

Didier Rance

Nancy, France

GILSON—NEWMAN—BLONDEL?

Gilson—Blondel

The dispute between Étienne Gilson and Maurice Blondel is quite notorious, even if all the reasons behind it are usually not known, in that it casts a shadow on the French philosophy of Christian inspiration in the last century; for its two protagonists were among the most illustrious representatives of it. Many have since tried to resolve this dispute, and some continue to do so, in various ways.

It just so happens that, according to Henri de Lubac, “Blondel greatly admired Newman and, in that, Gilson joined him;”¹ moreover, St. John Paul II, in *Fides et Ratio*, not only proposed the names of Newman and Gilson among the five thinkers of Western thought that he considered to be significant examples of “fruitful relationship between philosophy and the word of God” in their “courageous research” (§74), but he also, considered their “philosophical works of great influence and lasting value.” The former Pope stated, “a philosophy which, starting with an analysis of immanence, opened the way to the transcendent” (§59; see also §26 and 79),² just after devoting two paragraphs to praise the modern Thomistic revival and its fruits (§57–58). Could blessed John Henry Newman be a possible *tertium datum* between Gilson and Blondel?

This article is a revised and expanded version, translated by the author, of a paper originally published in French: Didier Rance, “Newman comme *tertium datum* entre Blondel et Gilson?,” in *Newman et Blondel: conscience et intelligence*, ed. Keith Beaumont, Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, Pierre de Cointet (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2012), 151–171.

¹ *Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 2 ed. (Paris: Cerf, 2013), 136.

² An implicit reference to Blondel according to Peter Henrici; cf. Peter Henrici, “The One Who Went Unnamed: Maurice Blondel in the Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*,” *Communio* 26:3 (1999): 617–618.

1931—The Debate That Failed

Before addressing this issue, some aspects of the dispute between the two philosophers has to be clarified. Gilson and Blondel did not know each other well, even if, in 1913, Gilson almost became Assistant to Blondel in Aix University (but he preferred to take a position in Lille). In the twenties, Blondel, whose blindness was making progress, visited Paris less often, which was where Gilson settled in 1921, after his nomination at the Sorbonne. Across the decade, divergences between Thomists (even if it is somewhat anachronistic to qualify Gilson already as ‘Thomist’ at this date) and “Blondéliens” were evident. A good example of these disputes appeared at the 1925 debate of the Société Française de Philosophie (French Society of Philosophy—now quoted ‘SFP’ in this paper) on mysticism, following Jean Baruzi’s book on St. John of the Cross. This led to a skirmish between Blondel and Maritain—both at the 1928 SFP debate on the “Dispute on Atheism,” largely initiated from a letter by Blondel, and also at the 1930 SFP debate about “God and Philosophy.”

The philosophical feud between Gilson and Blondel reached a climax in 1931, during a new debate at the SFP, on the concept of Christian philosophy. The main event took place at a SFP meeting in Paris on March 21.³ Such meetings were public debates which obeyed strict protocol and rules (a technical precision of importance): first, a Provisional Set of Talking Points was prepared, usually by the philosopher who took the initiative

³ Among recent studies on the Gilson–Blondel dispute of 1931: Henry Donneaud, “Étienne Gilson et Maurice Blondel dans le débat sur la philosophie chrétienne,” *Revue Thomiste* XCIX:3 (Juillet–Septembre 1999): 497–516; Heinrich Schmidinger, “Développements historiques du concept de «Philosophie chrétienne»,” in *La philosophie chrétienne d’inspiration catholique*, ed. Philibert Secretan (Fribourg: Academic Press, 2006), 71–105; Jean Leclercq et Nicolas Monseu, “Le phénomène religieux, une école française?,” in *Maurice Blondel et la philosophie française*, ed. E. Gabellieri & P. de Cointet (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2007), 159–181. Gregory B. Sadler, gives in his *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (Washington: CUA Press, 2011), an valuable English translation of the main texts of the debate and of subsequent studies (excepted de Lubac’s 1936 contribution), but doesn’t enter into the personal conflict between Gilson and Blondel (strangely, Gilson is completely absent from Anna Victoria Fabrizio’s *Blondel e i neotomisti: Momenti di un debate epistemologico* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 2005). But no study, to my knowledge, takes into account the 1928–1931 Gilson’s letters to Blondel, published in 1991 by Fiachra Long (“The Blondel–Gilson Correspondence through Foucault’s Mirror,” *Philosophy Today* 35:4 (1991): 351–361), which throws a new light on the quarrel, not even Adam C. English, *The Possibility of Christian Philosophy: Maurice Blondel at the Intersection of Theology and Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2007), which quotes Long’s article, but doesn’t develop their meaning for the 1931 quarrel.

