hand, Blondel contends that philosophy cannot itself honestly ignore religious questions, such as the supernatural, or the answers that people find in revelation and religious teaching to the question of human destiny. What is more, both philosophy and theology diminish themselves in proportion to their attempted self-sufficiency. Isolated and separated, they descend into “superstition.”

In this way, the extreme rationalists of the Enlightenment who would pretend to be free of all superstition by closing the circle of human existence within human reason alone (and so rejecting all revealed particular duty and tradition), Blondel finds guilty of exactly that which they most deplore: superstitious action. Likewise, however, any putative “separate” theology, contented with a closed conceptualist system, also fails in its quest to deepen understanding of faith. The ranks of superstitious intellectuals include not only extreme rationalists, therefore, but also the Catholic extrinsicists, who would juxtapose nature and supernature. This is because both the rationalists and the metaphysicians verge towards the self-satisfaction of superstitious action, as we will see below.

## Philosophical Method and Christian Doctrine

Blondel claimed to be a philosopher, not a theologian. A common misreading of Blondel’s early philosophy, however, is to conclude that, by talking of the “supernatural” at all, he strays into theological territory or that his work on the supernatural is best characterized as a hermeneutics of Catholicism, as René Virgoulay has proposed.<sup>3</sup> This is quite understandable, however, because Blondel talks as a philosopher, occasionally drawing on terms current in theology such as the “supernatural,” “Mediator” and “Savior,” “Revelation” as well as “literal practice” (*pratique littérale*), by which he means a sacramental practice. Blondel, however, uses these terms with a philosophical meaning and not with their usual theological sense, as we will see below.

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3. René Virgoulay proposes, for example, that in the transition from part 4 to part 5 of the dialectic, Blondel shifts into a hermeneutics of Catholicism, that is from a demonstration of the a priori necessity of a supernatural gift, to an interpretation of Catholic dogma and practice. Virgoulay’s interpretation, however, seems more adequate to the second part of the *Letter on Apologetics*, which was directed at believers, rather than part 5 of *Action*, which explicitly excluded any reference to Catholic teaching and which was directed at secular philosophers; René Virgoulay, “La problématique du surnaturel dans *L’Action* et dans la *Lettre* de 1896,” *Recherches de science religieuse* 86 (1998): 501–8.

Blondel remains a philosopher and his investigation of the phenomenon of human action is properly philosophical rather than theological, however, because it consists exclusively in the a priori demonstration of philosophical exigencies that point towards, but never presuppose, Christian doctrine as revealed. That is to say, his philosophy has absolutely nothing to say about whether, for example, the hypothetically necessary supernatural gift has ever been given in history, or even about the question of its possibility as such. This is because Blondel's supernatural is not in itself equivalent to the theological supernatural, but represents a mere opening or need that philosophical reasoning can indicate when pushed to its limits, but without giving it content.<sup>4</sup> Blondel in no way proposes a soteriology, Christology, or "fundamental" theology of revelation, nor does he make any claim whatsoever on a dogmatic theological footing, although it may be difficult for theologically inclined readers to realize this, even after a deep reading of the text. The common pitfall for theologians reading Blondel's early philosophy, especially *Action*, is to interpret terms like "revelation" and "Savior" as if they directly referred to Christian doctrine and as if Blondel were therefore engaged in some kind of apodeictic "proof" of Catholic doctrine from philosophical principles, or a hermeneutics of Christian doctrine, as Virgoulay has proposed. Nothing, however, in Blondel's phenomenology of action depends in any way on Christian dogma as positive fact: that is as "revealed." Blondel, in fact, is highly critical of such pseudo-philosophical apologetics in his later explanatory work *The Letter on Apologetics*, emphasizing that "What we find in ourselves is precisely not what we have to receive."<sup>5</sup> On the contrary, the maximum that philosophical reasoning can achieve on its own, as a task carried through to its logical terminus, is to indicate the gap that revealed religious dogma fills. Revelation necessarily exceeds what human reason can deduce from itself. Otherwise, it would not be a true revelation.

Admittedly, Blondel's entire philosophical *oeuvre* was inspired, shaped, and formed by Catholic practice and the desire to rehabilitate the Christian religion on an intellectual level in the wake of the extreme rationalist critique, yet without philosophy yielding autonomy to religion, or reducing theology to the philosophical enterprise.<sup>6</sup>

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4. This was the crux of the debate between Henri Bouillard and Henry Duméry: whether Blondel's notion of the supernatural is specifically Catholic, or some indeterminate and inchoate notion. See Xavier Tilliette's article for a *précis*: "L'insertion du surnaturel dans la trame de *L'Action*," *Revue philosophique* 4 (1986): 451–65.
  5. Maurice Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, trans. Alexander Dru and Illtyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 153; "Even if (to suppose the impossible) we were to recover by some effort of human genius the whole letter and content of revealed teaching, we should have nothing, absolutely nothing, of the Christian spirit, because it does not come from us. To have this not as given and received but as found issuing from ourselves is not to have it at all. It is this that scandalizes the reason, and that is what we must fix our gaze on if we are to probe the wound of the philosophical conscience among those of our contemporaries who live a life of thought."
  6. Maurice Blondel, *L'Itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel: propos recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre*, ed. Frédéric Lefèvre (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1966), 65–66: "Ce que je voulais, c'était me libérer ... du milieu ... où l'on oscillait du dilettantisme au scientisme;

His philosophical demonstration of the supernatural as hypothetical necessity in *Action* is not in itself equivalent to revealed teaching or dogma *qua* revealed, however. It is supernatural “hypothesis,” and not supernatural “doctrine,” a kind of phenomenological demonstration of the *convenientia* or “fittingness” of a supernatural complement to voluntary human action.

