CHAPTER 8

The Philosophy of Action: Tradition and Sacrament

1 Introduction

Blondel’s dialectic in *Action* (1893) implicitly expresses a particular vision of the relationship between philosophy and theology as mutual interdependence, as we saw in Chapter 4. Blondel elaborated on this relationship in later work, especially in the two volumes of *La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien* and in *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme*.¹ In his view, the positive claims of religion as well as the hypothesis of a supernatural revelation, rather than posing a scandal to reason, are in fact a challenge for reason to go further in its investigation of what there is in human action besides its immanent or natural and rational dimension. Theology, for its part as a rational discipline, cannot do without the help of philosophical reasoning, and both disciplines diminish themselves to the extent that they remain self-enclosed and self-sufficient in isolation from one another. By contrast, Blondel envisages that both disciplines engage in a mutually fruitful ‘symbiosis’ or ‘conjugal union’, both preserving their “essential autonomy” but finding their fulfillment only in close co-operation, in their “indeclinable connection”. They are not parallel and extrinsic to one another, but interpenetrating and inseparable in concrete actuality of a theandric action. Each preserving its own original initiative and character, the philosophical and theological enterprises can reciprocally enrich and enlighten each other without succumbing to confusion of one with the other. Instead, a real symbiosis of faith and reason, of spirit and truth is possible, which is at the antipodes of the perennial tendency to pull apart matter and spirit, reason and faith, manifested as much by the Ancients, who saw scandal in the idea of friendship with the divine, as by the Enlightenment attempt to force religion into the bounds of human reason:²


² Maurice Blondel, *La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien, tome premier*, ix; “A double consequence already issues from these premises. The slogan ‘in spirit and in truth’ in fact rightly enjoys two indispensable and equally legitimate and constructive senses: a living reality of harmony and
Déjà il résulte de ces prémisses une double conséquence. La devise “en esprit et en vérité” a, en fait et en droit, deux significations différentes, également légitimes, également positives et indispensables dans la vivante réalité d’une cohérence et d’une symbiose sans aucune confusion de pouvoirs. 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 un soulagement, une promotion, qui à son tour fournit des lumières pour la raison et assure une “philosophie ouverte”, – philosophie d’une inépuisable fécondité, non seulement par une cohérence intellectuelle, mais dans une coopération comparable à une sorte d’union conjugale.

Nowhere is this co-operation more obviously necessary than in the area of sacramental action, which in Blondel’s view, as we have seen, does not express merely a human need. Rather, as “literal practice”, it is an integral part of Providential and divine pedagogy, as well as of supernatural elevation. Sacrament is not superstition because of the guaranty of revelation, which entails an admission of human insufficiency in the face of a movement coming from outside human reason:

... le culte chrétien ne se propose point comme un simple perfectionnement des ébauches naturelles de cultes religieux, selon une poussée intérieure à l’homme et allant de bas en haut. Il exprime et réalise un mouvement contraire : il procède d’une inspiration supérieure et proprement surnaturelle, qui descend jusqu’aux plus intimes profondeurs de l’être humain, mais afin d’élever et de faire converger toutes les puissances de la nature jusqu’à l’assomption divine.

symbiosis without any confusion of powers. The philosophical enterprise has in itself a real value that cannot do without the study of human destiny. The Christian contribution, however, is neither an excess burden nor a repression: it is a relief, an encouragement, which in turn provides lights for reason and assures an ‘open philosophy’ of inexhaustible fecundity, not only through its intellectual coherence, but through co-operation comparable to a ‘conjugal union’.

3 Maurice Blondel, La Philosophie et l’esprit chrétien II, 117–8; “... the Christian religion is in no way a mere development of the natural forms of religious cult, following an impetus interior to man and going from the bottom up. Rather, it both expresses and realizes a contrary impetus: it proceeds from a superior and properly supernatural initiative that comes down into the most intimate depths of the human being, in order to elevate all natural powers, converging in an assumption into the divine.”