to propose the theme; then it was sent to all members of the Society, and those who wished could write and send responses to them; on this basis, a Summary Presentation was prepared by the writer of the Provisional Set; on the day of the meeting, this Presentation was read, then discussed, mainly by the champions of the opposing arguments; ultimately, all the contributions were published in the next SFP *Bulletin* while, quite often, more in-depth articles from contributors to the debate were also published in other journals.

Gilson was the initiator of this debate on the notion of Christian philosophy, which had started in fact in 1927 when Émile Bréhier wrote that Christianity had not made any contribution to rational thought and so has been philosophically sterile, concluding that the very concept of Christian philosophy was contradictory. He would write later: “One can no more speak of a Christian philosophy than of Christian mathematics or Christian physics”⁴ (an image borrowed from Feuerbach, and used also by Blondel in 1896 in his *Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée contemporaine en matière d’apologétique* [*Letter on the Exigencies of Contemporary Thought on Apologetics*], however in a much less radical sense than Feuerbach).⁵ For Gilson, it was all the work that he had been building which was challenged by Bréhier, namely the contribution of Christianity to philosophy, and precisely to philosophy as being a work of reason.

This is why Gilson suggested in 1930 that the SFP debate on the question: given the seriousness of the accusations made by Bréhier, the meeting had to be a kind of Honour Court when it took place on March 21, 1931 in Paris, although no other verdict was intended than the one made by the participants and the readers of the SFP *Bulletin*. Despite being overworked, due to the first series of Gifford Lectures he had to give in Aberdeen in the month preceding the meeting, Gilson worked hard on the preparation of the debate; not only did he do the job of a historian, but also he offered an elaborate philosophical typology for the questions involved in the debate. Blondel, in Aix, was also challenged by the thesis of Bréhier (and even more personally than Gilson by a subsequent article from the

⁴ Cf. Emile Bréhier, “Y a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne?,” *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* 38:2 (1931): 162; see also his *Histoire de la philosophie* [*History of Philosophy*], I/2, 1927 (published in the 1947 edition, 487–495).

⁵ Feuerbach compared the religious philosophy with Molière’s *Bourgeois Gentilhomme*, whose hero is neither a *bourgeois* nor a gentleman. For Blondel, “Christian philosophy doesn’t exist more than Christian physics,” but for him it was only a question of “[b]eware of the temptation to confuse domains and skills” (see note below).

same author), since the issue of the relationship between philosophy and Christianity was at the heart of his thought for over thirty years. Its basic position seemed clear,⁶ but he was also always keen on dissociating himself from the Thomists.

On Saturday, March 21, 1931, the SFP meeting on Christian philosophy took place, with civility on both sides. Gilson started with his Summary Presentation and exposed various hostile or favourable positions concerning the notion of Christian philosophy which he did not share. He put a touch of light humour against Blondel, who was not present at the meeting: “One invites thought to bathe in the real, and certainly nothing is refreshing like a bath, but we do not live in a bathtub . . . The problem with this kind of philosophy is not to get into the concrete but to refuse to move out.”⁷ Then Gilson presented his own position: the Revelation has been a generator of reason, and so the notion of Christian philosophy was a “complex historical reality,” composed of philosophies which have been influenced by Revelation in the constitution of their rationality—in particular, for the notions of creation and freedom. The debate that followed was, unsurprisingly, led by Bréhier and Léon Brunschvicg, who played the big names on one side, with Gilson and Jacques Maritain on the other. For lack of time, Blondel’s letter was not read.⁸

This meeting ended the main contestation about the philosophical relevance of the notion of Christian philosophy, at least for France,⁹ as Gil-

⁶ As evidenced by these two examples among many others: in 1893, he wrote about “the spring of my thought and the reason of my life, I mean that business of a Christian philosophy” and, in 1928, in his contribution to the SFP debate mentioned above: “I remain convinced that the God of the Philosophers can and must join the God of Tradition.” Cf. *Carnets intimes* [*Personal Notebooks*], vol. I (Paris: Cerf, 1961), 547; *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 28 (1928): 53.

⁷ *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 31 (1931): 47.