Nonetheless, Blondel emphasizes that revealed Christian doctrines and religious dogma are in themselves legitimate objects of inquiry that philosophy cannot legitimately ignore or dismiss out of hand. Such teachings deserve philosophical examination, not *qua* “revealed” (i.e. accepting them as positive facts) but as “revealing” (i.e. by way of hypothesis), like mathematicians who suppose a problem solved and then work backwards from the “fictitious” solution through analysis.<sup>7</sup> The positive teachings of Christian revelation, therefore, by no means represent a repression of reason, as some kind of excess baggage.<sup>8</sup>

Philosophy and theology are not juxtaposed.<sup>9</sup> Quite the contrary, the true autonomy of philosophy is assured only by admitting its utter incapacity to respond to the ultimate questions that religion alone can answer: *non adjutrix nisi libera; non libera nisi adjutrix philosophia* (philosophy is not a helper unless it is free and not free unless it is a helper).<sup>10</sup> In their mutual dependence, neither discipline abdicates its autonomy

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où le néo-christianisme à la russe se heurtait à la dure virtuosité de l'idéalisme radical à l'allemande; où, dans l'art et la littérature comme dans la philosophie pour ne pas dire dans la pédagogie religieuse elle-même, me semblaient triompher le notionnel, le formel, voire l'irréel; où les efforts mêmes qu'on tentait pour rouvrir les sources d'une vie profonde et d'un art frais n'aboutissaient qu'à du symbolisme, sans aller jusqu'à réhabiliter le concret, le direct, le singulier, l'incarné, la lettre vivante qui prend tout le composé humain, la pratique sacramentelle qui insinue dans nos veines un esprit plus spirituel que notre esprit, le sens populaire et le réalisme catholique.”

7. Maurice Blondel, *Action (1893): Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. by Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 360.
8. “L’initiative philosophique a, par elle-même, une valeur réelle dont ne peut se passer l’étude de la destinée humaine. L’apport chrétien n’est pas une surcharge ou un refoulement: il est—on le verra—un soulagement, une promotion qui à son tour fournit des lumières pour la raison et assure une ‘philosophe ouverte’ ... non seulement par une cohérence intellectuelle, mais dans une coopération comparable à une sorte d’union conjugale.” Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien, tome I: Autonomie essentielle et connexion indéclinable* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1944), ix.
9. Blondel, *La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien I*, xiii–ix; “Car de part et d’autre, des données positives sont fournies et, en gardant leur caractère propre, ces deux disciplines, humaine et chrétienne, n’ont point seulement à se juxtaposer: chacune d’elles conserve une initiative originale en même temps que chacune prépare ou stimule une coopération et à vrai dire une sorte d’hymen pour une raison féconde.”
10. Blondel, *Action*, 361; *Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 168: “And if it is true that it cannot develop its complete autonomy without facing the religious problem, neither can it touch it fruitfully save at the price of an intransigent and jealous discretion which is both the avowal of its incompetence and the safeguard of its dignity. *Non libera nisi adjutrix, non adjutrix nisi libera philosophia*. We must claim this liberty for philosophy in all its fullness.”

nor alters its basic function as rational inquiry. Rather, each contributes to a profitable “symbiosis” with the other.<sup>11</sup>

Philosophy and theology preserve their “essential autonomy” while finding their fulfillment only in close cooperation, in an “indeclinable connection”; therefore, each preserving its own original *élan* and character, the philosophical and theological enterprises reciprocally enrich and enlighten each other without succumbing to confusion of one with the other. A real symbiosis of faith and reason, of spirit and truth, is called for, which is at the antipodes of the perennial tendency in Western thought to pull apart matter and spirit, reason and faith, manifested both with the ancients, who saw scandal in the idea of friendship with the divine, and in the Enlightenment attempt to uncover the principles of true religion in human reason alone, and so rejecting the historical contingency and particularity of a true revelation.<sup>12</sup> This vision of the mutual dependence of philosophy and theology is integral to the dialectic of Blondel's seminal work *Action*, as we will now see.

### The Supernatural as Necessary Hypothesis in Action

How can a philosopher legitimately address the question of the supernatural, however? Is it even possible to affirm the supernatural without abdicating reason to faith?<sup>13</sup> Blondel dismisses the idea that philosophers should not speak of the supernatural at all as a misunderstanding of the essence of the supernatural itself, and of the true relation between faith and reason:

If as soon as philosophy touches on the simple *notion* of the supernatural one dreads an abuse of power or a confusion of competences, it is because one knows nothing of the *essence* of this supernatural itself. Being above everything we can suspect or hope for, this mystery, far from dreading the encroachment of thought, opens up for it an infinite quarry, without thought ever being able to attain it. To be sure, in what faith proposes, all is not inaccessible to our efforts; and in what reason can discover, there is a part covered and confirmed by revelation. But beyond all advances of human science and virtue, there is a truth impenetrable to any philosophical view, a good higher than any aspiration of the will.<sup>14</sup>

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11. Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'esprit chrétien, tome II: Conditions de la symbiose seule normale et salutaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946), x; Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1950), 7–8; the term “symbiosis” designates the indispensable cooperation of two things of a different species, which despite their organic specificity, have need of each other. It has a stronger sense than “cooperation,” “collaboration,” or “union”; Blondel also uses the geometrical metaphor of “cycloidal” movement to illustrate this mutual dependence between philosophy and theology: that is a single movement arising from two complementary and separate movements (a rotating circle moving in a straight line); Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'esprit chrétien I*, 30, 224.
  12. Blondel, *La Philosophie et l'esprit chrétien I*, viii–ix.
  13. This is a question, of course, that many contemporaries answer in the negative, as in Blondel's nineteenth-century France. For a contemporary expression of the question, see Paul Valadier, *Un Philosophe, peut-il croire?* (Lormont: Éditions Cécile Defaut, 2006).
  14. Blondel, *Action*, 374n1.

Admittedly, however, a supernatural vocation proposes what seems like an impossible union between two radically incommensurable orders, the utmost “category mistake.” The assimilation of human beings to God, in this view, is radically absurd, and runs the risk of the impious ambition of *hubris*, susceptible to *nemesis*, punishment by the gods.<sup>15</sup> In contrast with ancient philosophy, therefore, Christian specificity claims an effective union of the human and the divine, nature and supernature. What the ancients saw as an absurdity, therefore, Christianity holds up as its primary doctrinal specificity:<sup>16</sup> the Incarnation and, flowing from it, the doctrine of grace (divinization)—the offer of participation in the divine life.

