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Peter J. Bernardi. *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, and Action Française: The Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernist Era*. Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009. xii + 297 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$79.95 U.S. (cl.) ISBN 978-0-8132-1542-6.

Review by Thomas Kselman, University of Notre Dame.

Standard histories of the early Third Republic pay a great deal of attention to the battles between Catholics and anticlericals that culminated in the law of 1905 separating Church and State. Somewhat less familiar, perhaps, are the internal conflicts that went on behind the lines of this dispute, as republicans and Catholics struggled internally over both principles and tactics. Peter Bernardi's new book focuses on one particularly bitter conflict centered in the period 1909-1910, when Maurice Blondel, a lay philosopher, and Pedro Descoqs, a Jesuit priest, attacked each other in a series of articles that appeared in two of the major Catholic journals of the day. The stakes could not have been higher for these two men, for as they saw it their debate involved both fundamental philosophical issues and immediate questions of political actions and alliances. The great value of Peter Bernardi's work is to show the intimate connections between these different modes of intellectual engagement. Through a close reading of a series of challenging texts, Bernardi captures the passion of these men as they attacked each other in the harshest terms and illuminates the ways in which their conflicting views on human nature and its relationship to God were linked to sharply opposed political agendas.

The immediate context for the polemical exchange between Blondel and Descoqs was the meeting of the *Semaines Sociales* in Bordeaux in 1909. Bernardi provides a useful introduction to this institution, which starting in 1904, organized annual meetings of Catholic intellectuals and activists that drew as many as 2000 participants to discuss the intersection of Catholic teaching and social policy. Under the leadership of Henri Lorin, the *Semaines Sociales* defended policies that would promote social equality, and in particular the welfare of the working class. The rhetoric of the *Semaines Sociales* provoked a critical response from representatives of the Catholic right, who saw in its program a threat to the principles of hierarchy and authority judged essential for church and society. The *Action Française* movement of Charles Maurras, with its commitment to a Catholic monarchy, provided an institutional and intellectual base for many of those who perceived the *Semaines Sociales* as a threat.

Maurice Blondel joined this battle in order to provide philosophical justification for the positions Lorin and his colleagues advanced. Trained at the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*, Blondel was already a controversial figure in French intellectual and religious life. His doctoral dissertation, *Action*, which appeared in 1893, aimed at demonstrating the inadequacy of self-sufficient reason in accounting for reality and the need for a transcendent dimension in order to understand the human condition. In making this case Blondel drew on the methods of contemporary philosophy, and in particular applied "the method of immanence," which called on Catholic thinkers to begin their analyses with an exploration of human subjectivity. This position was immediately attacked by philosophers tied to Scholasticism, who accused Blondel of neo-Kantianism and solipsism. For writers such as the Dominican Fr. Schwalm, the only valid philosophy was modeled on the work of St. Thomas Aquinas,

which could establish the truth of Catholicism by starting with the objective realities of revelation and nature. Blondel's response was to distinguish his method from a "doctrine of immanence," which held that religious beliefs emerged exclusively from human consciousness. While he began with the human subject, Blondel insisted that his philosophy left ample room for connecting with the supernatural, and he accepted as well the historical basis of Christianity as documented in the scriptures, and the teaching mission of the Church (pp. 51-60).

Blondel's philosophical position left him open to the broader attack underway in this period directed against Modernism, identified as a heresy by Pope Pius X in his Encyclical *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907). Although he disputed the label of modernist, and insisted on his orthodoxy, for two years Blondel felt compelled to withdraw from public discussion. But the assault on the *Semaines Sociales* brought him back into the arena, writing under the pseudonym of "Testis" in the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne*. The heart of Bernardi's book is a close reading of the Testis essays, and the response they provoked from Descoqs, who published his critique in the Jesuit journal, *Etudes*. In the early essays, Blondel defended the social Catholics from the charge that they were social modernists because they perceived Catholic principles in reforms that would advance the causes of democracy and equality. For Blondel, social Catholics were putting into practice his view of the relationship between nature and supernature, a vision in which the two reached out to each other and in which elements of the divine were, in some sense, implicit in nature.

Just as Blondel was publishing his first Testis essays in 1909, Pedro Descoqs proposed a very different philosophical and political program in *Etudes*. Descoqs' first essays defended a project that could not have been more antipathetic to the one Blondel proposed. In these articles, and for much of his subsequent career, Descoqs was a principal apologist for the alliance of Catholics with Action Française. As with his treatment of Blondel, Bernardi is a lucid guide to a thinker whose vocabulary and argumentative method might otherwise be opaque. In presenting Descoqs, Bernardi draws on the recent and definitive work of Jacques Prévotat on the complex relationship between Action Française and the Catholic Church, which officially condemned the movement in 1926.^[1] But his analysis deepens our understanding of the philosophical issues at play in the Catholic debates over Maurras and his political program. Descoqs understood that Charles Maurras, the founder and guide of the movement, was a positivist who defended a public role for Catholicism only because it would reinforce social discipline and a respect for constituted authority. His advocacy of Action Française was made more difficult because some of Maurras' statements were explicitly critical of Christ and his message. But Descoqs insisted that the common goal, a corporatist society in which authority was respected and in which the Catholic Church would play an instrumental role, was sufficient grounds for cooperation. Descoqs' position also included an elaborate philosophical defense of the Catholic alliance with Maurrasiens. In Descoqs' view, Catholics who accepted Thomism shared with Maurras a commitment to philosophical realism that regarded human reason, acting on its own, as able to determine with certainty the appropriate institutions for creating social harmony and prosperity. From this perspective, Maurras' rejection of the supernatural as the ultimate goal of human existence was unfortunate, but not fully relevant.