⁸ Fiachra Long argues that Gilson had ensured that Blondel letter was not read during March 21 meeting (id., 355), but the accusation seems groundless—the session was already very busy (his publication of Gilson’s letters is very valuable, and his considerations on the antagonist views of the two men about philosophy and history are interesting, but his interpretation of the dispute between Blondel and Gilson in terms of play of strategy “through Foucault (and in fact also Bourdieu)’s mirror” miss the target—neither of both men was a ‘player’.

⁹ But not in Germany where Heidegger, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935), resumed Feuerbach’s thesis, declaring that “Christian philosophy is a square circle (litt. ‘a wooden iron’) and a misunderstanding.” For him, as he declared in 1955 at a Symposium in Cerisy-la-Salle: “Philosophy is Greek in its essence;” Jaspers had adopted a similar position in his

son had not been defeated, which could be seen as a victory for the defenders of Christian philosophy.¹⁰ Bréhier will not return to the subject after 1931. According to Henri Gouhier, Gilson's 'victory' will be acknowledged in 1932 by the success of the publication of his *Esprit de la philosophie médiévale* [*The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*]¹¹—he had thought of giving it a title *Philosophie chrétienne* [*Christian Philosophy*]¹²—and by his election to the prestigious Collège de France (according to Brunschvicg, it had been in fact the election of St. Thomas Aquinas “disguised as Gilson”). Already in 1931, Régis Jolivet in his *Essai sur les rapports entre la pensée grecque et la pensée chrétienne* [*Essay on the relationship between Greek Thought and Christian Thought*], had supported Gilson's thesis on the contribution of Christian Revelation to the major philosophical themes of creation and freedom; Maritain will do the same in his *De la Philosophie chrétienne* [*On Christian Philosophy*] in 1933.

A Personal Dispute

But, meanwhile, there had been the Blondel–Gilson Case of a very different order. Blondel, having received Gilson's Provisional Set of Talking Points, sent him a long letter outlining his thoughts on the subject (this letter is now in the Gilson Archives in Toronto). But, on the March 21 meeting, Gilson discovered that, contrary to the rules of the SFP debates, the philosopher of Aix not only had received the Summary Presentation (which has been ‘imprudently’, according to Gilson, sent to him by Xavier Léon, co-founder and secretary of the SFP [probably on request from Blondel, who had a long history on this], but also had sent another letter for the meeting, “substituted” (Gilson's own word) for the first one sent to Gilson!¹¹

Philosophy (1932). Cf. Schmidinger, “Développements historiques du concept de «Philosophie chrétienne»,” 85–87.

¹⁰ Contributions for this meeting were published in *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 31:2 (1931), including Gilson's Summary Presentation, Bréhier, Brunschvicg, Lenoir, Leon, Leroy and Maritain's addresses, Chevalier and Blondel's letters.

¹¹ It has long been assumed that Blondel wrote the second letter *after* March 21, maybe as late as summer or early fall 1931 (see for example Donnaud, “Étienne Gilson et Maurice Blondel dans le débat sur la philosophie chrétienne,” 501–502). But Gilson's letter to Blondel dated March 21, found in Blondel Archives (B 15208) and published by Long, “The Blondel–Gilson Correspondence through Foucault's Mirror,” concerns clearly a second letter (the proof of it is that Gilson wrote this day about Blondel's “second draft”). In the eighties, de Lubac tried unconvincingly to put on Xavier Léon the whole blame both for the sending of the Summary Presentation and for the publication of Blondel's letter (*Lettres de monsieur*

The very evening of the meeting, Gilson wrote a rather quiet letter to Blondel, stating that he would give the letter to Xavier Léon (a good friend of both men) with a detailed reply to Blondel's objections as well as his own objections to Blondel's way of posing the problem. This letter, however, will never be sent. What happened? Maybe Gilson, surely quite exhausted after the tense meeting he had to fight the day he wrote to Blondel, read again the second letter and understood that it was a lot more polemical against him than at first sight? Moreover, and more seriously, unless Gilson did make the decision to start a public polemic against Blondel about his transgressing of SFP rules (which would implicate of course his good friend Léon), this second letter, which was due to be put in the SFP *Bulletin* after Gilson's Summary Presentation, would appear for the reader of the *Bulletin* *a priori* and so more convincing refutation of the positions defended by Gilson in the Summary, while in fact the letter was posterior to it.