From the Christian doctrines of the Incarnation and grace, therefore, a truly philosophical question arises—how to understand this assimilation of humanity to God that Christianity professes, outrageous to ancients and “Enlightened” alike.<sup>17</sup>

For Blondel, as for Aquinas, the entry point for the supernatural lies in human subjectivity. While Aquinas expressed this in terms of infused virtue, Blondel articulates it in terms of voluntary human action, which at that time was a topic that had practically disappeared from the lexicon of academic philosophy.

### A Philosophy of Action

Blondel’s is a philosophy of *action*, in which the term “action” refers to the entirety of voluntary human activity in which there is a concerted effort of the intellect and the will.<sup>18</sup> Voluntary human action, in this sense, is irreducible to anything else. Moreover, this entails a crucial distinction between the mere idea of action and real human action. They are not equivalent. This is because even deliberate thought itself is voluntary human action, *pace* Descartes.<sup>19</sup> Cognition is voluntary human action like any other. In this way, Blondel’s philosophy of action envisages no opposition between thought or word, on the one hand, and deed on the other, between speculation and practice. Acts of the intelligence arise from the same dynamic of the will as any other human action. In this way, the “ancient hegemony” (*autarkeia*) of reason is deposed and the starting point of philosophy, then, is not speculation nor the isolated sovereign subject,

15. Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*, 55.

16. Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*, 5.

17. Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*, 58: “comment ce rapprochement assimilateur devient-il possible et effectif, comment l’union devient-elle aussi proche de l’unité, là où Aristote disait qu’il serait scandaleux et indécent de parler d’amour entre Dieu et l’homme, tant la disproportion est infini? Ne voit-on pas dès lors combien les préparations intérieures, les ascensions morales, les purifications spirituelles sont nécessaires pour conférer un sens humain, une valeur morale à ce rapprochement qui ne doit pas être juxtaposition pure et simple entre deux entités hétérogènes?”

18. It therefore covers all the Aristotelian distinctions between *poiein*, *prattein*, and *theorein*. See Blondel, *Action*, 205.

19. Maurice Blondel, “La tâche de la philosophie d’après la philosophie de l’action,” *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 153 (1906): 47–59 at 52: “l’idée vive naît de l’action et va à l’action; ... l’idée de l’action est contenue dans la pensée, l’action contient la pensée.”

but the lived reality that never yields itself entirely to human concepts.<sup>20</sup> By contrast, the history of Western thought manifests a tendency to “conceptualism,” that is the replacement of lived action in concrete actuality with its reflection in the conceptual realm, the substitution of a living body with a “verbal cadaver.”<sup>21</sup>

### The Dialectical Principle

Blondel's philosophy, therefore, rehabilitates human action as a philosophical category, which had been subordinated to thought by Aristotle, and which is still, even in modern philosophy, radically separated from thought by the legacy of Kant.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, his investigation of the phenomenon of willed human action from its conception in human subjectivity to its farthest expansion into the universe is also the way to establishing a philosophical exigency for a supernatural complement to human action. He shows that a supernatural auxiliary from *outside* the natural order and yet immanent *within* it is hypothetically necessary to bring the dialectic to a resolution.

We are less concerned here with reproducing each step of the dialectic in detail, however, than with the relationship between philosophy and theology that is operative within it. Remaining squarely within philosophy, Blondel's treatment of human action concludes that a supernatural complement is a “necessary” hypothesis. Critically, this is a “hypothetical,” not a natural necessity, a subtle yet decisive distinction. The supernatural is a hypothesis since it is conditional: *if* the dialectic is to be resolved, *then* a supernatural complement from outside the natural order is necessary. The supernatural gift is, therefore, the consequent of a conditional. In logical terms, if the consequent of the conditional is negated, then the antecedent is negated (*modus tollens*).<sup>23</sup> In other words, if there is no supernatural complement, then human action cannot reach the completion towards which it tends, and the dialectical principle that Blondel establishes cannot be resolved. With Augustinian echoes, this dialectical principle is expressed in terms of a real privation at the heart of human action, a drive towards an elusive satiety that finds its resolution only by means of a complement from outside the natural order.

The dialectical principle driving *Action* is the disparity between what Blondel terms the “willed will” (*volonté voulue*) and the “willing will” (*volonté voulante*). The “willed will” corresponds to decision, the choice of one particular finite motive out of an unlimited number of other finite motives. The “willing will,” on the other hand, corresponds to the infinite power to choose. Blondel's dialectic (which he calls a

20. Blondel, *Letter on Apologetics & History and Dogma*, 181–82; James LeGrys, “The Christianization of Modern Philosophy according to Maurice Blondel,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 455–84 at 480, <https://doi.org/10.1177/004056399305400303>.

21. Blondel, “La tâche de la philosophie d’après la philosophie de l’action,” 53.

22. James LeGrys, “Human Perfection as Assimilation to God: Beatitude in the Light of the Philosophy of Maurice Blondel” (PhD diss., Boston College, 1993).

23. That is, adopting the following logical structure for Blondel's findings, negation of a consequent will lead to a negation of the antecedent *modus tollens* ( $p \rightarrow q, \neg q \therefore \neg p$ ).



“science of practice”) investigates the disparity between the “willing will” and the “willed will”; a disparity which becomes ever more evident in the complex orders of action resulting from the progressive expansion of the human will into its universal milieu. The dialectic follows this expansion of the human will into the universe in search of an object equal to the power of willing, moving outwards to its broadest development in human society, examining each successive intermediate stage, as if it were what human willing wills ultimately.

### *The Phenomenon of Superstitious Action*

Following this expansion of the will into the universe, crossing the phenomenal series to the outmost limits, however, results in no phenomenal object that resolves the dialectic. From the interior life of subjectivity, through various collectivities such as family and nation, the human will meets no phenomenal object that will resolve the dialectical principle: that is, that satisfies the infinitude of the willing will. On the contrary, the human being always wills more than is available in any form of willed action considered in the dialectic.

