



Between *History and Dogma*: On the Spirit of Tradition in the Demands and Limitations of Modernity

Robert C. Koerpel

Abstract

The philosophical anthropology of the twentieth-century French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel has had a significant impact on modern and contemporary theology. However, Blondel's less well-known idea of tradition in the text *History and Dogma* remains to be adequately assessed by the English-speaking world. In order to appreciate Blondel's contribution to the idea of tradition in modern Catholicism and to discover how his thought remains a rich resource for contemporary theology, this essay traces the shifts in late-medieval theological discourse that reveal a gradual move toward conceptualizing tradition as a bureaucratic reality mediated through institutional and juridical means which comes to full expression during the modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church. Having situated Blondel's thought within the historical and theological development of the modern idea of tradition in Catholicism, the essay argues that Blondel offers an alternative account of tradition as 'liturgical action,' which vivifies Christ's sacramental presence in tradition and resists reducing tradition to a bureaucratic reality or a natural phenomenon.

Keywords

Maurice Blondel, tradition, modernity, history, dogma

I. Introduction

The historical theologian Yves Congar once remarked that "[i]t was the destiny of the nineteenth century to call for a new precision in the idea of tradition."¹ Behind Congar's statement resides a conceptual and theological history (much of which Congar himself catalogues)

¹ *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, (trans) Michael Naseby and Thomas Rainborough (New York: MacMillan, 1966), p. 213. Hereafter abbreviated TT.

that this essay narrates in an abbreviated form in order to grasp the role and contribution of the French Catholic philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861–1949) to the development of the idea of tradition in modern Catholicism.

Despite the import of Blondel's thought for modern theology², his significance for contemporary theology remains to be adequately assessed by the English-speaking world. His influence today, when it is felt, is primarily in the areas of philosophical and theological anthropology, where his philosophy of action delineates the structure of the human will and discloses with phenomenological rigor and pragmatic sagacity the indissoluble union-in-distinction between knowledge and action in the human person that comes to perfection in the bond of charity. Blondel's lesser known and underappreciated account of tradition also provides modern and contemporary theology with a new horizon from which it is able to move beyond the limitations of history, as it has been defined by modernity, and attend to the demands of revelation, in the unwavering and particular claims it makes upon humanity. In this area of Blondel's thought, modern and contemporary theology discovers the "new precision," as it were, which allows tradition to mediate and re-present God's action in human history through Christ and his church.

To appreciate Blondel's current contribution to theology, the first part of this essay explores the conceptual and theological pressures that have shaped modern Catholicism's notion of tradition. Tracing the shifts in late-medieval theological discourse reveal a move away from thinking about tradition primarily as a liturgical and ontological reality mediated through ecclesial practice (action) and toward conceptualizing tradition principally as a bureaucratic reality mediated through institutional and juridical means. The overarching positive good of the shift toward conceptualizing tradition as a bureaucratic reality is that it discloses the necessity of the institutional and juridical means of tradition in protecting and safeguarding the sacramental integrity of the church. However, Catholic ecclesiology in its best form depends not only on the institutional and juridical means of tradition, but it also relies on the liturgical and sacramental means of tradition as well.

With the relationship between these two dimensions of tradition in mind, the second part of this essay explores how Blondel inherits a modern Catholic ecclesiology that had obscured Christ's presence in tradition. In the text *History and Dogma* (1904)³ Blondel offers

² Cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 210–219.

³ Maurice Blondel, *The Letter on Apologetics and History and Dogma*, trans. and eds. Alexander Dru and Iltyd Trethowan (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994). Hereafter abbreviated HD.

an account of tradition that vivifies Christ's sacramental presence in tradition through the liturgical action (practices of prayer, fasting, almsgiving) of the church and restores the animated vitality between the institutional and liturgical dimensions of tradition. His account continues to be a rich resource for modern and contemporary theological thinking,⁴ because it displays the ontological and liturgical significance of tradition in the economy of revelation and casts into relief the way in which tradition is, along with Scripture, as the Second Vatican Council suggests, "a mirror, in which the Church, during its pilgrim journey here on earth, contemplates God."⁵

II. The Late-medieval Origins of the Modern Notion of Tradition

There is a palpable shift in emphasis away from the idea of tradition (*traditio, paradosis*) as received and embodied in the practice of the members of the Body of Christ and toward the modern idea of tradition as a reality that is centralized in the teaching authority of the *magisterium*⁶ and channeled and managed through ecclesiastical office, which comes to expression in post-Tridentine thought and obtains in Catholic theology into the nineteenth century.⁷ Although

⁴ For example, the significant role Blondel's "hermeneutic of tradition" plays in elucidating the spiritual understanding of Scripture in the work of Henri de Lubac. See Henri de Lubac, *Histoire et Esprit: L'intelligence de l'Écriture d'après Origène* (Paris: Aubier, 1950), pp. 374–446; as well as de Lubac's, *Exégèse médiévale: Les quatre sens de l'écriture*, 2 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1959–1961). For Blondel's connection to the latter work of de Lubac see Kevin L. Hughes, "The 'Fourfold Sense': De Lubac, Blondel and Contemporary Theology," *Heythrop Journal: A Quarterly Review of Philosophy and Theology* 42 (2001), pp. 451–462. For de Lubac's account of the Blondel's influence on his thought see, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings*, trans. A.E. England (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993). On the importance of Blondel's thought for contemporary theological thinking, see Peter Henrici, "The One Who Went Unnamed: Maurice Blondel in the Encyclical *Fides et ratio*," *Communio* 26 (1999), pp. 609–621; René Virgoulay, *Philosophie et théologie chez Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Cerf, 2002); Adam English, *The Possibility of Christian Philosophy: Maurice Blondel at the Intersection of Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007); David Grumett, "Blondel, Modern Catholic Theology and the Leibnizian Eucharistic Bond," *Modern Theology* 23 (2007), pp. 561–577 and "Blondel, the Philosophy of Action and Liberation Theology," *Political Theology* 11 (2010), pp. 502–24.

