MAURICE BLONDEL

A Philosophical Life

Oliva Blanchette


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PART ONE

The Journey Inward

Maurice Blondel can best be understood as a philosopher, but as a philosopher who sought to expand the scope of philosophy, so that it would include the most authentic religious spirit as it is lived in human thought and action. He was a religious man who had to think his religious life philosophically. But at the same time he was a philosopher for whom religion, even in its supernatural aspect, had to be seen as a necessary part, not only of human life itself, but also of philosophical reflection on that life.

In this resolve Blondel found himself at odds with both sides of the anti-religious atmosphere that ruled in French intellectual life at the end of the nineteenth century, those who attacked religion or relegated it to something insignificant in rational life, and those who defended religion and asserted its right to propagate in secular society. At first he was seen as a defender of religion in philosophy in a University that was resolutely secular, and as a threat to the autonomy of reason. As the defenders of reason feared for their conception of philosophy, the defenders of religion, who were mostly Catholic in France at the time, as was Blondel, rejoiced in having a champion of religion at the University. But this joy soon turned to suspicion on the part of some, when it became clear how Blondel proposed to “defend” religion, not by cutting reason short, as even many philosophers were quite willing to do in the spirit of neo-Kantianism, but by extending its power of inquiry into the very idea of supernatural religion, thus apparently bringing the very content of such religion, supposedly the exclusive domain of a theology based on revelation, under the domain of critical philosophy. This was not what the established theologians of the time had had in mind as a proper defense of religion, and while philosophers found some reassurance in Blondel’s protestations concerning the philosophical nature of his method, theologians began to fear for the autonomy of their own method in discoursing about religion.
A new mode of religious thinking was in the offing, launched as a philosophical dissertation on Action at the Sorbonne. Before we go into this mode of thinking as it appears in L'Action of 1893, it is interesting to note how Blondel first presented himself to the University and how it first reacted to him and his claim to establish supernatural religion as a legitimate and necessary domain for philosophical inquiry.

Blondel first came to Paris in November 1881, at the age of twenty. He had gained admission to the highly touted École Normale Supérieure through a rigorous competitive exam that was carried on in France every year. He came from the provincial city of Dijon. He was from a well-established family of lawyers and notaries, professional people who gave their children a good bourgeois and Christian education, an example of work well done, a concern for doing the right thing, and even a certain taste for discreet but active proselytizing. He had done his studies at the Lycée of Dijon, the regular state-run school, and not at a Catholic school, and had spent his last year in intense preparation for the very competitive national admission examination that was the only way of access to the École Normale, then and still considered a Mecca for intellectuals in France.

At the École Normale, Blondel was to learn to think. Henri Bergson and Émile Durkheim had just finished the year before he came there. Victor Delbos and Pierre Duhem, along with many others less well known, were to be his classmates. What he was to learn, however, was not exactly congenial to his way of thinking or to his convictions. Among the faculty he found a deep-seated rationalism that was essentially anti-religious, though two, Émile Boutroux and Léon Ollé-Laprune, were themselves avowed Christians who supported him in his religious interests. Among the student body, he found a general skepticism derived from Renan, and from a waning scientism as well as a loss of confidence in the power of reason to deal with concrete questions of the meaning of life.
II

Awakening to the Light
of the Gospel in Human Action

Early Family Life

Maurice Blondel was born in Dijon, the capital city of Burgundy in France, on November 2, 1861. In later life he would add the precision that it was at seven in the morning, about the time when the Catholic liturgy was celebrating the office of the dead. In this, as people who knew him personally have noted, he saw a symbol: this birth at the moment when the memory of the dead was being kindled could only mean a continuity of life, the prolongation of a line. This is why, as he would say himself, he understood early in life that he had been given to his family in order to continue its traditions. The date and the hour of his deliverance from the maternal womb imposed on him a duty of fidelity, something he was conscious of all his life, even as he came to think that innovation was the best way of preserving tradition.

The family into which he was born was in fact one of long and very strong tradition in the Catholic faith of France. In a Mémorial of the family that he prepared for the hundredth birthday of his older sister, Thérèse, Blondel himself was able to trace its lineage, thanks especially to records of properties owned by the family over the centuries, all the way back to the thirteenth century, where he found one Jehan Blondel, a yeoman in the service of the Duke of Burgundy, who had gone to negotiate with the Great Turk for the liberation from captivity of one of the Duke's sons. The family was not part of the nobility, but they had prospered in the service of the Dukes of Burgundy and maintained themselves in prominence as lawyers and notaries. In the nineteenth century they were part of the established bourgeoisie in legal and notarial circles who felt responsible, not just for public service, but also for the propagation of their robust faith in the face of a rising secularism.

The father of the family was a notary, a highly esteemed profession that en-