It is here that the phenomenon of superstition arises, at the outmost expansion of the human will through the phenomenal series. The phenomenon of superstition plays a pivotal role in *Action*, acting as a sort of middle term. It is understood as a kind of delusional attempt to fill, under one’s own power, the privation at the heart of willed human action:

It remains for us to see then how man, in an attempt to perfect himself, tries finally to absorb what escapes him infinitely, to fabricate himself a god in his own fashion and to garner with his own strength alone something to make him self-sufficient. We must study the *phenomenon of superstition*: the phenomenon; i.e., the necessary manifestation of a need under whatever form it may try to satisfy itself; *superstition*, i.e., the use of a remainder of human action outside of the real.<sup>24</sup>

Superstition, therefore, arises from the same source as genuine and sincere religious sentiment, the imperious need to resolve the disparity between the “willed will” and the “willing will.” In contrast to true religious action, however, superstition is the futile attempt of the human will to generate from its own strength the transcendent complement that can come only as a gift from outside the natural order.

Since it is rooted in the dynamic of human willing, superstitious action is not restricted to the attempted embodiment, in finite objects or determinate rituals, of the infinite towards which all human action tends. Rather, in its most insidious form, superstition insinuates itself into every kind of human action, including intellectual activities like philosophy and theology, in which one’s own voluntary cognition, one’s thought-as-action, can become the “object” of superstition, in a kind of apotheosis of voluntary human action. Superstitious action arises when human thought-as-action is

24. Blondel, *Action*, 284.

taken to be perfect and “self-sufficient,” as if human reason through its own strength and capacity provides the equal of the infinite power of the human will, with no need to search beyond that which humans can will or give themselves:

In its effort to fulfill itself and to give its work a character of complete sufficiency, the human will ends up looking for the complement it requires in incomplete action itself. Rather than have recourse to magic formulas or consecrative ceremonies, it avails itself directly of its perfection, as if acts were not self-sufficient and complete because they are religious, but religious and divine because they are fulfilled and complete, because they are “moral or human.”<sup>25</sup>

Blondel's game plan here is to turn the tables on the “enlightened” rationalists, leading to the explosive conclusion that those who would claim to be free of all superstition, finding in their human action alone the equal of the infinite power of the human will, are guilty of what they most loudly deplore, the culpable self-enforced blindness of superstition.<sup>26</sup> The negative claim that human beings can restrict themselves to phenomena and be self-sufficient is radically illogical in this view.<sup>27</sup>

## Philosophical Exigencies of the Supernatural Hypothesis

As well as rehabilitating the question of the supernatural by establishing a hypothetical necessity for a supernatural complement, however, Blondel also sets about analyzing how the supernatural elevates and transforms the human faculties and how humans must cooperate in the supernatural vocation: that is the means by which the supernatural auxiliary effectively enters human life in concrete actuality. This aspect of Blondel's

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25. Blondel, *Action*, 288.

26. Blondel, in fact, maintains that the destructive program of Enlightenment philosophy of religion is driven by a deeply religious sense. Its problem is that it stops short prematurely, coming to rest in negative conclusions only: “For if he stays only with his negative conclusions, if he takes satisfaction in them, with the hope of having confiscated and as it were dissolved the divine, if he is triumphant for having dug within himself an abyss deep enough to bury, once and for all, his actions and all things, the impious critic is not yet impious enough. He still retains the superstition of not having any; he remains an idolater. He is the one who, in spite of his air of being a forerunner and beacon, remains backward and wrapped in darkness. We must, therefore, penetrate further and puncture this last idol, the only one man could still cling to in order to convince himself that he is fully self-sufficient.” Blondel, *Action*, 297.

27. Blondel, *Action*, 299. The intrinsic insufficiency of philosophy is a strong theme in Blondel's later explications of his philosophical synthesis. See Bernard de Saily (a.k.a. Maurice Blondel), “La tâche de la philosophie d'après la philosophie de l'action,” 48: “Oui ou non, la philosophie tend-elle à obtenir par ses propres ressources une solution théoriquement suffisante des questions soulevées par la pensée et la vie? ou bien doit-elle tendre normalement à reconnaître son insuffisance intrinsèque, à déterminer les conditions d'une solution réelle, et à servir de moyen partiel et subordonné à la réalisation d'une destinée totale qui dépasse la portée de sa vue et de ses forces?”

early work is largely unexplored in theological commentaries on Blondel to date, however, and yet it is rich with theological repercussions, constituting a robust rebuttal of the Enlightenment critique of Christian orthodoxy.

The supernatural must come from outside, and yet make use of sensible phenomena within the natural order.<sup>28</sup> That is to say, humans cannot by definition mete out this supernatural help to themselves, rather they receive it in active passivity. Accordingly, the latter part of Blondel's dialectic also educes *three* philosophical exigencies from this supernatural hypothesis: an exigency for a revelation in sensible signs interpretable to human beings, an exigency for the union of God and humanity in a historical Mediator, as well as for sacramental or "literal" practice. These are truly philosophical exigencies, however, and are neither equivalent to nor dependent on Christian doctrine accepted as revealed truth, as we will see below.

### *The Exigency of Revelation in "Sensible Signs"*

Blondel's basic thesis regarding revelation is that it cannot come entirely from outside the natural order, since it would then be utterly incomprehensible to human creatures.<sup>29</sup> Rather, revelation must make use of natural intermediaries immanent to human sensibility, that is "sensible signs." Revelation, if it is to be intelligible at all to human creatures, must express itself in sensory signs that invite the human act of interpretation.

The very notion of revelation entails the offer of the infinite under finite guise, the absolute universal offered through immanent particulars; something which is of course a scandal to those who reject the immanence of the universal in the particular, such as Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers, for whom the notion of a real revelation is a "scandal too farfetched for reason."<sup>30</sup> Blondel is concerned with offering an adequate response to the rationalist religious philosophy of the Enlightenment, which rejected, in

28. Blondel, *Action*, 369: "And yet it seems inconceivable for this operation to remain supernatural in becoming ours, or for it to be ours without ceasing to be supernatural. It should, it seems, come entirely from a source external to us; and it should be entirely immanent to us. By what opening, then, can this higher life insinuate itself into our life, if it is true that, in its very principle, it must be absolutely independent of our initiative?"

