

The Possibility of Christian Philosophy

Maurice Blondel at the intersection
of theology and philosophy

Adam C. English

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	viii
1 Introduction	1
2 Training in Christian philosophy	8
3 Structure	31
4 Mystery	54
5 Power	79
<i>Notes</i>	104
<i>Bibliography</i>	134
<i>Index</i>	141

Preface

Is universal equivalent to eternal? Is one even a subset of the other? The obvious answer is “no,” universal and eternal describe two different metaphysical realities. “Universal” denotes that which is common to anyone, anywhere. “Eternal,” so it would seem, indicates that which has no beginning and no end, limitless time. This might be a common definition of “eternal” but it is patently deficient from the outset by its dependence upon time-bound categories of beginning, ending, before, and after, even if they are negated. But then, how else would one go about describing eternity, except as the negation of temporal limits?

Perhaps some of the difficulty in defining this term comes from the fact that modern philosophy has concerned itself not with eternity but with universality (for instance, Kant writes on the categorical or universal imperative and Hegel on concrete universals) or the rebellion against universality (Sartre writes on the “I” and Levinas on the “Other”). This neglect of the eternal is obscured by the fact that modern philosophy – whether in its idealistic, materialistic, or existentialist modes – has said much about “time.” On the whole, it has staked out two a priori universals of experience and knowledge: space and time. These two universal elements of experience, or subjective transcendentals, undergird modern philosophy not to the betterment of the eternal axis, but at its expense. Space and time function in modern understanding without reference to beginning (*arche*) or end (*telos*); they are thoroughly subjective, though universally so. Space and time function as the personal platforms upon which every particle of knowledge and experience is received and processed. Even eternity, as far as we can know and experience it, must pass through the filters of time and space. Otherwise, how would we know it or experience it if we did not know and experience spatially and temporally? Time and space are the universal conditions for the knowledge and experience even of eternity. Hence the eternal becomes a subset of the universal. So quickly is the initially obvious distinction between eternal and universal lost. Eternity becomes subjectively universalized such that it can mean nothing more than time and space stretched to infinity.

To illustrate why this blurring of the eternal into the universal is prob-

lematic, consider its theological application. If eternity is simply temporality elongated forever, then it makes sense to ask which of God's eternal decrees came first, the decree to create or the decree to elect (hence the infra- and supralapsarian debates of seventeenth-century Protestantism). What was God doing before either of these decrees? *Before* and *after* are meaningful terms in a temporal rendering of eternity. Further, it makes absolute sense to ask if being eternal means that God knows every future action and decision of every individual. If so, has God determined from eternity those actions and decisions? After the modern turn, these and other related questions of the timing and order of God's actions become real issues with vexing and divisive implications. Pre-seventeenth-century Christian orthodoxy did not entertain these kinds of questions simply because they were not seen as real issues. Dilemmas arising out of the order and timing of God's decrees were viewed as unintelligible and meaningless; they were patently false dilemmas. For pre-modern theologians, God's actions are eternal, which means God acts in such a way that His doings cannot be plotted on a timeline, even though they affect and shape time and space. Eternity, for pre-modern Christians, indicated not time and space infinitely extended but a different axis of reality besides time and space that nevertheless cooperates and coordinates with time and space.

The argument of Christian philosophy is that the confusion of the universal and the eternal results from modern philosophy's attempt to construct the cosmos on the space-time continuum. In such a world, things become curiously two-dimensional. The eternal cannot have a meaning outside time and space, because there is no dimension of reality outside time and space. Eternity must be flattened as a descriptor of either time or space, even if infinitely elongated. Christian philosophy, by contrast, pictures a three-dimensional, or trinitarian, world in which the universal and the particular are but two elements. The eternal dimension adds the question of "why" to the questions of "what," "when," and "how." As Jacques Ellul has observed, technology – surely the dominant feature of our age – can never allow more than an examination of technique, performance, efficiency. Technology cannot ask the question, "Why should it be done?" but only "How should it be done?"

Christian philosophy offers a way through this impasse, but only by re-imagining the world. The eternal dimension must be rediscovered so as to open room in an otherwise two-dimensional universe of space and time for meaning, purpose, design, fulfillment, love, hope, and faith. The eternal is not as much about the afterlife, when we *leave* the here and now, as it is about this life and how we make sense of it in the here and now. The eternal axis stretches not across endless quantities of time and space but across the fullness of time, space, and being. The eternal concerns life at its center, the city at its heart, history in its whole, and existence in its plentitude. When we ask the eternal questions, we are going to the marrow.

