

PREFACE

Dear Father McNeill:

Ever since our first conversations at the Blondel Archives in Aix-en-Provence I have followed the development of your study of Maurice Blondel's philosophical thought with the greatest of interest. I remember agreeing enthusiastically with the project you outlined to me at that time; and I was delighted to be able to assist you in any way I could in your study of the unedited manuscripts. I had the impression that from the beginning you were in complete harmony with Blondel's thought. I recall telling you that you seemed quite naturally to have parachuted down, as it were, into the very center of that difficult philosophy, but a philosophy whose inexhaustible richness and fecundity you had already intuited in your previous studies.

Today, after reading the completed work entitled *The Blondelian Synthesis*, I am pleased to be able to communicate to you the pleasure and the profit which I have derived from it. I am most grateful to you both for having written this study and also for the privilege you extended to me of reading it in manuscript. This is the first time that a work of this nature has been undertaken concerning Blondel's philosophy. I must compliment you both for your impressive erudition and for the manner in which you succeeded in dominating so complex and so rich a subject matter. It will be a wonderful help to all Blondel scholars and I am sure that its publication will stimulate further studies in the same spirit and with the same method. I dare even to hope that your work will be published subsequently in a French translation as well as in other languages.

There is a special reason why I am so pleased with your effort to bring out the influence of the history of philosophical thought on Blondel. He himself constantly repeated to me what importance he attached to a serious knowledge of the history of philosophical thought in order to successfully affront any philosophical problem whatsoever. The years which he had spent at the Ecole Normal Supérieure had made a deep impression on him in this regard. The formation in the history of philosophical thought was held in great honor there at that time and was a primary center of enthusiastic interest for both professors and students alike. Blondel always claimed to have been deeply formed in that discipline by assisting at the lectures of his professors

and by means of the interminable discussions of his fellow students. All his life he continued to cultivate that study with the greatest of pleasure. I should never finish adding details concerning this subject if I were to call back to mind Blondel, the professor at the University of Aix-Marseille at the time when I prepared my university studies under his direction, or Blondel, the philosopher-writer, when for eighteen years I was his hands and his eyes. (A visual infirmity deprived him of the power of reading and of writing, yet he remained eager for intellectual contact.)

You have pointed out quite justly that he was above all else an original genius, a creator, quite capable of absorbing and transforming all his sources and the influences he had received in order to construct a vast "synthesis". Blondel loved to contemplate the great systems of the past; he was intolerant of those who attempted to impose a blanket condemnation of these systems. He was convinced that every doctrine contributed some important lesson to the over-all current of philosophical thought and he excelled at discovering what it was from each doctrine of the past which could be assimilated with profit by the present-day thinker. Consequently he recommended constantly that one read both the ancient and modern authors and that one go directly to the original texts and the living sources of each thinker. However it was not Blondel's objective in demanding this return to sources that they be used purely as a means of erudition. Rather he hoped that each one would be capable of stimulating and nourishing his own personal thought by means of this contact.

This, it seems to me, is exactly what you have done yourself in relation to Blondel. In his own interpretation of the philosophers of the past Blondel was always particularly interested in uncovering the religious inspiration, open or secret, which animated their intentions. Yet he was no less scrupulous in his respect for the text and in his effort to explain each philosopher in his own terms, that is to say, by the letter of his writings as well as the spirit. His correspondence with Victor Delbos gives ample evidence of this and his own historical writings are its proof.

This is why I find that your study fulfills exactly the lesson which Blondel himself gave. You have noted, at times even in detail, Blondel's reactions to the works of his predecessors. Your work concentrates primarily on the German philosophers. (It would have been impossible to include all the philosophers who inspired Blondel, who sought inspiration from such various sources as Saint Thomas, Pascal,

Descartes, Maine de Biran etc.) You have succeeded in situating each one in his proper context and, what is more, in function of what Blondel himself thought of each one, keeping in mind the state of historical knowledge at his time. As a result you permit the reader to participate in a sort of dialogue between Blondel and Spinoza, Blondel and Kant, Blondel and Fichte, Schelling and Hegel etc. I am convinced that this will prove extremely profitable to all those who are interested in the history of ideas. At the same time you forcibly underline how Blondel, who as a sincere believer was obliged to pose the religious problem in philosophical terms, was equally obliged to find other ways and other methods from those of his most illustrious predecessors in order to resolve that problem. In other words you explain to what point he was aware of the past and yet inevitably led to a true independence of the past. This also should serve as an example for all our present-day philosophers as well as those yet to come. There is a philosophical technique which is apprehended only at the price of inserting oneself in a tradition; but there is also a personal option which obliges us finally to confide ourselves to a Master other than human teachers.

I am especially joyous to see that at present Maurice Blondel has awakened prolonged echos in the new world as in the old. You have well appreciated all that he is capable of conveying of openness and enrichment of spirit for your America whose youth, dynamism and generosity Blondel (as he frequently told me) always admired and loved. The true philosophers will recognize him as one of their own. Religious spirits will be attentive to his witness. To the one and to the other you have brought a new sustenance and a new stimulation. For this I am infinitely grateful to you.

Aix-en-Provence, February, 1965

N. PANIS