29. Blondel, *Action*, 363: "If we had to think that revelation itself comes entirely from outside like a completely empirical datum, the very notion of a dogma or a revealed precept would be totally unintelligible. For, by hypothesis and by definition, revelation uses sensible and natural intermediaries only as a vehicle for the supernatural, which the senses and science are in no position to judge. Also, without as yet having to pronounce in the least on the value of what is called *revealed*, it is essential to study the mechanism and the genesis of this notion, a critique that philosophy has hardly begun."

30. Blondel, *Action*, 364: "And that in itself constitutes, for more subtle minds, one of the most difficult obstacles to overcome, for it would seem almost natural to find the absolute in the suppression of the relative, and supernatural life in sensible death. But to recapture being under sensible species, to admit that a particular, contingent, and limited act should contain the universal and the infinite, to take from the series of phenomena one phenomenon that ceases belonging to the series entirely, that is the wonder."

part or in total, all those aspects of Christian teaching having to do with particularities: the orthodox doctrine of the Incarnation, the very possibility of a historically conditioned revelation, the realist doctrine of grace *qua* an “immanent supernatural,” as well as sacramental praxis, which Kant placed on the same level as superstition.<sup>31</sup>

The principle of revelation for Blondel is the human act of interpretation, rather than the sign itself. The revelatory sign always remains open to interpretation, as a *signum contradictionis* (sign of contradiction), in which people can see what they want to see, or fail to see what they choose not to see. Revelation takes hold in human action only where *interpretation* comes into play, therefore.<sup>32</sup> The efficacy of revelation then hinges on human dispositions, rather than on the equivocal revelatory phenomena in themselves. Accordingly, these sensible signs *qua* revelation cannot be invincibly and universally efficacious, univocally imposing themselves on the senses and demanding assent from human creatures.

This also holds of miracles.<sup>33</sup> Miracles are “miraculous” only to those who are already disposed to seeing divine assistance in the mundane and quotidian. Similarly, revelation succeeds in revealing the divine only to those who are open to perceiving it: “The sound of words and the sudden appearance of signs would undoubtedly be nothing, if there were not interiorly an intention of accepting the desired light, a sensitivity

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31. In the only direct reference to another philosopher in *Action*, Blondel paraphrases Kant in the following passage: “In order to give the moral order a solid foundation and to make it a self-sufficient whole, has it not seemed enough to some to consider duties as originally independent of all metaphysical notions and all compromises with sensibility, but yet solidary with postulates so that, in acting well, we would be accomplishing, mysteriously no doubt, but surely, the presumptive will of the perfect legislator, and so that finally morality itself constitutes the true cult? All duties and only duties seem to be religious. In claiming that God placed us in the world to act according to his will and not to offer him harangues or compliments, one concludes with Kant: ‘Everything that man thinks he can do to make himself pleasing to God other than maintain a good conduct is pure superstition.’” Blondel, *Action*, 292–93.
32. Blondel, *Action*, 364–65: “Signs, then, though necessary, are never sufficient. It is the interpretation, it is the interior need, that is everything, because upon this preparation depends whether the light will be blinding or whether the darkness will bring out the brilliance more vividly. For, to the one who knows how to hear, the mystery itself is a new illumination, since it proposes as obscure precisely what we want to surpass the capability of a limited view.”
33. Blondel, *Action*, 365: “The idea of fixed laws in nature is only an idol. Each phenomenon is a particular case and a unique solution. To go to the bottom of things, there is, no doubt, nothing more in the miracle than in the least of ordinary facts. But also there is nothing less in the most ordinary fact than in the miracle. And that is the meaning of those exceptional shocks that incite reflection to more general conclusions. What they reveal is that the divine is not just in what seems to surpass the accustomed powers of man and of nature, but everywhere, even where we readily think that man and nature are sufficient unto themselves. Miracles, then, are miraculous only in the eyes of those already prepared to recognize divine action in the most habitual of events and acts. Nature is so ample and so diverse that it is everywhere equivocal; and in striking souls, it gives off the sound we want it to give.”

already prepared to judge of the divinity of the word heard.”<sup>34</sup> The sign itself is never sufficient for revelation to occur, therefore. Rather, the interpretative *action* of the human creature is called for in the one to whom revelation is addressed.

Revelation, if real, is of divine rather than purely human initiative. The constant temptation for human beings, however, is to set their own conditions for revelation, to “decree an apotheosis” of human desire and to follow an easier path of one’s own making than the one traced by divine design.<sup>35</sup> The correct response to true revelation, by contrast, entails sacrifice and abnegation of the human will, even a certain suffering. It also presupposes a disposition of obedience in “an act of submission, a substitution of thought and will, an admission from powerless reason.”<sup>36</sup> Yet even this act of obedience cannot result from mere human willing alone, because humans cannot “generate” the supernatural from their own efforts. Otherwise, it could not be “super-natural.” Even the *élan* of our search for God, therefore, is due to a supernatural help. Yet, in all this, it is important to emphasize that Blondel remains a philosopher, and not a theologian. No positive teaching from revelation has entered the dialectic.<sup>37</sup>

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34. Blondel, *Action*, 366; Blondel, “La notion et le rôle du miracle,” *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 154 (1907): 337–61. Pierre de Loch’s article provides an overview of the contemporary debate surrounding miracles in which Blondel engaged: Pierre de Loch, “Maurice Blondel et sa controverse au sujet du miracle,” *Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses* 30 (1954): 344–90.

35. Blondel, *Action*, 366: “We may well ask God to reveal Himself. But most of the time man begins by setting his own conditions for this, as if he were seeking only to decree the apotheosis of his own desires. Wishing to follow an easier path off to the side, he demands that this path itself be the true way. Always, when we do not surrender to the divine will, we want God to will what man wills.”

36. Blondel, *Action*, 367: “If there is any, divine revelation has to propose itself as independent of human initiative. It is necessary that it require an act of submission, a substitution of thought and of will, an admission from powerless reason; so that reason itself would judge it false as soon as it failed to require of us this unavoidable *sacrifice*. But this salutary disposition of *obedience* cannot be related back only to the effort of the human will; for the supernatural movement cannot proceed from ourselves. Even the *élan* of the search that brings us to God, then, has to be in its principle, a gift. Without this indispensable mediation, we are nothing and we can do nothing. There is a revelation, therefore, given or received, only through a mediator: first and essential exigency.”