⁵ "Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation," *Dei Verbum* # 7, *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, New Revised Edition, vol. I, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1998), p. 754.

⁶ *Magisterium* here refers to the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office. Francis Sullivan has observed that in its more recent development the term *magisterium* has come to mean both the teaching authority of the hierarchy as well as the hierarchy as the bearer of the office. See Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1983), pp. 24–34.

⁷ It is beyond the scope of this essay to give sufficient theological reflection to the positive goods of protecting and safeguarding the sacramental integrity of the church that

this shift has its origins in the medieval symbiosis between the church and Scripture, the patristic and early medieval notions of tradition certainly did refer to the teaching authority of ecclesiastical office in the transmission and practice of tradition.⁸ However, as soon as the mendicant-secular debates of the late thirteenth century raised the specter of an irreconcilable conflict between the teaching of the church and the teaching of scriptural texts, a shift can be detected in the relationship between the church and its magisterial authority in relationship to Scripture.⁹

At the center of the mendicant-secular disputes was the question of post-apostolic revelation and the authority such revelation carries. From this speculative center new forms of thought emerge regarding the relationship between Scripture and tradition, as is characterized by Henry of Ghent's (1217–1293) preoccupation with the unique authority of Scripture and Duns Scotus's (1265–1308) ontological formalism and emphasis on the importance of non-Scriptural revelation.¹⁰ Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure had not reached this point in their thought.¹¹ Both inherit and continue, in their distinct ways, the patristic legacy of tradition, distinguishing tradition from the scriptural texts without opposing each to the other, since conceptually both *sacra pagina* and *sacra doctrina* fall under the same formal object of divine revelation.¹² Unlike Henry of Ghent, Siger of Brabant and Duns Scotus, Aquinas and Bonaventure did not have to write and teach within the intellectual milieu that followed the Condemnation of 1277,¹³ where the ecclesial politics that ensued from medieval

accompany the shift toward the modern idea of tradition in Catholicism. The objective of this essay is to identify the shift in theological thinking about tradition and the conceptual and theo-political dynamics that have contributed to this shift.

⁸ For an analysis of the office of the episcopate and its relation to tradition, see Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger, *The Episcopate and the Primacy*, trans. Kenneth Barker, Patrick Kerans, Robert Ochs and Richard Strachan (New York: Herder and Herder, 1962).

⁹ See Yves Congar, "Aspects ecclésiologiques de la querelle entre mendiants et séculiers dans la seconde moitié du XIII^e siècle et le début du XIV^e," *Archives d'histoire et littéraire du moyen âge* 36 (1961), pp. 35–151.

¹⁰ For the latter see Brian Tierney, *Origins of Papal Infallibility 1150–1350: A Study on the Concepts of Infallibility, Sovereignty and Tradition in the Middle Ages* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), pp. 132–144.

¹¹ For a concise account of the various themes under which Bonaventure and Aquinas consider the notion of revelation see René Latourelle, *Theology of Revelation* (New York: Alba House, 1966), pp. 155–179.

¹² For a summary of the similarities and differences between Aquinas and Bonaventure, as well as twentieth-century interpretations of the two thinkers, see David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* 2nd edition, eds. D.E. Luscombe and C.N. L. Brooke (London: Longman, 1988), pp. 213–225.

¹³ For an introduction to the discussion concerning Aquinas's relation to the Condemnation of 1277, see John F. Wippel, "Thomas Aquinas and the Condemnation of 1277," *The Modern Schoolman* 72 (1995), pp. 233–72; and Roland Hissette, "Thomas d'Aquin directement visé par la censure du 7 mars 1277? Réponse à John F. Wippel," in *Roma, Magistra Mundi: Itineraria Culturae Medievalis: Mélanges Offerts au Père L.E.*

theology's re-engagement with the primary sources of pagan philosophy exerted a new set of pressures on reason's relation to revelation.¹⁴

That Aquinas and Bonaventure did not bear these pressures is reflected in the distinct, yet fluid relation between the registers of faith and reason in each thinker's discourse.¹⁵ It is even more salient in the negligible role the distinction between God's absolute and ordained powers (*potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata*) plays in each thinker's account.¹⁶ This relatively insignificant distinction was a feature of their thought, "but 'their interests had always lain with God as known to us by reason or revelation, and the 'absolute' power [of God] was no more than a formal saving clause."¹⁷ However, when the full impact of the reception of Aristotle and his commentators in the newly formed medieval universities became clear in 1277, the desire to protect the sovereignty and freedom of God and to eliminate Greek naturalism propelled the *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* distinction from the margins of medieval theological discourse to its center. As this distinction was codified in the late-medieval mind, there is a shift in thinking about God and God's relation to world that broached the previously unthinkable possibility that this "God of pure freedom might always posit and demand what is contrary; for instance, that man should hate him (Robert Holkot), [and] that the innocent should be damned and the guilty saved (Ockham)."¹⁸ What we see here is a "spectacular deflation of theology," whereby "the truths of 'natural' theology, which had formed the chains binding the dictates of reason

Boyle à L'occasion de Son 75e Anniversaire, ed. Jacqueline Hamesse (Louvain-la-Neuve: Fédération des Instituts d'Etudes Médiévales, 1998), pp. 425–437.

