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Robert C. Koerpel, *Maurice Blondel: Transforming Catholic Tradition*. South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2019. 265 pp. Index and bibliography. \$55.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9780268104771; \$43.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9780268104795.

Review by Brenna Moore, Fordham University.

In January 1942, the French Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain published an essay, “Religion and Politics in France,” in *Foreign Affairs*, the stalwart journal aimed at elite, international, policy-minded Americans.[1] Maritain had been living in the United States as an exile from France for three years, and he loved the optimism about democracy in his new home country. However, he sometimes confided to friends—in almost a cliché of a French expat—how shocked he was that Americans knew so little about religion, about Europe, and about the nature of evil. In the article, Maritain aimed to explain to American readers how Catholicism maps onto the political landscape of war-torn France, three years after succumbing to Nazism. Although the 1930s were the decade of “manifestos after manifestos” there were basically two Catholic camps, as he saw it. One sanctioned the old order, was authoritarian in its ecclesiology and its politics, and was cozy with fascism. But the other was harder to understand. This was a newer kind of Catholicism in 1942, one more compatible with democracy, and this meant that democracy was not just an ideal owned by American Protestants. But the paradox of it, Maritain insisted, was that these democratic-oriented Catholics were not “politically-minded” about their faith, they were the more “gospel-minded,” as he put it, more interested in the poetics of mysticism than dogmatic pronouncements, focused on the inner life.[2] The architects of this kind of Catholicism, according to Maritain, were eclectic: he mentioned artists, writers, and, significantly, the philosopher Maurice Blondel.

Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) is a thinker much like Henri Bergson, whose name appears all over the literature of twentieth-century French intellectual history as a key protagonist who helped crack open the old ossified mentality for Catholics, and helped point them toward more expansive philosophical, spiritual, and political horizons. But unlike Henri Bergson, not as much has been written in English about Maurice Blondel. Maritain’s American readers in 1942 would certainly never have ever heard of him. Even now, so many decades later, there is still little of substance known about this influential philosopher.[3] Robert Koerpel’s new book, *Maurice Blondel: Transforming Catholic Tradition*, fills in this considerable gap. It is a fine work of intellectual history, introducing the richness and complexity of Blondel’s thought and situating it in the wider context of European philosophy and ecclesial politics. The book advances the project Maritain started so many years ago when he introduced names like Blondel to English speakers, but it also contributes to a much more recent conversation that has been taking place in the field

of intellectual history in the last few years. There is a resurgence of interest in the lives and ideas of continental Catholic thinkers who—for better or worse, depending on your perspective—seem to have left an indelible mark on European thought in ways that have yet to be fully probed. In this way, *Maurice Blondel* can be placed alongside James Chappel's *Catholic Modern*, Edward Baring's *Converts to the Real*, and Sarah Shortall's exciting forthcoming book, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World*.^[4]

Koerpel's book is more narrowly theological and philosophical than those works, but it is a most welcome addition. The project offers a detailed account of the development of Blondel's ideas, with particular attention to Blondel's notion of tradition. Tradition was a key arena of contestation for Catholic thinkers working in and around the *ressourcement* project, or the "turn to the sources"; those who wanted to reclaim a wider, more living and dynamic sense of the past beyond the canonical sources of Thomas Aquinas and the fideism of church teaching.

Maurice Blondel was born in Dijon in 1861 and chose a life in philosophy as a young man. He wrote a famous doctoral thesis in 1893 that remained his most influential and controversial work, *L'Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique*. In *Action*, Blondel parted ways with what Koerpel calls the predominant "reductionist and empiricist tendencies" (p. 10) that came from Kant in the world of secular philosophy, the dryness of the neo-scholastic ecclesial atmosphere, and the historicist reductionism of Catholic modernists like Alfred Loisy. Through his treatment of action, Blondel recovered the personal, the experiential, and the historical dimension of human experience—living, dynamic realities that are in excess of reason. Blondel's philosophy of action cleared new ground and used words like yearning, wonder, anxiousness, and love. "Action," Blondel once wrote, "is the abundance of the heart."^[5] It was meant to be purely philosophical, but it sounded far too Christian for the philosophers and not orthodox enough for the ecclesial circles. Despite the contested reception of *Action*, Blondel ended up securing an academic appointment in Aix-en-Provence in philosophy and published two further serious scholarly works that treated religion more directly, *Letter on Apologetics* (1896) and *History and Dogma* (1904).