Gilson felt he had been cheated a second time by Blondel. Indeed, it was not the first incident of this kind which he had to suffer from the Aix philosopher. Two years earlier, Blondel had obtained from the publisher to read before publication Gilson's contribution to a miscellany published as *A Monument to Saint Augustine*, for which he too had been requested to write a text. Gilson, who had not given his approval, did not appreciate this maneuver by Blondel. In addition, accustomed to scholarly and rigorous attention to texts, Gilson has been shocked by Blondel's inaccurate quotations and references, that had contributed also to discredit the philosopher of Aix in his sight. (To be fair, it must be added, we know that Blondel, given his geographic isolation combined with his blindness, tried to—by receiving other contributions to the book before publication or presentation—compensate his lack of intellectual exchanges enjoyed by other philosophers, especially Parisians like Gilson—who did not know it).

Gilson was now too furious to go on with this man! However, he did not answer nor start a polemic. He knew yet how to be a formidable intellectual sword-fighter, as he had just shown with Bréhier; but, judging by other episodes in his life, it seems that when he considered, rightly or

É. *Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 136). It seems that Gilson never told or wrote the full story to de Lubac. The Jesuit, notwithstanding what he has read in Shook's biography (*Étienne Gilson* (Toronto: PIMS, 1984); and maybe directly learned from the Basilian) still presented in 1986 Blondel's letter published in the SFP *Bulletin* as his first one (*Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 136).

wrongly, that a debate was not fair, he did not answer.¹² The *SFP Bulletin* was published later in the year with Blondel's second letter,¹³ and Gilson wrote then to Marie-Dominique Chenu that he considered it as a declaration of war and added: "It is why I do not answer."¹⁴ This gives us a good idea of what kind of man Gilson was.

Gilson Reproaches Against Blondel

Blondel's behaviour was unacceptable. For Gilson, to act against the rules of the SFP was clearly unfair. He was very strict on professional standards and no longer considered Blondel seriously as a scholar.¹⁵

Blondel was unfair and dangerous. Blondel's letter included a violent charge against Gilson, a tit for tat for the Summary Presentation, it

¹² See above, note 10. Other examples: his answer to Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange's threats just before the Rome September 1950 Congressus Thomisticus: "Mon père, if you do that, I will leave the congress and return to Paris the same day," or his attitude in the quarrel initiated by Waldemar Gurian against his supposed neutralism the same year (Shook, *Étienne Gilson*, respectively: 300 and 303).

¹³ It seems that Blondel changed once more what he had written for the March 21 meeting (according to a letter he wrote to Auguste Valensin on October 10). When Laurence Shook treats of this letter in his biography of Gilson (*Étienne Gilson*, 199–201), he quotes this printed version. During the time Blondel was revising his letter for *SFP Bulletin*, he wrote other attacks against Gilson for his *Le problème de la philosophie catholique* (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1932) (see his letter to Valensin, Octobre 10th, quoted in *Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 136).

¹⁴ Cf. F.A. Murphy, "Correspondance entre É. Gilson et M.-D. Chenu : un choix de lettres (1923-1269)," *Revue Thomiste* CV:1 (2005): 29–30. In fact Blondel was not so sure of himself, and Gilson would surely have been surprised if he had read his correspondence with Fr. Valensin during the same months. In his letter of March 4, for example, Blondel wrote: "Bodily miseries, intellectual stiffness . . . Sense of a work too heavy to carry and to carry out." Even more, on March 17, four days before the debate, he wrote as a counterpoint to the second letter he was sending to SFP and to his charge against Gilson: "On the precise and accurate conception of Christian philosophy, how I should need your lights! But one is always taken aback, and has double-quick and whatever happens to improvise an answer. Gilson, pointing to the 'Augustinians' wants either to ignore me or to caricature me . . . Gilson does not accept one Christian philosophy or *the* Christian philosophy; he considers systems more or less Christianized or juxtaposed in history as closed conceptions, each in its historical and precarious scheduling. O historicism! I moaned having to answer, deprived not only of my eyes, but of my head;" quoted in *Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 135–136.

¹⁵ Later on, Blondel's criticism of Christian philosophy for the benefit of his own Catholic philosophy could only appear as a shell game. On Blondel's Catholic philosophy, see, from a Thomistic point of view, Yves Floucat, *Pour une philosophie chrétienne* (Paris: Téqui, 1981), 124–135.

must be said. The main accusations were: conceptualism, historicism, concordism.¹⁶ For Gilson, they were like a stab in his back as well for his relationship with the Catholic Church and with academia.