¹⁴ Cf. Pierre Félix Mandonnet, *Siger de Brabant et L'averroïsme Latin au XIIIe Siècle*, vol. 2, (Louvain: Institut Supérieur de Philosophie de L'Université, 1908–11), pp. 175–191; Etienne Gilson, *Reason and Revelation in the Middle Ages* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1938) and *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (New York: Random House, 1955), pp. 402–410; and Fernand van Steenberghen, *Thomas Aquinas and Radical Aristotelianism* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1980).

¹⁵ On the relationship between reason and revelation in Aquinas's thought see Etienne Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. L.K. Shook (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), pp. 3–25; and Per Eric Persson, *Sacra Doctrina: Reason and Revelation in Aquinas*, trans. J.A.R. Mackenzie (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1970). For Bonaventure see Joseph Ratzinger, *The Theology of History in St. Bonaventure* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1971).

¹⁶ For an analysis of Aquinas's and Bonaventure's use of this distinction see Lawrence Moonan, *Divine Power: The Medieval Power Distinction up to its Adoption by Albert, Bonaventure, and Aquinas* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), pp. 193–295.

¹⁷ Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 300.

¹⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, trans. Oliver Davies, Andrew Louth, Brian McNeil C.R.V., John Saward and Rowan Williams, ed. Brian McNeil C.R.V. and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 20.

to the declarations of revelation, melted into thin air.”¹⁹ The upshot of this new form of theological thinking was that

the essentially supernatural life of the Christian, seen in action in divine faith and love, and derived from a totally new and God-given principle of grace which had inspired and dominated the work of an Anselm, a Bonaventure or a Thomas, was now relegated, as unknowable and inexpressible, to the purely religious sphere of belief, and in practice ignored.²⁰

When the *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* distinction comes to the fore in late-medieval theological thinking it signifies a shift away from thinking about tradition as an aspect of revelation primarily mediated and represented through the diffuse complex of liturgical customs, practices and guilds embodied by pre-modern Christians,²¹ and toward thinking about tradition as an aspect of revelation that is communicated and mediated through God’s *absoluta potentia*. To be sure, liturgical customs and practices continued to mediate and communicate tradition, but a new horizon for thinking about tradition that departs considerably from patristic and early medieval patterns of thought emerges and begins to structure theological thinking about tradition’s mode of mediation and its representation in the modern world.

This new conceptual structure for thinking about tradition is reflected in the work of such fourteenth and fifteenth-century Conciliarists as Pierre D’Ailly (1350–1420), whose thinking hinges on the prospect of God’s absolute power (*potentia absoluta*). For D’Ailly, the idea of a purely oral transmission of tradition represents God’s divine prerogative by which God reveals Himself, should God deem it necessary to do so. God can and already has revealed Himself in a post-apostolic form of special revelation not found in the canonical Scriptures.²² In D’Ailly’s horizon the written word of Scripture is a sufficient mode of revelation, but in God’s freedom and omnipotence God chooses (*potentia absoluta*) to reveal Himself through the working of the Holy Spirit in a direct manner requiring no liturgical

¹⁹ Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought*, p. 299

²⁰ *Ibid.* Also see Gilson, *History of Christian Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, pp. 488–499.

²¹ For well-reputed works engaging the theological, philosophical and ecclesiological complexity of pre-modern Christianity, see Etienne Gilson, *Histoire de la philosophie médiévale* 2nd ed. (Paris, 1943); Beryl Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, 2nd ed. (New York: Philosophical Library, 1952); and Jean Leclercq, O.S.B., *The Love of Learning and the Desire for God: A Study of Monastic Culture*, trans. Catharine Misrahi (New York: Fordham University Press, 1961).

²² Cf. Pierre D’Ailly, *Quaestiones super I, Sententiarum* (Lyons, 1500) and Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence and Promise: The Legacy of the Scholastic Distinction of Powers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2002).

embodiment or ecclesial practice.²³ What is new here in D'Ailly's thought is the emphasis placed on the speculative axiom that revelation contains no limit, save the principle of non-contradiction, and consequently, God can intervene directly in creation, by virtue of His *potentia absoluta*, without employing secondary instrumental causes.²⁴ That D'Ailly conceives of an unmediated form of tradition for which no embodied liturgical or ecclesial practice is needed to render it intelligible, is an indication that the bond between the church and Scripture has been broken by a doctrine of revelation that has reconceived the relationship between the created and uncreated realms. Now that the natural world is no longer seen as "participatorily enfolded within the divine expressive *logos*"²⁵ D'Ailly is required to envision the order of the natural world as principally dependent upon God's divine will.²⁶

The shift in thinking about God and God's relation to the world characterized by the new emphasis on God's absolute power provided the conceptual structure within which tradition was considered less in terms of the synthetic bond that mediates God's presence through the ecclesial action of the church and more in terms of a contractual artifice that governs the different ecclesiastical arrangements, bodies and practices. John Milbank has argued that the conceptual pressure the *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* distinction exerted on D'Ailly's account of an unmediated notion of tradition, and that encouraged the move away from thinking about tradition primarily as a liturgical and ontological reality and toward an understanding of tradition principally as a bureaucratic reality, is one of the decisive factors in the construction and formation of the secular.²⁷ Indeed, a number of interrelated theological and political forces flow out of this distinction to form the speculative horizon of modernity. Chief among the theo-political forces flowing out of the distinction and facilitating

²³ Cf. George Tavard, *Holy Writ or Holy Church: The Crisis of the Protestant Reformation* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), p. 56.