Blondel responded to the Descoqs essays with a fierce attack on the philosophical system of his Jesuit counterpart, for which he coined the term "extrinsic monophorism." As throughout his account, Bernardi is able to translate arguments that are technical and obscure into terms that are understandable, though even philosophically inclined readers may find themselves moving slowly as he lays out the epistemological and ontological differences between his protagonists. For Blondel, monophorism described a worldview based on fixed and impermeable categories across a range of philosophical topics. But Blondel and Descoqs disagreed most importantly, according to Bernardi, on the crucial issue of the relationship between nature and supernature. Blondel loathed the sharp distinction between these two that was at the heart of monophorism. "[In monophorism] Nature is not assumed by the supernatural and does not ascend into it. It is the supernatural, according to its desire,

that releases, from above down, a sign that serves as material for reasoning, a command that is imposed on the lower level, purely receptive and in fact totally passive. From below up, there is only activity on command uniquely destined to rationally enthrone the higher level by conferring on it a dictatorship rationally exercised and rationally without control" (p.124). The term "dictatorship" suggests the close connection that Blondel saw between philosophy and politics; authoritarianism and theocracy were the political correlates of monophorism. Furthermore, cooperation with *Action Française*, so forcefully defended by Descoqs, posed a deadly spiritual threat to Catholics, who would inevitably be tainted by the postivist perspective and power-oriented goals that drove the movement. Those who followed Descoqs' lead would turn Catholicism into a "war machine, an instrument of earthly reign" (p.132).

Descoqs responded in kind to Blondel and, in the short run, he seemed to win this war of words, for in 1913 the *Annales de philosophie chrétienne* was put on the Index of Prohibited Books, ending the life of a journal that had been established in 1830. In a later chapter Bernardi covers the echoes of this dispute into the post-war era, when *Action Française* was at first condemned in 1926 and then rehabilitated in 1939. Although Descoqs disputed the Vatican's understanding of Maurras, he went along with the condemnation, but continued to defend his version of Scholasticism throughout this period. Blondel was no less active, and had the satisfaction of addressing (through his son Charles) the opening meeting of the *Semaines Sociales* that met in Paris in 1947. In his last chapter, Bernardi offers a final assessment of the theological positions of Blondel and Descoqs, and shows how some recent debates flow from the same issues that divided these two men. Bernardi is even-handed in his judgments and suggests that Blondel never provided a fully satisfactory answer to the criticism that he disparaged the ability of natural reason to grasp reality. But he acknowledges as well the deficiencies of Descoqs, whose choice of order over liberty allowed him to justify political authoritarianism. In general, Bernardi warns against the tendency to read the divine into any political ideology, citing the examples of liberation theology's embrace of Marxism, and Michael Novak's association of Christianity with liberal capitalism. It is worth noting as well that Catholics in contemporary France continue to debate the issues that divided Blondel from Descoqs. Florian Michel, for example, has argued recently against the schismatic movement founded by the late Bishop Lefebvre by tracing its roots to *Action Française*.^[2]

Bernardi takes us deep into the philosophical currents underlying the internecine political and social battles of French Catholicism in the early twentieth century. He is clearly in command of his topic and he has worked extensively in the Jesuit archives at Vanves and with unpublished material from the Blondel archives in Belgium. As valuable as he is as a guide to Blondel and Descoqs, his book leaves open the question of connections between them and the broader intellectual and cultural context. Henri Bergson, for example, whose philosophical critique of positivism captured public attention in the same period and shared many of Blondel's concerns, receives only brief treatment. More generally, intellectuals on the left, as well as the right, were preoccupied with making fruitful connections between their intellectual systems and the social problems of industrial capitalism. Jean Jaurès, for example, was like Blondel a product of the *Ecole Normale Supérieure*. Jaurès also shared his concern for adjusting the intellectual system within which he operated (in Jaurès' case, Marxism) so that it would address more effectively the political and social problems that troubled France on the eve of World War I.^[3] This reservation aside, Bernardi's work provides a detailed and thoughtful introduction to an important debate in French Catholic life at the start of the twentieth century.

NOTES

[1] Jacques Prévotat, *Les catholiques et l'Action Française: Histoire d'une condamnation, 1899-1939* (Paris: Fayard, 2001).

[2] Florian Michel, "L'Action française et l'intégrisme catholique: les paradoxes d'un antiromanisme ultraromain," in Marc Leboutet, Florian Michel, Bernard Sesboué, eds., *De Mgr Lefebvre à Mgr Williamson: Anatomie d'un schisme* (Paris: Lethielleux/Desclée de Brouer, 2009).

[3] Jaurès is one of the figures treated in James Kloppenberg, *Uncertain victory: social democracy and progressivism in European and American thought, 1870-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

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