Concerning academia, Gilson was primarily accused of thinking in a closed system of concepts and therefore of not truly being a philosopher, but only at best an historian who prided himself on philosophizing. (For Blondel, Gilson remained “faithful to the cult of human concepts up to the point of ignoring their deficiency, both congenital and acquired.”¹⁷)

Two other accusations could also be considered very annoying, as they concerned his candidacy to teach medieval philosophy at the Collège de France (Gilson was on his way, but nothing official had yet been settled) and his relationship with the Catholic Church. According to Blondel, Gilson was guilty of historicism, that is, of founding on historical data what can only be grounded on doctrinal bases. And, since he did not establish an intrinsic link between philosophy and Christianity,¹⁸ he was guilty of concordism which brought together in an extrinsic way philosophy and Christianity.

Gilson had good reasons to be furious for another reason: Blondel’s attack was not only unjust, but also doubly dangerous. For not only could conceptualism, historicism and concordism disqualify him from academia, but also the two latter were judged to be modernist crimes against the Catholic Church. (Blondel himself had been accused of these crimes, and so there is a sour irony that he directed those accusations against Gilson, who never participated in the hunting down of modernists). Moreover, the context was all the more unfortunate, as Édouard Le Roy had just been put by Rome on the Index this year, a fact that greatly worried Gilson, as he wrote to Maritain in July 1931.

Blondel was not really a philosopher. For Gilson, Blondel’s hostility to the concept prevented him from being a real philosopher. On this point, Bréhier and Maritain were in agreement: Blondel was an apologist rather than a philosopher, and if this term was not penned by Gilson at that time,

¹⁶ “La philosophie chrétienne existe-t-elle comme philosophie?,” *Bulletin* 31:2 (1931): 86–92. A good analysis of Blondel text may be found in Donneaud, “Étienne Gilson et Maurice Blondel dans le débat sur la philosophie chrétienne,” 507–509.

¹⁷ Blondel, *Le problème de la philosophie catholique*, 130.

¹⁸ A consequence of this supposed historicism was that Gilson, according to Blondel, was unable to recognize the only true philosophy, that is the philosophy which recognizes itself as normally incomplete, the only philosophy in spontaneous and profound agreement with Christianity (it is not difficult to recognize here a description of Blondel’s own philosophy).

he would write in the same direction later on (see below). Besides, we can find here another episode of the secular polemic between Augustinians and Thomists which is a more personal touch: the young Gilson had sympathies for his Sorbonne master Victor Delbos (who had also greatly influenced the young Blondel) and his school of thought, but that was *before* he met St. Thomas Aquinas. For Gilson, the idea of St Thomas's thought being surpassed by modern philosophy made little sense, since he had gone the other way round.

After 1931–1932

Gilson did not have any more contacts with Blondel until the death of the latter, eighteen years later. But he tried to be fair to the thinker. He praised Blondel's critique of Cartesian naturalism in his Lectures at Indiana University just before the war.¹⁹ Later, he wrote some appeased and rather positive pages on Blondel in the chapter on French and Italian philosophy in *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present*, co-authored with Thomas Langan and Armand Maurer (1962). Gilson wrote that "Blondel was haunted by the feeling that the unknown face of reality is the most precious part of it and, for the research of it, will, which is love, must have primacy over knowledge."²⁰ Gilson presented the foundation of Blondel's thought as an attempt to give account of creation as wholly ordained to its Creator as its end and drew consequences from this. Gilson concluded: "It may be that the intelligibility of created nature is a secret held by Christian Philosophy alone. But Maurice Blondel had no patience with that notion, and he said so in no uncertain terms, although his own philosophy was a fine illustration of it."²¹ Furthermore, without bitterness, Gilson wrote to Henri Gouhier that Blondel was "an admirable Christian and an excellent man," and in the same vein to Henri de Lubac: "I would like to be a Christian as Blondel."²² But his philosophical stance towards Blondel did not change in substance over the years: "Let him be welcome, with his Catholic philosophy which is not a Christian philosophy and yet finds by itself

¹⁹ Published as *God and Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1941).

²⁰ Étienne Gilson, Thomas Langan, Armand A. Maurer, *Recent Philosophy: Hegel to the Present* (New York: Random House, 1962), 361.

²¹ *Id.*, 360–362 and 794–796. Gilson gives texts of Blondel pointing in that direction (*id.*, 796).