A book on the possibility of Christian philosophy might at first glance seem beside the point. Christian philosophy exists by the mere fact that some Christians study, write, and teach philosophy. As will become apparent, however, there is more at stake. Christian philosophy is not simply Christians doing philosophy, rather it is a robust acknowledgment that divine grace and life in the Spirit animate the mind of the believer and transform philosophical questions, the use of reason, one's view of history, society, and the self. Christian philosophy cannot abstract from or set aside the eternal dimension; the eternal questions of "why" and "to what end" supply the very rationale for doing philosophy, though sadly this rationale has been forgotten by many in contemporary times. The eternal is not a fringe issue, but at the very heart and soul of the Christian's approach to philosophy. Christians simply cannot go about philosophy wearing 2-D glasses; we see the world through fundamentally different lenses. The possibility of Christian philosophy is the possibility of a three-dimensional world, the possibility of re-envisioning everything, the possibility of faith.

My writing would not have been possible without the help and support of family, friends, colleagues, and supervisors. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward have graciously allowed this work to see the light of day. I would also like to thank the following people: Matt Archer, Barry A. Harvey, Daniel H. Williams, Carl G. Vaught, Ralph Wood, Bob Patterson, and Steve Harmon read, edited, and gave insight on various manifestations of the work. Chris Newton has also been of great assistance. I would like to thank Terry Clague, Katherine Carpenter, and the editorial staff at Routledge. Maureen Keating checked my translations. Jean Leclercq and the staff at Archives Maurice Blondel, Université catholique de Louvain-la-Neuve, provided access to resources and advised my studies. Baylor University's Interlibrary Loan Office also acquired other necessary resources. I appreciate James Livingston and the Nineteenth Century Theology Group, AAR, for encouraging my study of Blondel. Gratitude must be extended to my wonderful colleagues at Campbell University and to my family, including my Dad, who read and edited the dissertation version of this work, as well as my Mom, from whom I have always had support. Special thanks goes to my wife, Charissa, who weathered the journey from start to finish, and to our daughter, Cassidy, who kept me company while I wrote.

1 Introduction

“Each philosophical effort does little more than translate a primitive and abiding idea and intention that seem capable of being expressed in a word, yet are scarcely exhausted by a shelf of books.”¹ This magnificently modest observation comes from the pen of Maurice Blondel (1861–1949). Henri Bouillard, in his classic study of Blondel, is right to state that it describes well the tenor of Blondel’s own philosophical effort. The “primitive and abiding idea” that dangled before Blondel’s eyes was the tantalizing possibility of “constructing a philosophy which, by the logic of its rational movement, would lead spontaneously to Christianity and, without imposing faith, would inevitably pose the Christian problem.”² This is not to say that Blondel intended to manufacture an apologetic for the faith; he wanted to invest himself in a truly Christian philosophy.

What is Christian philosophy?

What is “Christian philosophy”? Most basically, it is the conjunction of two enterprises, Christianity and philosophy. Even the phrase itself implies that there is some natural fit between the two entities. Karl Rahner, one of the most influential Roman Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, observes in his magisterial *Foundations of Christian Faith*, that when “we are reflecting upon the concrete whole of the human self-realization of a Christian . . . [t]hat is really ‘philosophy.’”³ And, when “we are reflecting upon a Christian existence and upon the intellectual foundation of a Christian self-realization . . . that is basically ‘theology.’”⁴ At first glance, then, ordinary philosophy and Christian theology are concerned with the same kind of things. Rahner says there is even a unity of the two projects, although this unity is not a one-to-one equation. Nevertheless, might not such a correlation of the two disciplines open to the possibility of cooperation or conjoining under the title of “Christian philosophy”?

John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical, *Fides et Ratio*, offers one of the clearest and most concise definitions and defenses of Christian philosophy. “Christian philosophy,” he says, is not meant to convey “an official philosophy of the Church, since the faith as such is not a philosophy.”⁵ Rather, it

2 Introduction

describes “a Christian way of philosophizing, a philosophical speculation conceived in dynamic union with faith.”⁶ There are at least two implications of this distinctiveness. First, Christian faith commitments give a certain shape to the philosopher’s reasoning. The style and approach to philosophical questions is different from those without such convictions. Put more forcefully, “faith purifies reason” by demanding that it speak truthfully, humbly, and graciously.⁷ Second, the specific concerns of the Christian tradition influence the interests and emphases of the philosopher’s project. For instance, the idea of “a free and personal God who is the Creator of the world” has contributed to the philosophy of being, the reality and consequences of sin has helped in formulating the problem of evil, and “the notion of the person as a spiritual being” helped prepare the way for consideration of human dignity, equality, and freedom.⁸ According to John Paul II, revelation has introduced into the history of the world “certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided.”⁹ He makes clear, however, that investigating these truths does not make one a theologian. The philosopher continues to operate via a “purely rational method” and not, as a theologian might, on the basis of revelation.