²⁴ Cf. Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, and Order: An Excursion in the History of Ideas from Abelard to Leibniz* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), p. 64. See also Heiko Oberman, "Pierre D'Ailly and the Absolute Power of God: Another Note on the Theology of Nominalism," *Harvard Theological Review* 56 (January, 1963), pp. 59–73.

²⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 14.

²⁶ See Oakley, *The Political Thought of Pierre d'Ailly: The Voluntarist Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), pp. 14–33. A detailed analysis of the complex of distinctions that accompany the *potentia absoluta/ordinata* distinction in D'Ailly's thought is beyond the scope of this essay. Here we have offered a rudimentary sketch of the distinction in relation to D'Ailly's understanding of the notion of tradition. It is worth noting that this distinction, as it is worked out in D'Ailly's account, allots an important role to human reason, as is evidenced by the further distinction between "absolute evidence" and "conditioned evidence" (cf. p. 29). Oakley contends the *potentia absoluta/ordinata* distinction and *evidentia absoluta/conditionata vel secundum quid* prevent D'Ailly's thought from fideism or occasionalism (cf. pp. 26–33).

²⁷ Cf. *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 9–26.

the modern shift in emphasis toward conceptualizing tradition as a bureaucratic reality was the tension between the *regnum* (kingship) and the *sacerdotium* (priesthood), which had its origins in the Gregorian reform of the eleventh century, but remained unresolved in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries when D'Ailly and other Conciliarists were writing. Despite the Gregorian reform's success in reinvigorating papal authority, redeeming the life of clergy and liberating the church from lay ascendancy (lay investiture struggle), the reform's complete success required what it could not have accomplished, namely, that the feudal structure and the system of benefices that gave rise to the reform be dissolved.²⁸ As a consequence of its inability to resolve the occasion of the reform, the reform itself left the medieval church vulnerable, in both theory and practice, to the conceptual and linguistic influence of the emerging domain of the secular. As the church began to speak of itself in terms of a centralized, bureaucratic institution, one can detect a trace of the transition to a more bureaucratic understanding of tradition that would manifest itself in much modern Catholic theology.²⁹ The division of sacramental and juridical powers that takes place during the later Middle Ages is a reflection of the internal reconfiguration the church was beginning to experience as it formed a novel relationship with the inchoate secular domain.³⁰ The effect of this sacramental and juridical reconfiguration on the late-medieval idea of tradition is that tradition began to be seen as a distinct mode of truth, as a category that ought not to be considered under the rubric of Scripture, and, at times, set in distinction to the written word of Scripture. In short, it was in the wake of the conceptual and theo-political shifts in late-medieval thought that modern theological thinking was able to envision revelation as composed of two distinct sources, Scripture and tradition.

III. The Reformation, Modernism, and the Modern Problem of Tradition

The intellectual turbulence that consumed Catholicism in the wake of the Reformation is one of the most significant events in the shift in emphasis toward the modern idea of tradition as a reality

²⁸ Cf. Oakley, *The Conciliarist Tradition: Constitutionalism in the Catholic Church 1300–1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 22–25.

²⁹ Cf. Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, trans. Gemma Simmonds, Richard Price and Christopher Stevens (London: SCM Press, 2006), pp. 75–119.

³⁰ Cf. Ernst H. Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 193–272.

that is centralized in the teaching authority of the *magisterium* and channeled and managed through ecclesiastical office. The Reformation account of justification by faith and Scripture alone succeeded in forcing sixteenth-century Catholicism to bring to official expression its notion of tradition. To defend the Catholic position against the protests and contraventions of the Reformers, to stem the abuses that concerned them, and to protect and safeguard the sacramental integrity of the church the Tridentine decree on Scripture and tradition was promulgated during the fourth session of the Council of Trent on April 8, 1546.³¹

In order to substantiate its account of revelation, the Tridentine decree maintained an ecclesiological pneumatology in the legacy of the early Church Fathers and medieval theology, which perceived an unbroken covenantal bond, guided by the presence of the Spirit, between the apostolic deposit and texts, the historical moments of the church, and the church's present moment.³² But the Reformation had called into question the authenticity of the bond between the past and the present, as well as the provenance and practice of the church's many embodied traditions. In many instances the church's concrete embodiment of particular traditions had become so wanton that the character of tradition as a legitimate and integral expression of revelation now was seen by the Reformers as an abusive human invention obscuring the presence of God.³³

In an effort to reply to the Reformation and to protect and safeguard the sacramental integrity of the church, most post-Tridentine Catholic theology began to substantiate the concept of tradition from a theological horizon that had reconfigured its ecclesiological referent from "seeing tradition as having its reference to the past, [to seeing] it in reference to the current magisterium of the Church."³⁴