37. See Oliva Blanchette, “Blondel’s Original Philosophy of the Supernatural,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 49 (1993): 413–44 at 440: “What keeps philosophy from ever becoming a theology or a religion as such is that in its interpretation of the phenomenon of action it is not in any position to interpret any sign that a revelation has been given or a supernatural life has been offered in reality ... Blondel develops the idea of what such signs would have to consist in. But for him, as it should be for theology, the interpretation is strictly a matter of faith and not of philosophy. To make it a matter of philosophy would be to fall back into the kind of superstition that has been criticized or to reduce something that has to be infinite in its meaning and reality to something finite or purely phenomenal.”

### The Exigency of a Mediator

Yet how can this supernatural auxiliary enter the natural order and historical human life from outside? How can the abyss between the divine and human be bridged? The answer lies in the historical union of God and humanity in a unique Mediator. The possibility of a supernatural help itself depends on this more fundamental exigency: the “Mediator,” the “Savior,” the “Pontiff,” a “second and more essential exigency”:

And what we cannot conceive by ourselves we can still less consummate by ourselves; nothing that man brings to completion, nothing in the natural order of action, reaches its perfection and attains God; to make God the end of man according to the imperious need of our will, to become a cooperator with Him, to refer all life back to its source and its destiny, we need a help, an intercessor, a pontiff to be the act of our acts, the prayer of our prayer, and the offering of our gift. It is by Him alone that our will can equal itself to itself and hold on to everything in between, from its principle to its end: second and more essential exigency: *via et veritas* (the way and the truth),—above all *via* (the way).<sup>38</sup>

In other words, the union of God and humanity in this historical Mediator is the necessary source and principle of all supernatural help to humans.

Blondel marshals the predicament of the irreversibility of the past in favor of this exigency.<sup>39</sup> The predicament of past deficient action, of past wrongdoing, has no solution in the natural order of things. Assuming that all human action involves some divine concurrence (*concursum divinum*), neither God nor human beings can act alone to remedy past wrongdoing. What is required is a “pontifex,” a bridge-maker; an intercessor, fully divine and human: “To give, to preserve, and to restore life, we need a savior.”<sup>40</sup> From this union of God and humanity in a historical human life comes the only possibility of “repairing” past action.

Blondel’s language here is evocative of a theological defense of the Incarnation, as for example, in Saint Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*.<sup>41</sup> Yet it is important to remember, as René Virgoulay is careful to point out, that Blondel and Anselm have radically

38. Blondel, *Action*, 367.

39. On the irreversibility of past action see also Blondel, *Action*, 5, 9, 103, 306–7.

40. Blondel, *Action*, 367: “And it is not only to believe and to act, to know and to do the truth, it is to remedy the inevitable deficiencies of action that a help is essential for man. What he does, even in the properly natural order, has infinite repercussions. And if he has done wrong, his failing always contains something absolutely irreparable. To annihilate evil, therefore, we need a power and an expiation of which we can never find in ourselves the smallest part. To destroy the past forever fixed! to give back life to dead action and to the perverted will! to remedy an outrage that wounds man and God! The mind boggles before the enormity of such a necessary task. To give, to preserve, and to restore life, we need a savior.”

41. A number of authors have pointed out certain similarities between Blondel and Anselm: Paul Vignaux, “Sur quelques tendances de la philosophie de M. Blondel,” *Recherches philosophiques* 6 (1937): 367–72; Jacques Paliard, *Maurice Blondel ou le dépassement chrétien* (Paris: Juliard, 1950), 115; Henri Bouillard, *Blondel et le christianisme* (Paris: Seuil, 1961), 249–55.

different starting points. Blondel's philosophical project in *Action* is not at all the same as Anselm's approach of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).<sup>42</sup> Rather, what we have in the exigency for a historical Mediator is a truly philosophical exigency for which the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation provides content.

### *The Exigency of Sacramental or "Literal" Practice*

Remaining within philosophy and pushing it as far as it can go leads Blondel to a final exigency: that of sacramental cult, or "literal practice" (*pratique littérale*). His audacious conclusion is that the supernatural gift requires some very precise actions both revealed to, and enjoined on, human beings by divine precept. That is to say, the entire dialectic concludes to a rebuttal of the rationalist Enlightenment philosophy that would relegate Catholic sacramental action, as a natural action claiming supernatural effect, to the realms of superstition.<sup>43</sup> Not only does Blondel's investigation of the determinisms of human action ensure the primacy of practice over speculation, it leads as well all the way to affirm sacramental practice, therefore, as a real philosophical exigency in the hypothetical necessity of supernatural religion. Again, it is important to emphasize that this is a philosophical exigency that follows inexorably from the philosophy of action, and does not rest in any way on the acceptance of revealed dogma as positive fact.<sup>44</sup>

The first step in the argument concerns the opposition of thought and action, or in more theological language of faith and works, that is false in Blondel's philosophy of action. Just as thought cannot be separated from action, in his philosophy, neither can faith from practice, in contrast with Reformation and Kantian thought.<sup>45</sup> Human action is irreducible, and the will that inspires it cannot be separated entirely from it. Moreover, completed action is the only guarantee of sincerity. The humble person who

42. René Virgoulay, "La problématique du surnaturel dans *L'Action* et dans la *Lettre* de 1896," *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 86 (1998): 501–508 at 505.

43. Blondel, *Action*, 373: "That through the complete development of the human will and through a full generosity in action one could reach the avowal and the felt need for a truth higher than reason we have perhaps managed to understand and to admit. But that this faith could in turn become the principle of acts embodied in sensible nature, that the divine intervention should descend into the detail of practical life through material signs, that supernatural life should have a natural expression, no doubt at first seems unacceptable and unintelligible."

44. Blondel, *Action*, 375: "The role of the philosopher is to establish that, fully consequent with our secret wish, we go all the way to a literal practice."