Christian philosophy, then, offers a distinctive style and content. Creation, redemption, and eschatology orchestrate the philosophical investigation of meaning and existence. The Christian story provides not the subject for Christian philosophy, as it does for theology, but the compass or grid for using reason and reflecting on existence. Reason is not the same as faith, but it finds its home in faith; philosophy, even for the Christian, is not the same as theology, but is consummated in theology. In Christ all things hold together (Col 1:17).

Blondel dedicated his life’s work to articulating the Christian style of philosophizing. In this he aimed to travel the “way” described by St. Thomas Aquinas: “Human understanding climbs up to God from creatures, whereas faith’s knowledge comes down to us by God’s revealing; it is, however, the same way up and down.”¹⁰ Blondel recognized that such a provisional way cannot materialize as a goal to be achieved or a monument to be erected; it is a virtue to be lived. It is the character of faithful reasoning, the openness of a mind that knows truth is not its invention or possession – never a given, always a gift. As such, the “possibility” itself comes as a Christian virtue, that of hope. The possibility is already a theological discipline, an exercise that is as much penance as prayer. The aim of Christian philosophy is not a proud monument of “truth,” taken as an object of possession, but rather in a humble hope of *participation* in truth – reason seeking faith. Christian philosophy requires humility about the limits of one’s knowledge and honesty about the world. It is a form of truth-telling.

The possibility of such a project – genuinely Christian and philosophical – ignited Blondel’s long and productive career, culminating in a trilogy of

writings on thought, being, and action. *La pensée, L'être et les êtres*, and the revised *L'action* stand out for their tremendous force, creativity, and coherence. They are the manifestation of what Christian philosophy has to offer.

The Radical Orthodoxy connection

In a recent issue of *New Blackfriars* there is a review of *Deconstructing Radical Orthodoxy*, itself a collection of essays highly critical of Radical Orthodoxy. The author of the review, David Grumett, says in passing, "The Blondelian perspective lies, however, at the roots of Radical Orthodoxy's strident anti-secular and anti-modern rhetoric and its hostility to any form of self-validating philosophical discourse."¹¹ Grumett does not explain or substantiate this claim (it is, after all, a book review), but he seems to be voicing two commonplace assumptions about Radical Orthodoxy: one, that it embodies and endorses an attitude of critical superiority and, two, that a part of the radically orthodox impulse, and particularly its stridency, can be traced back to Blondel, or at least a certain interpretation of Blondel. As for the first assumption, each reader must judge for him or herself whether those associated with Radical Orthodoxy display arrogance or daring, hostility or clear-sighted criticism. It should be said that the project is not opposed to true humility and propriety, but it is opposed to what John Milbank calls "the false humility" of much modern theology.¹² This phrase (in its entirety it reads, "The pathos of modern theology is its false humility") appears on the first page of Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory* and is as memorable as it is provocative. It sets the tone of the book and articulates the basic posture of Radical Orthodoxy. It is a posture of suspicion about theology's self-sacrificing accommodations to modernity in the name of cultural relevance and Christian humility, and it is essentially Blondelian, which takes us to the second assumption commonly made about Radical Orthodoxy.

What about Maurice Blondel appeals to Radical Orthodoxy? His is the figure of a committed Christian philosopher caught in the cross-fires of ecclesiastic authoritarianism and philosophical nihilism at the turn of the twentieth century who not only survives but rises above the fray to produce works that are thoroughly Christian and uncompromisingly philosophical. He vindicates the faith for the Nietzschean skeptic and shocks the faith of the ultra-Montanist traditionalist. And, through it all, he remains on the cutting edge of early-twentieth-century thought. By pushing philosophy beyond secular reason, Blondel not only cuts a new edge for the discipline, but rejuvenates the faith in the process. He shows that faith does not have to excuse itself from the philosophical arena for reasons of incompetency but can stand its own ground as a formidable challenger. Blondel is the model of the unabashedly Christian thinker who nonetheless is able to speak fluently in the language of modernity, and