³¹ For the Tridentine decree on Scripture and tradition see *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 2, *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), pp. 663–665. Much of the interpretive history of the Council of Trent takes place in the twentieth century as a result of the work of Josef Geiselmann. See Josef Geiselmann "Das Konzil von Trient über das Verhältnis der heiligen Schrift und der nichtgeschriebenen Traditionen," ed M. Schmaus, *Die mündliche Überlieferung* (Munich: Hueber, 1957), pp. 123–206. For responses to Geiselmann see Joseph Ratzinger, "Offenbarung, Schrift, Überlieferung," *Trierer theologische Zeitschrift* 67 (1958), pp. 13–27 and Heinrich Lennerz, "Scriptura Sola," *Gregorianum* 40 (January, 1959), pp. 38–53. For a detailed summary of the history of the decree see Hubert Hedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, vol. 2, *The First Sessions at Trent 1545–47*, trans. Dom Ernest Graf O.S.B. (St. Louis, MO.: B. Herder Book Co., 1961), pp. 52–98.

³² Cf. Congar, TT, p. 173.

³³ Cf. Joseph Ratzinger, "On the Tridentine Decree on Tradition," in *Revelation and Tradition*, pp. 59–60. Ratzinger narrates a more complex account of the connection between *traditiones* and *abusus* at Trent in which he suggests procedural complications at the council partly are to blame for the link between the two.

³⁴ Congar, TT, p. 176.

In the newly reconfigured post-Tridentine Catholic theology,³⁵ then, can be seen the shift in emphasis away from speaking of tradition in terms of the principle of receptivity mediated through the liturgical and ecclesial action of the church and toward a new stress upon the principle of living teaching authority [*magisterium*] as the privileged language and grammar in which the modern notion of tradition is discussed.³⁶

However, John Henry Newman, Matthias Scheeben, and Johann Adam Möhler before both of them, believed and argued, for the most part by exploring the thought of the early Church Fathers and the practice of the early church, that the transmission of tradition and its spirit and content was, along with the *magisterium*, mediated through and active in the ecclesial and liturgical life of the church. For Möhler, tradition is an intrinsically communicative reality that encompasses the whole of Christianity, including Scripture.³⁷ In fact, without tradition, Möhler writes, “there would be no doctrine of the Church, and no Church, but individual Christians only; no certainty and security, but only doubt and probability.”³⁸ He was able to locate the post-Tridentine Catholic interpretation of revelation within the context of the Reformation and thus interpret it as the Catholic response to the Reformer’s disjunction between Scripture and tradition. Möhler’s great achievement, along with drawing attention to the interior reality of tradition guided by the Spirit, was to unite the subjective (spirit) and the objective (texts) dimensions of tradition in a theology of communion that showed the Spirit’s action is united with the people’s consciousness and the *magisterium*’s acts.³⁹

Along with Möhler, the question of tradition for Newman had concrete implications for the life of the church, as Newman’s research into the Arian controversy led him to discover that in

³⁵ For a summary of post-Tridentine Catholic thought see Tavad, *Holy Writ or Holy Church*, pp. 225–247.

³⁶ Cf. Congar, TT, p. 176 and p. 182. In regards to this shift in emphasis, Congar also observes that, “beginning in the sixteenth century, canonists and theologians (especially followers of Suárez) held the thesis, endorsed by the 1917 Code (c. p. 25), according to which custom [tradition] only obtains the force of law by the approbation of the competent superior. In a word, the consideration of content has been replaced by a consideration of the juridical title of authority, *quod by quo*, in scholastic terms.” TT, p. 181.

³⁷ Cf. *Unity in the Church, or, the Principle of Catholicism Presented in the Spirit of the Church Fathers of the First Three Centuries*, trans. and ed. Peter C. Erb (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996).

³⁸ *Symbolism: Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences Between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by Their Symbolic Writings*, trans. James Burton Robertson (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), p. 284.

³⁹ For commentary on Möhler’s theology of tradition see Congar, *Tradition and Traditions*, pp. 193–196; Jean-Georges Boeglin, *La question de la tradition dans la théologie catholique contemporaine* (Paris: Cerf, 1998), pp. 68–72; and Josef Rupert Geiselmann, *The Meaning of Tradition*, trans. W.J. O’Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), pp. 19–23.

practice the laity was able to preserve the tradition of faith better than the bishops in the fourth century.⁴⁰ His English Romantic view of the imagination, as the force that shapes the intellectual and spiritual existence of the human person,⁴¹ allowed him to articulate with Victorian eloquence and rhetorical splendor the personal, living and active role the phenomenon of tradition plays in the life of the Christian.⁴² The personal, corporate, and dynamic realities of tradition at work in Newman's idea of development brought to the attention of nineteenth-century Catholic thinkers the underlying tension that had formed between human history and Christian belief.⁴³

A little more than a decade after Newman had died, the Modernist crisis required Catholicism to address this tension, and, in so doing, to revisit its conception of tradition. Modernism confronted Catholicism with the question of how to articulate human history's relation to tradition and how the former and the latter have shaped Christian belief. "Was tradition reducible to the demands and limitations of history, or does it go beyond them, and if so, how and under what conditions?"⁴⁴ At a fundamental level, Modernism was the expression of the two powerful and deeply antagonistic forces, tradition (continuity) and modernity (rupture), coming to bear on the intellectual life of late-nineteenth century Catholicism.⁴⁵ For many Catholic intellectuals the pressure of these forces, especially as they manifested in the historical-critical methods for reading Scripture, overwhelmed the speculative framework available to late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Catholicism.⁴⁶ In one sense the Modernist crisis constituted an "epistemological crisis"⁴⁷ in late nineteenth-century Catholicism, but in another sense it provided the occasion for such thinkers as Blondel to refuse two inadequate accounts of tradition and liberate the spirit of tradition from the demands and limitations of the

⁴⁰ Cf. John Henry Newman, *The Arians of the Fourth Century: Their Doctrine, Temper, and Conduct, Chiefly as Exhibited in the Councils of the Church Between A.D. 325 and A.D. 381* (London: Rivington, 1833).