45. Blondel, *Action*, 376: "To think that to adore in spirit and in truth is to abstain from all determinate practice, such is the error that resembles very much the illusion we fall into when we imagine that the real execution is only an accessory appendage and almost a deterioration of the ideal resolution. Of course, action seems to constrain the beautiful expansion of the interior life and to impoverish the richness of feeling. But that is only so in appearance. The necessity for a practical determination, far from drying up the liberality of the inward infusion, replenishes its source . . . the religious soul finds a help against itself in the demanding rigor of the letter."

submits to the "rigor of the letter" and to the "precepts of devotion," without the pretension to a complete understanding, has a better sense of religious truth than self-satisfied intellectuals, in this view.<sup>46</sup> It is in *doing* what we cannot very easily talk about, rather than in speculation, that the assurance of sincerity lies.<sup>47</sup> While we cannot think through all the multiple aspects of our actions, we can still do all that has to be done. Only action ties together the two orders that otherwise seem incommunicable, divine and human, the universal Absolute and the particular.<sup>48</sup>

The center of perspective for religion, therefore, lies in practice, not in speculation or isolated human reason, but in human action, as an irreducible operation of the human composite. This is diametrically opposed to the Enlightenment philosophy of religion that would claim to "purify the spirit of the letter," by casting aside all positivity and particular duties in favor of a pure universal religion educed from human reason alone. In placing voluntary human action at the center of our perspective, by contrast, we are forced to see what is lacking in human thought and will. What one cannot see or understand clearly, one can perform fully and completely: "The letter, incomprehensible and demanding, is the means of thinking and acting divinely."<sup>49</sup>

### *Superstition versus Sacrament*

At a superficial level, however, sacramental rites and other determinate practices labeled "superstitious" appear to be the same sort of activity as they did to Kant: that is natural human actions pretending to a supernatural effect. At the level of mere externals, there is nothing much to distinguish sacramental rituals from all sorts of superstitious practices. What is the essential distinction, therefore, between sacramental practice and superstitious rituals and traditions, given that both insist on obedience to a given "letter," the execution of a determinate practice?

What sets sacramental action apart, by definition, is that it manifests a divine initiative and is not of purely human inspiration. In fact, no action emanating from a purely

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46. Blondel, *Action*, 376.

47. Blondel, *Action*, 377: "Who, then, gives proof of his spiritual fruitfulness, the one with the unction of speech, or the one who, even dryly, can do what he could not speak of? Yet it is the dialectician of interior feelings who glories in the abundance of his piety; and it is the one faithful to the letter who is reproached for having a devotion all for show. What is external still, are feelings, thoughts; what is most intimate, what manifests life best and transfigures, are works. What matter the fleeting marvels of dialectics or the ravishing emotions of conscience! There has to be a conclusion: it is action. *In actu perfectio* (perfection is in the act)."

48. Blondel, *Action*, 377: "We cannot immediately understand the multiple aspects of all that is to be known; we can pass immediately to the practice of all that is to be done. To act only within the limits of present clarity, and to restrict ourselves to the conception or the sense of the divine as we feel it, without seeking in life itself an immediate application for it, is to diminish ourselves. Through its tyranny, thought narrows action down; through its submission, action broadens thought out."

49. Blondel, *Action*, 378.



human initiative can contain the supernatural gift, even if inspired by the most sublime and pious thoughts and feelings.<sup>50</sup> For Blondel, that would constitute an attempt at “self-sufficiency,” and the very essence of superstitious action. Therefore, it is clear that for a finite, determinate, and particular human action to be a receptacle for the supernatural, its authority can only come supernaturally from God.<sup>51</sup> Sacramental practice must, in other words, have the authority of revelation, or it is simply superstition. While the necessary source of any religious practice is human election of the divine will, human reason alone cannot determine its form, since the supernatural is never attainable under human effort alone:

In order for these ritual acts not to be reduced to an idolatrous fiction or for them to equal the faith whose vivifying expression they must be, it is required that they be, not an invention of man and the always imperfect effect of a natural movement, but the expression of positive precepts and the original imitation of dogma divinely transcribed into distinct commandments ... A practice is necessary; and any practice not given as a supernatural order is superstitious. It is nothing if it is not all.<sup>52</sup>

In other words, the positive precepts of a “literal practice” must manifest the divine will, if they are not to be just another superstitious “letter.”

As revealed practice, therefore, the sacramental signs express a divine intention that human beings must work at interpreting and understanding, with all the natural means that they dispose of. Moreover, like other revelatory sensible signs such as Scripture, sacraments are inexhaustible sources of divine knowledge, constantly “speaking out” God’s intentions to human beings in the concrete circumstances of their finite lives. In this view, sacramental action is no “unreal” symbol, or mere approximation of the absolute within it: “There is no approximate or symbolic absolute.”<sup>53</sup> As symbolic, sacraments do not primarily express the intentions of the persons or communities that celebrate them, nor do they exclusively give voice to human need, although part of God’s revelation to human creatures through such revealed practices is doubtless to teach precisely what it is that we need.

Blondel’s philosophical acumen in this distinction between superstition and sacrament has strong ramifications for the theological enterprise and for sacramental theology, in

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50. Ritual is fundamentally ambivalent, therefore, in Blondel’s philosophy. Either it issues from a divine initiative (in sacraments) as a revealed praxis, or from a purely human source, in which case it devolves to superstitious action. See Peter Henrici, “L’ambivalence du rite selon Maurice Blondel,” *Communio* 38 (2013): 40–50.

51. Blondel, *Action*, 382: “On the one hand, no act naturally born of religious belief perfects or equals its dignity. On the other hand, faith is possible only under the species of a defined letter and through the efficacy of a practical submission; and the true infinite could be immanent only in action; it is therefore necessary for this action itself to be the object of a positive precept, and for it to start, no longer from the movement of our nature, but from the divine order.”

52. Blondel, *Action*, 382.

53. Blondel, *Action*, 383.

particular. Sacraments cannot “cause” grace because human creatures succeed more or less adequately in their efforts at interpreting sacramental symbolism. This is because the supernatural cannot be made to depend on the phenomenological perception of the natural (as a merely human action), without verging back to the phenomenon of superstition. The concept of “symbolic efficacy,” therefore, so popular in postconciliar sacramental theology, is fundamentally a fraught one, if not a contradiction in terms, to the extent that it ignores or sidelines divine agency in sacramental action and makes grace *directly* dependent on human action.<sup>54</sup> It is to blur the heterogeneity of nature and supernature, flirting with human self-sufficiency and ultimately, with superstition.