4 Introduction

does so not to “translate” Christian ideas for it, but to defend the Christian vernacular as a vastly rich and dynamic alternative. In this way, his work is both critical and constructive and, as such, he is a forebear of the radically orthodox spirit that “systematically [criticizes] modern society, culture, politics, art, science and philosophy with an unprecedented boldness” by means of a “recovered vision” of the Christian tradition in all its force and beauty.¹³

So, it is right to witness Blondel in connection with Radical Orthodoxy, and especially at this juncture in time. Radical Orthodoxy has so far laid out well the guiding vision and fundamental pattern for engagement. That pattern is to enter postmodern sites like sex, medicine, technology, etc., with a view toward exposing their vacuousness and introducing an authentically biblical and patristic voice that might reconstitute and resituate those sites. The challenge for those who wish to continue the trajectory marked out by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward, and others is threefold. First, there is the risk of substituting the synchronic for the diachronic. It is tempting to allow this “new theology” to function merely as a critical machine that speaks only a “No” to postmodern fallacies and faults. When pressed about a solution to the identified problems, one receives a triumphant word, “Christianity,” but only a word. The gospel of Christ without substantiation and without truth-telling about Christianity’s own complicity with postmodern ills serves merely as a static, synchronic, textbook answer. Radical Orthodoxy must be mindful of the diachronic – Christianity as it is actually lived and believed. It must take into account the historical and continued development of the faith and its practices that occurred in cooperation and in competition with the modern world. The recovery of biblical and patristic Christianity must not become a wistful nostalgia or a dispensational ideal, but a full and honest disclosure. The call here is for a recovery of a the full tradition, including the scholarly and the popular, the orthodox and the heretical. The second and related challenge to add to recovery and *ressourcement* is construction. Milbank’s *Being Reconciled* is an important move in this direction, but others need to enter the conversation with an eye toward building up the faith. This is a biblical imperative (Acts 20:32, 1 Thes 5:11, Jude 1:20). What is unique about this constructive theology is that it will not be marked by “a particular set of doctrines or institutions” but, as Michel de Certeau understood, by “a particular kind of practice, a certain ‘style’ of transgressing and exceeding limits – for example, siding with outcasts, going the extra mile, and so on.”¹⁴ For de Certeau, who is often appealed to by Radical Orthodoxy, “there is no essence or original presence to the Christian tradition; it is a series of responses to a call.”¹⁵ Hence the challenge to construct is really a challenge to re-imagine the pilgrim character of the faith, to re-envision the faith as fully Abrahamic. So we should not expect the publication of a “systematic theology” along Radical Orthodoxy lines, in fact, such a species would be a betrayal of core convictions.

The process will be one of collage and bricolage. The third challenge aims at the practical. The next frontier for Milbank *et al.* is to connect robust theology with local preaching, liturgy, and social practice. This will undoubtedly prove to be the most arduous of the tasks, and efforts have already begun to meet it – William T. Cavanaugh’s *Torture and Eucharist* and James K. A. Smith and James Olthius’s *Radical Orthodoxy and the Reformed Tradition: Creation, Covenant, and Participation*, to name two.¹⁶ This study of Blondel hopes to provide fodder for the first two challenges, while the third challenge will, for the most part, be postponed for the time being due to the limitations of the subject.

Organization of the chapters

The first major chapter presents an overview of Blondel’s intellectual career, especially as it relates to his thinking about Christian philosophy. Like many thinkers of his generation, Blondel started his career enamored by Husserlian-style phenomenology. Even as he made great and inventive use of it in his first treatise on *Action*, Blondel realized that it must ultimately open onto and resolve into an awareness, however vague and undefined, of the God who mediates. Phenomena must be mediated, and this cannot be done by the subject or the object, but by that which transcends both. Hence, phenomenology must be superceded, or perhaps more properly, undergirded by the transcendent. From this understanding, Blondel was prepared to see that authentic philosophy must always and ultimately be theologically oriented. If philosophy is the study of reason and the reflection on life, and if reason and life constitute elements of creation, then philosophy is always bound to creation and to the Creator. All that exists and can be known, even philosophy, operates as flourishes and designs on the mural of God’s creation. Blondel understood that only a theological perspective can appreciate this artistic pattern. Only a theological account can provide substantive meaning to existence. Blondel’s journey into Christian philosophy will be traced through his 1893 thesis, *Action*, the “Letter on Apologetics” and “The Idealist Illusion,” the Modernist controversy, and his involvement in the 1930s with the debate on the status of “Christian philosophy.” As a result of the controversy over “Christian philosophy,” Blondel realized the need to issue a definitive statement of his position on the matter. The product was the trilogy: *La pensée* (2 volumes), *L’être et les êtres*, and the revised, two volume edition of *L’action* (1936–7).