⁴¹ Cf. Stephen Prickett, *Modernity and the Reinvention of Tradition: backing into the Future* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 169–188.

⁴² Cf. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. David J. Delaura (New York: Norton & Company, 1968).

⁴³ For example, see Newman's essay "Milman's View of Christianity" in *Essays: Critical and Historical, vol. II* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1907), pp. 186–248. Newman himself was already aware of this tension and was attempting to address it before he became Catholic.

⁴⁴ Congar, TT, p. 189.

⁴⁵ Cf. René Virgoulay, *Les courants de pensée du catholicisme français: L'épreuve de la modernité* (Paris: Cerf, 1985), p. 45.

⁴⁶ Cf. Roger D. Haight, S.J., "The Unfolding of Modernism in France: Blondel, Laberthonniere, Le Roy," *Theological Studies* 35 (1974), pp. 632–666.

⁴⁷ Cf. Alasdair MacIntyre, "Epistemological Crisis, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science," *The Monist* 60, no 4 (1977), pp. 453–472.

critical historians and speculative theologians of the early twentieth century.

IV. Between History and Dogma: Blondel on the Spirit of Tradition

The Catholic speculative theology that emerged in the early twentieth century as one of Blondel's interlocutors was a form of Thomistic thought that found it difficult to manage the tension between the elements of the past and those elements of the future, a tension managed so masterfully by Aquinas himself, by Aquinas's ability to allow "not only elements of the past but also those of the future [to] have room in his thought; either by being able to incorporate the new into [his thought] or by being fruitful enough to let [his thought] be transformed *by* the new."⁴⁸ Blondel contended that the inability to manage the tension between the elements of the past and future led this form of Thomistic thought to emphasize the juridical, abstract or conceptual nature of dogmatic statements with little or no reference to the concrete and historical circumstances in which they were formulated.⁴⁹ Its ahistorical understanding of dogmatic statements lent itself to an account of tradition as a reality that is represented in a privileged way through the teaching authority of the *magisterium* and channeled and managed through ecclesiastical office.

In reaction to the centralization of tradition within the teaching authority of the *magisterium*, and in an effort to respond to liberal Protestantism's critique of apostolic authority,⁵⁰ Blondel's other Catholic interlocutor embraced a form of thought that reduced dogmatic statements and texts to the individual, unique, and ascertainable facts of the historical situation from which they arose.⁵¹ This form of historicism envisioned tradition as a reality that either obstructed the written form of God's revelation in Scripture or it functioned as a compensatory device when Scripture failed to present the historical truth accurately.

⁴⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth: Exposition and Interpretation*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), p. 252.

⁴⁹ For example, see M.B. Schwalm, "Les illusions de l'idéalisme et leurs dangers pour la foi," *Revue Thomiste* 4 (1896), pp. 413–441; Hippolyte Gayraud, "Une nouvelle apologétique chrétienne," *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* 133 (1896), pp. 257–273 and "Une nouvelle apologétique chrétienne," *Annales de Philosophie Chrétienne* 133 (1897), pp. 400–408.

⁵⁰ For example, see Adolf von Harnack, *What is Christianity?* Trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1957).

⁵¹ For example, see Alfred Loisy, *L'Évangile et l'Église* (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1902) and *Autour d'une petite livre* (Paris: Alphonse Picard et fils, 1903).

In the context of these two positions,⁵² Blondel argues the “need for an intermediary between history and dogma, the necessity for a link between them which would bring about the synthesis and maintain solidarity without compromising [history’s and dogma’s] relative independence.”⁵³ The synthetic principle of tradition

must have an original force, and a foundation of its own; for neither facts nor ideas nor reasoning have really succeeded in extricating us from the circle in which we were enclosed by the initial question: ‘How is it that the Bible legitimately supports and guarantees the Church, and the Church legitimately supports and interprets the Bible?’⁵⁴

The notion of tradition must be a principle with an ontological value distinct from history and dogma, Scripture and the church, faith and reason and yet, a principle that is able to function as the source of unity between each without eliding the one for the other. In other words, the objective of Blondel’s notion of tradition is to understand how tradition unites the fundamental tensions in Christianity while maintaining the distinct integrity of each. To do so requires identifying the space between them, a space that constitutes their unity-in-distinction and that is interwoven into the fabric of the exegetical methods and the speculative doctrines of Christianity in such a way that it presupposes the ordinary language and grammar spoken in the church. As Blondel notes,

[t]his vivifying power is known to everyone. It is a commonplace to say that the Church rests on ‘Scripture and *Tradition*.’ But what is it precisely? What is its function? What rational justification can be offered for it? How is it that it is linked, on the one hand, to historical facts without being absorbed into history, and that it is bound up, on the other hand, with speculative doctrines though it is not completely absorbed in them.⁵⁵

The task at hand is to liberate tradition from the assumptions that conceal it by describing its role and discovering “the source of its strength, and by virtue of what right it knows history in some respects otherwise and better than the critical historian, and dogma otherwise and better than the speculative theologian.”⁵⁶

To begin, Blondel notes that the conventional idea of tradition is that of “transmission, principally by word of mouth, of historical facts, received truths, accepted teachings, hallowed practices and

⁵² Blondel represents his interlocutors as the two early twentieth-century Catholic schools of thought he names, “extrinsicism” and “historicism.”