## Conclusion

Finally, Blondel's philosophical treatment of the supernatural drew criticism from Catholics on the one hand, who accused him of departing from orthodox teaching in “naturalizing” the supernatural order, as well as from philosophers on the other hand, who accused him of “supernaturalizing” the natural.<sup>55</sup> Yet Blondel claims never to confuse faith and reason but to maintain the strict autonomy of theology and philosophy, while emphasizing and exploring their mutual interdependence.

That is, while Blondel philosophizes as a believer, and believes as a philosopher, he does not allow revealed truth to contaminate his philosophical method, which always remains autonomous.<sup>56</sup> Following the determinism of human action to its logical conclusion leads Blondel to affirm the hypothetical necessity of a supernatural complement to human action, itself entailing three prior philosophical exigencies: a divine revelation in the form of sensible signs interpretable to human beings, a historical Mediator and Savior, as *pontifex* (“bridge-builder”) between God and Man, as principle and foundation of the supernatural gift offered to human creatures, and finally a revealed sacramental practice

54. The notion of symbolic efficacy appears in various guises in the work of Karl Rahner and Louis-Marie Chauvet. Edward Schillebeeckx, in early works, also proposed a version of symbolic efficacy, which drew criticism for seeming to make sacramental grace the direct result of subjective human effort. See Argimiro Turrado, “La teología del P. E.H. Schillebeeckx O.P. Causalidad simbólica instrumental,” *Augustinianum* 2 (1962): 40–72.

55. Blondel, *L'itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, 53; “À gauche, on m'accusait de ne pas réserver la part de l'homme et de tout surnaturaliser. À droite on m'a reproché d'abord de ne pas réserver la part de Dieu et de tout naturaliser, même la grâce et l'ordre surnaturel. Or rien de plus expressément contraire à mon dessein. Car je tendais à maintenir, à manifester dans toute leur étendue ces deux parts,—sans nulle abdication de la raison qui conserve son droit de regard et son devoir de coopération jusqu'aux sommets où saint Jean de la Croix parle de notre passivité active,—sans nul empiètement sur le terrain théologique, puisque le transcendant peut compénétrer notre vie et devenir immanent à notre action en gardant tout son caractère gratuit et, à vrai dire, innaturalisable.”

56. Blondel also makes this intention quite clear in a long explanatory note, a footnote to the sentence “Revelation must transcend the grasp of reason; and no effort of man purely as man could penetrate into its essence”: i.e. know anything of its possibility, let alone its existence in fact, based on human reason alone; Blondel, *Action*, 374n1.

(*pratique littérale*). Christian dogma and practice provide content to these merely philosophical exigencies, but Christian teaching does not enter the dialectic.

In this regard, a common objection to Blondel's approach is to question whether having presupposed some notion of the supernatural from the outset as a kind of secret postulate, he simply reintroduces it at the end of the dialectic under the guise of a hypothetically necessary supernatural. Has theology surreptitiously entered his philosophy from the very beginning and corrupted the entire project? This objection arose even at the defense of his dissertation at the Sorbonne.<sup>57</sup> Blondel's response is to reaffirm his philosophical method by which he rigorously attempts to suppress the supernatural, only to conclude after eliminating all other alternatives, that it is impossible to escape the supernatural as a necessary hypothesis.<sup>58</sup> His later writing also addresses this question and, in part, the *Letter* of 1896 was written to defend the autonomy of his philosophical method in *Action* (1893), as one can easily see from its original title (A letter on the exigencies of contemporary thought in the matter of apologetics and on philosophical method in the study of the religious problem).<sup>59</sup>

While Blondel was certainly inspired by a desire to rehabilitate the Christian religion on an intellectual level, it does not follow that his "logic of action" presupposes the supernatural from the beginning.<sup>60</sup> Instead, in systematically following the necessary relations step by step, the logical necessity of the supernatural, which is his inspiring thought, can appear only at the end, and that only after all other options are ruled out.<sup>61</sup>

57. Joannès Wehrlé, "Une soutenance de thèse," in *Études blondéliennes I*, ed. Jacques Paliard and Paul Archambault (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), 82; "Il me semble donc que malgré votre dessein d'éliminer tout préjugé et tout parti pris, un postulat secret inspire et soutient toute votre dialectique."

58. Wehrlé, "Une soutenance de thèse," 83; "Voilà d'où naît le caractère négatif de la méthode qui seule m'a paru avoir une rigueur scientifique. J'examine donc toute la variété des tentatives qu'il est possible de faire pour échapper à ce que vous nommez mon postulat secret; je cherche de toutes mes forces à l'ignorer, à le supprimer ... Mais de toutes ces tentatives, il ne ressort qu'un système d'affirmations liées qui, peu à peu, nous amènent à poser devant la pensée réfléchie et l'option de la volonté ce qui était déjà présent à l'origine du mouvement par où on le fuyait."

59. Maurice Blondel, "Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d'apologétique et sur le méthode de la philosophie dans l'étude du problème religieux," pts. 1–5, *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* 131 (1896): 337–47; 467–82; 599–616; 132 (1896): 225–67; 337–50; reproduced in *Les premiers écrits de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France), 5–96.

60. Blondel, *Action*, 374n1; see also Maurice Blondel, *Carnets intimes (1883–1894)* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 324 (February 12, 1890): "Il est naturel que dans son investigation philosophique, la pensée qui m'a inspirée tout d'abord ne puisse paraître qu'à la conclusion, tandis que j'ai trouvé à la fin seulement mon point de départ apparent: c'est qu'il s'agit d'aller chercher et d'attirer au coeur de ma pensée les esprits qui en sont le plus loin."

61. See also René Virgoulay, "La philosophie de l'action et la théologie fondamentale," *Recherches de Sciences Religieuses* 81 (1993): 385–420 at 387.

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