Chapter 3 addresses the first installment of the trilogy, *La pensée*.¹⁷ In this work, Blondel presents the initial element of his Christian philosophy: *structure*. Structure represents that which is cognitive, reflective, organizational, formal, and synchronic. For something to be structured, it must be *thought*, i.e., intended or purposed. Thought incorporates horizontal, linear dimensions such as the act of thinking (*pensée pensante*), the

6 Introduction

thought produced (*pensée pensé*), and the mysterious relationship between the two, as well as vertical, non-linear noetic and pneumatic dimensions. In Christian philosophy, purposed structure, or thought, is not always explicit or obvious. Indeed, reality is most truthfully depicted not in direct, propositional, and obvious ways, but indirectly and implicitly. For Christian philosophy, what we know about being, existence, purpose, and meaning is always implied, never crudely yanked up, shown to all, and then boxed away. It is by method of implication that the world and its history are understood and described. This insight turns the discussion into a consideration of how exactly divine, revelatory, supernatural work is discerned in the natural world. Divine activity is never merely given, it must be perceived and interpreted by those with eyes to see and ears to hear. Perception and discernment are conditioned upon the innate, or better, transnatural *desire* to see and to understand. It is a first grace. Such an impulse expresses the divinely created rudiment of the faith that seeks understanding. The structure of Christian philosophy becomes clear as the fully human yet divinely fashioned desire for understanding draws together the natural and the supernatural and unites them in mystery.

Chapter 4 engages the second element of Blondel's Christian philosophy: the *mystery* of creation which is framed in terms of being and beings, *L'Être et les êtres*.¹⁸ In this work, the mystery of being and beings is a creational mystery, which is to say that the true mystery does not lie in "being" or even "Being," but in the *relation* of Creator to creation. In the mystery of creation, Being and beings do not represent the most basic metaphysical relationship, those roles are assigned to Creator and creature. Ontology is no longer viewed as the metaphysical mediator between the Creator and his *ex nihilo* creation. Being is not the link between nature and supernature, philosophy and theology. Rather, creation mediates being. Blondel puts his theories to the test in an exploration of the proof of God's existence, by all standards one of the most mystery-draining and rationalistic exercises in Christian theology and philosophy. He argues that the real value of the proof is its ability to lead us to admit not "being" but insufficiency – the insufficiency of our human rationality in the presence of mystery. In this way, the proofs work in the inadequacy we are awakened to while performing them, not in their final products. It is not *being* which is discovered in the action, but an awareness of one's own creatureliness, that one is created and in a strange way dependent. The chapter then follows two streams of development with regards to the mystery of being in Roman Catholic philosophy after Blondel: the first is the transcendental Thomism represented by Karl Rahner and Bernard Lonergan and the second is the new phenomenology represented by Jean-Luc Marion. Maurice Blondel's grammar of creation offers a critique and correction to these two trajectories.

In Chapter 5 the third variable of the Christian philosophy presents itself: *power*. This theme is encountered in the most controversial and

underappreciated work in the trilogy: the new edition of *L'action* (1936–7).¹⁹ Blondel feels that it is crucial for a Christian philosophy to distinguish action from the idea of action and establish the ontological difference of action. Ontologically speaking, action is enacted power. Enacted power occurs on individual, social, and transcendent levels, each carrying its own concerns for Christian philosophy. Blondel follows these three “waves” of action as they spread out like ripples in the water.²⁰ Blondel begins with *personal action* and its plurality of types. Three types will be investigated here, including making, practicing, and contemplating. He also explores how the social being of power, especially as it relates to the rise of Nazi Germany, is determined by the philosophical assumptions that are invested in it. Finally, Blondel presents divine action as the third wave. He revitalizes the antique medieval concept of pure action (*actus purus*) as a possible way to understand divine operations in the world. The medieval doctrine is contrasted with the modern logic of causality and the formalism of absolute will. God’s action is always a creating, sustaining, and loving presence, not a distant, arbitrary, and punctuated intervention. Through his account of the three waves of action, Blondel is able to show that Christian philosophy offers not just an existential account, but a holistic reckoning of action.