⁵³ Blondel, HD, p. 264.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 264–265.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

ancient customs. Is that, however, the whole content, is it even, where Catholicism is concerned, the essential content of the notion?"⁵⁷ The conventional idea of tradition conceives of tradition as an epiphenomenon that emerges in the absence of texts, "supplementing the lacunae," as Blondel puts it. In this way tradition is invoked in distinction to Scripture as revealing a "state of mind" or "ancient custom" prior to the text or even implied in the text, and becomes subject to a double presupposition:

tradition only reports things explicitly said, expressly prescribed or deliberately performed by men in whom we are interested only for their conscious ideas, and in the form in which they themselves expressed them; it furnishes nothing which cannot or could not be translated into written language, nothing which is not directly and integrally convertible into intellectual expression; so that as we complete our collection of all that former centuries, even without noticing it, confided to memory – rather like students of folklore noting down folk-songs – Tradition, it would seem, becomes superfluous, and recedes before the progress of reflective analysis, written codification and scientific co-ordination.⁵⁸

Conceiving of tradition in terms of a reality that emerges in the absence of texts neglects the dynamism of tradition, its spirit, and, as Blondel would note in a later comment on tradition, that "element in tradition which is irreducible and always escapes when we formulate tradition in writing... [and which] permits some few particles of the gold of truth to pass from the level of what is implicit in life (*l'implicite vécu*) to the level of the expressly known (*l'explicite connu*)."⁵⁹ For Blondel, tradition's ontological value comes to expression through its mediative and unitive functions. It is a "principle of unity, continuity and fecundity which is both initial, anticipatory and final, precedes all reconstructive synthesis and likewise survives all reflexive analysis."⁶⁰ It is the bond that unites the "communion of saints," mediating the living community's contemporaneity with the whole church, both living and dead. It is the church's encounter with eternity, a foretaste of the fullness of the eternal gift, whose infinite value "simultaneously affords a sense of certainty of an immensity definitively possessed, which is forever inexhaustible."⁶¹

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* Blondel does not mention the important distinction between apostolic, post-apostolic and ecclesial tradition.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

⁵⁹ Blondel, 'Tradition', in André Lalande (ed), *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, 8th edition (Paris: PUF, 1960), pp. 1140–1141. Also, see Blondel's remarks on the non-textual significance of tradition in *La philosophie et l'esprit Chrétien: Conditions de la symbiose seule normale et salutaire* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1946), pp. 2:79–80.

⁶⁰ Blondel, 'Tradition,' p. 1141.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, *La philosophie et l'esprit Chrétien*, p. 82.

The truth of tradition, then, is attuned to the historical realities of faith, but it transcends the heuristic gaze of critical history, inviting one to participate in the reality that stretches back to the past and into the future from the present.⁶² This is the “living reality” of tradition, which operates on the charism of discernment embodied in concrete practice and animates the entire life of the church, drawing into itself a living synthesis of the speculative, historical and moral truths of the church, manifesting and corroborating these truths through the concrete reality of “faithful action.”⁶³

Here we encounter the central reality of the synthetic bond between action and tradition in Blondel’s account. In his well-known work exploring the phenomenon of action, *L’Action*,⁶⁴ Blondel laid the groundwork for this bond through his “regressive analysis” of the will’s necessary development, which he expressed in the form of a polarity (heteronomy) between the freedom of the will and the necessity of the will through the categories of the “*la volonté voulue*” (willed will) and the “*la volonté voulante*” (willing will). For Blondel, the term “action” connotes a metaphysical reality akin to traditional metaphysics’s use of the term “existence” as the most fundamental and originating principle moving the essence to act. Action also represents a shift toward understanding God’s power as the original dynamism of spiritual beings, which resides beyond the intellect and the will, while at the same time functioning as the source of power for the intellect and the will. From this shift the bond between the truths of reason and the declarations of revelation that had been broken in the late-medieval voluntarist tradition is reestablished, because in Blondel’s conceptual horizon the will plays “less the role of a faculty among others than that of a *vestigium*. Such a vestige must first recognize itself as such – as a trace – follow its own path, and then traverse itself to find that of which it is the imprint.”⁶⁵ It is an imprint of the *vinculum substantiale* (substantial bond), the *actus purus* (pure act) from which all reality has its origin and the end toward which all creation moves. The objective of the dialectic at work in LA is to discover what is necessary in action, the “determinism of action.”

⁶² Cf. Blondel, HD, p. 268.

⁶³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 274.

⁶⁴ Blondel, *L’Action* (1893): *Essay on a Critique of Life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Oliva Blanchette (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984). There are two versions of *L’Action* published by Blondel. The first version was published in 1893 after his doctoral defense at the Sorbonne. The 1893 version is the text of his original dissertation with the additional chapter, “The Bond of Knowledge and Action in Being.” The second version was published as two volumes in 1936 and 1937 as part of Blondel’s trilogy on thought, being and action. All references in this essay are to the English translation of *L’Action* (1893). Hereafter abbreviated LA.