It is a small part of Koerpel's book, but one of its compelling contributions to our understanding of this movement is by showing how indebted Catholic philosophers and theologians were, beginning with Blondel, to the currents of romanticism. Blondel, according to Koerpel, "absorbed the wistful mood" at the turn of the century (p. 18). The works of René Chateaubriand were what Blondel called a "musical prelude to the Catholic renewal taking place in France" (p. 19). This is worth emphasizing. Though Blondel's romanticism is not an explicit through-line of the book, one senses the romantic undercurrent throughout Koerpel's treatment of Blondel on tradition. Koerpel quotes from *History and Dogma*, that tradition is "a treasure" of the past toward which we "turn lovingly" (p. 153), expressed primarily in "nontextual" ways (p. 141), through living relationships, gestures, rituals, and actions that take place below the radar of rational deliberation. In Blondel's tradition, there is something admirable that points to depth and "fecundity," and is grounded in feeling, liturgy, and experience (p. 129). One could see how it would have felt like a fresh cool breeze in the stagnancy of the old church atmosphere. Blondel's romanticism left an indelible mark on *ressourcement* theologians like the Jesuit Henri de Lubac, who also broke open a dry and narrow notion of tradition as he mined for and translated ancient Christian prayers, poems, sermons, looking for vitality and beauty. "It took forty years in the desert to enter into the Promised Land," de Lubac wrote of his method of recovering tradition, "It sometimes takes a lot of arid archeology to make the fountains of living water well forth

anew.”[6] This sense of buried vitality in tradition took hold of their imaginations. It was indeed an “imaginative conceptual innovation,” a guiding concept of the book that Koerpel borrows from Alasdair MacIntyre (p. 35).[7] It was an innovation that viewed tradition with wistfulness, a sense of its potential, its beauty, its energy. Koerpel notes that Blondel once claimed that “the reason for his life is the ‘ardent desire to show that Catholic thought is not sterile’” (p. 107).

I wonder if this might be one reason that subsequent *ressourcement* theologians who were influenced by Blondel—Jean Daniélou, Henri de Lubac, and Karl Rahner, who had so much power in the church at Vatican II—today seem unable to offer resources for thinking about the much darker, deadly, sinful aspects of tradition that continue to be revealed. Today, thinkers like Daniélou, Lubac and Rahner do not always seem to provide sufficient intellectual resources as the contemporary church reckons with the almost unfathomably massive and serious sins in its own past. It is tough these days to feel lovingly about the Catholic past, to see treasure and vitality in the way Blondel and de Lubac did.

One of the minor theological disputes Koerpel excavates in chapter seven was one between the prominent Dominican theologian Yves Congar and Blondel. Congar was a historical theologian and accused Blondel of lacking a robust historical sensibility, of being insufficiently attentive to historical change. Koerpel doesn’t explore this, but Congar was one, in fact, of the few *ressourcement* theologians to think seriously about the problem of evil and sin *within* the Christian past. In *True and False Reform*, Congar spoke admiringly of otherwise pious paintings of Fra Angelico, for instance, “where you can find monks, bishops and even popes being ushered into hell by grimacing devils.”[8] For all the beauty of Blondel, when reading him in 2021, Congar’s seems to have a more provocative metaphor for thinking about parts of the Catholic past than the more thoroughly romantic ones like Blondel and de Lubac.

Koerpel makes a good case that Blondel was the lynchpin that enabled important Catholic thinkers to find their way out of the historicism of the modernists, the fideism of the neo-scholastics, and the rationalism of the Kantians to find fullness, spirituality, and depth. I am grateful to Koerpel’s good work in advancing this conversation. Romanticism was an important animating source of their imaginations. But now we need to start thinking of who was making sense of the darkness that has always been part of the Christian past, and with which we are only now beginning to reckon. That was another thing Jacques Maritain often wondered about: why so many of his new American friends underestimated the reality of evil. When it comes to thinking about this internal to the Catholic tradition, there is still more work to be done.

NOTES

[1] Jacques Maritain, “Religion and Politics in France,” *Foreign Affairs* 20/2 (January 1942): 266-267.

[2] Maritain, “Religion and Politics in France,” *Foreign Affairs* 20/2 (January 1942): 266-271.

[3] For two excellent exceptions in English, see William L. Portier, “Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology and the Triumph of Maurice Blondel,” *Communio* 28 (Spring 2011): 104-137 and Peter J Bernardi, S.J., *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Francaise: The Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernist Era* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

[4] See James Chappel, *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Edward Baring, *Converts to the Real: Catholicism and the Making of Continental Philosophy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2019); and Sarah Shortall, *Soldiers of God in a Secular World: Catholic Theology and Twentieth-Century French Politics* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, forthcoming).

[5] Quoted in William L. Portier, "Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology and the Triumph of Maurice Blondel," *Communio* 28 (Spring 2011): 105.

[6] Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), p. 58.

[7] Alisdair MacIntyre is a moral and political philosopher, whose 1981 book, *After Virtue*, became a classic in the field of philosophy, particularly in Catholic circles. See Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

[8] Yves Congar, *True and False Reform in the Church* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), p. 29.

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