⁶⁵ Jean-Luc Marion, ‘La conversion de la volonté selon *l’Action*’, in Dominique Folscheid (ed), *Maurice Blondel: une dramatique de la modernité* (Paris: Editions Universitaires, 1990), p. 160.

The determinism of action will disclose the supernatural within all willing. Action, Blondel will say toward the end of his work, “is a synthesis of man and God.”⁶⁶

The relationship between action and tradition is anticipated toward the end of the dialectic in LA, when, in the final stage of the drama of the “life of action,” Blondel suggests that “dogmas are not only facts and ideas in acts, but also they are principles of action.”⁶⁷ That is, dogma contains speculative truths but the full value and meaning of dogma is disclosed through its concrete embodiment in practice. In this respect, “a tradition and a discipline represent a constant interpretation of thought through acts, offering each individual, in the sanctified experience, something like an anticipated control, an authorized commentary, an impersonal verification of the truth.”⁶⁸

In HD, published over a decade after LA, the interplay between action and tradition unfolds within a more explicitly ecclesial horizon that envisions the disclosure of the speculative truths of Christian doctrine as a process sustained by ecclesial and liturgical action.

‘To keep’ the word of God means in the first place to do it, to put it into practice; and the deposit of Tradition, which the infidelities of the memory and the narrow limits of the intelligence would inevitably deform if it were handed to us in a purely intellectual form, cannot be transmitted in its entirety, indeed, cannot be used and developed, unless it is confided to the practical obedience of love. Faithful action is the Ark of the Covenant where the confidences of God are found, the Tabernacle where he perpetuates his presence and his teaching. If the essential truth of Catholicism is the incarnation of dogmatic ideas in historical facts, one must add reciprocally that the miracle of the Christian life is that from acts at first perhaps difficult, obscure and enforced, one rises to the light through a practical verification of speculative truths. *Lex voluntatis, lux veritatis.*⁶⁹

What Blondel suggests here is that to discern the content and meaning of God’s truth in revelation requires the symbiotic interaction of the intellect and the will. The ecclesial and liturgical practices of prayer, almsgiving and fasting, that is to say, the gospel call to the life of concrete action, illuminates the splendor of truth revealed both in Scripture and doctrine.⁷⁰ Through ecclesial and liturgical action tradition offers a constant interpretation of Scripture and doctrine by penetrating its content and implications, and in so doing, displaying the fullness of the speculative truths contained in each.

⁶⁶ Blondel, LA, p. 343.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 380.

⁶⁹ Blondel, HD, p. 274.

⁷⁰ Cf. *ibid.*

From this perspective Blondel's account of tradition is not an epiphenomenon that appears in the absence of the canonical scriptures. Rather tradition relies on texts and, at the same time, it relies on something else he calls "an experience always in act which enables it to remain in some respects master of the texts instead of being strictly subservient to them."⁷¹ This account of tradition allows it to be more than a force preserving the intellectual aspect of the past in texts, but also a living reality of Christ's presence. Tradition, as Blondel puts it, "frees us from the very Scriptures on which it never ceases to rely with devout respect,"⁷² to reach the real Christ who escapes scientific examination without rejecting the practices of critical exegesis and modern historiography.

Since the idea of tradition in the Blondelian framework does not literally depend upon texts, though it perpetually renews and provides an interpretive horizon for them, tradition has a relative latitude in appropriating other means for expressing the central truths of Christianity, without these other means, whether in their social, cultural or philosophical forms, usurping the theological expression of the principle truths of faith.⁷³ Of course, it is possible for the normative truth claims of tradition to be obscured by ideology. But when a living tradition is embodied well in practice the central and enduring truths of that tradition are intelligible to the community which represents the living tradition – and, when embodied poorly, imperspicuous to the community. Therefore, there obtains a symbiosis between truth and freedom in tradition, where tradition simultaneously preserves and develops through the ongoing interplay between history and "faithful action." In this way "[o]ne realizes through the practice of Christianity that its dogmas are rooted in reality. One has no right to set the facts on one side and the theological data on the other without going back to the sources of life and of action, finding the indivisible synthesis."⁷⁴ The synthesis is a "Christian knowledge" that attends to history, as well as the "collective experience of Christ verified and realized in us."⁷⁵ In other words, tradition is a form of Christian knowledge and being which situates itself between "those who offer us a Christianity so divine that there is nothing human, living or moving about it, and those who involve it so deeply in historical contingencies and make it so dependent upon natural factors that it retains nothing but a diffused sort of divinity."⁷⁶

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 268.

⁷³ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 280.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 286.

With this last comment we arrive at the Blondel's most significant and lasting contribution to a theology of tradition for contemporary theology. Blondel teaches us that tradition, far from being an ersatz form of historiography, a social phenomenon that could be interpreted adequately by the social sciences, or a collection of texts and practices that are invoked to supplement Scripture, is the synthetic bond that discerns and draws the incarnational and spiritual dimensions of history into the concrete life of the church. Tradition illuminates God's action in human history and calls the church to discover God's presence not merely as facts and linear phenomena or as a social and cultural reality, but as the event of salvation encountered in the liturgical and ecclesial action of the church.

Robert C. Koerpel
Saint Catherine University
Department of Theology
2004 Randolph Ave
Whitby Hall
Rm., 209
Saint Paul
Minnesota
United States
55417

Email: rckoerpel@stkate.edu