²² *Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 118 (letter of 1965).

all the divine message as if the word of God never existed;" and he opposed Newman to Blondel.²³

Attempts at reconciliation 1931–2010. In the background of this debate, which fizzled after Blondel's second letter to which Gilson never responded, many attempts have been made from 1931 to the present years to reconcile the positions of the two thinkers and more broadly, Blondel with Thomists, usually in a dialectical pattern (all of which ignore the personal dimension of the feud). Most of them start from their respective champion's fundamental positions, then try to show to those on the other side that the criticism against them are inaccurate. On Gilson's side, Henri Gouhier, in May 1932, put the position of his friend as the natural introduction to that of Blondel which, without it, "may be, impossible."²⁴ Emmanuel Tourpe, speaking on Blondel's side, will write similarly in 2010 that "'Blondelism' requires, in its own development, a dialogue with Thomism."²⁵ A similar but reverse attitude is to be found in Bruno de Solages, writing about Blondel and Maritain, but who, on this very point, could have put the name of Gilson instead: "M. Blondel justifies M. Maritain because M. Maritain's position on Christian philosophy would not be sustainable if M. Blondel was not true."²⁶

The best known 'conciliation' was written by de Lubac in his 1936 article "Sur la philosophie chrétienne" ["On Christian philosophy"]. De Lubac was strongly on Blondel's side. For de Lubac, there were several stages in the comprehension of Christian philosophy; Maritain and Gilson had illustrated two of them, but Blondel had established the final one. Not only had he completed Gilson's view, but his own position was the only consistent one; for Gilson's position was politely considered as provisional and yet dangerous if it did not give way to Blondel's.²⁷

²³ Id., 119.

²⁴ *Les Nouvelles Littéraires*, May 7th, 1932, quoted in *Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 137.

²⁵ Cf. Emmanuel Tourpe, *L'être et l'Amour: Un itinéraire métaphysique* (Bruxelles: Lessius, 2010), 32.

²⁶ The most important conciliatory contributions are those of de Lubac (see below, note 25) and of Maurice Nédoncelle (1956), but may also include those of Antonin Sertillanges, Henri Bouillard, Claude Tresmontant, Jean Ecole.

²⁷ Published in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 63:3 (1936): 225–253. De Lubac will change his mind once more, nearly thirty years later, when receiving Gilson's *Introduction à la philosophie chrétienne*. He wrote an enthusiastic letter to Gilson, approving the book 'from the first to the last word' and adding: "If the sky of Christian philosophy has to become clearer, you will have a great share of it" (*Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et*

In Between of Gilson and Blondel

These attempts present the disadvantage of being more or less one-sided. There might be another way to reconcile Blondel and Gilson: to find mediators between them, some *tertium datum*, third names, from whom we may secure agreement between the two Catholic thinkers. Besides the Ancients (Augustine, Bernard, Thomas or Aristotle), two names of modern thinkers are here especially interesting: Erich Przywara²⁸ and, before him, blessed John Henry Newman. I will focus on the latter.

Blondel and Newman

Let us look first at the binary relations: we have just seen the Gilson–Blondel side of the triangle and the Newman–Blondel relation has been largely investigated,²⁹ so three observations related to our topic will be sufficient here.

1. Gilson had a negative idea on the relationship between Newman and Blondel. In his 1965 letter to de Lubac already mentioned, he opposed them in blunt terms: Blondel’s thought “is exactly the opposite of Newman’s thought, this last of the Fathers of the Church.”³⁰

2. In his comment on this letter, de Lubac issues a warning: “Blondel has experienced Newman only very partially, quite late, and rather poorly. His work was developed in different atmosphere, so that any comparison between their thoughts would be quite useless.”³¹ De Lubac’s last sentence is certainly overstated.

3. It is interesting to note that during the first half of 1931, just when he was fighting against Gilson, Blondel distanced himself from Newman. On June 10, he wrote to Fr. Valensin: “Newman, known very late, did not helped me in anything, except for the use of some expressions and the

commentées par celui-ci, 73). How did de Lubac combine that with his persistent support of Blondel? Jacques Prevotat tries to show it in *id.*, 26–29.

²⁸ On Przywara as *tertium datum* between Gilson and Blondel, see Tourpe, *L’être et l’Amour: Un itinéraire métaphysique*, 10–15. It may be noted here that Przywara has been deeply influenced by Newman.

²⁹ See, for example, Pierre Gauthier, *Newman et Blondel. Tradition et développement du dogme* [*Newman and Blondel. Tradition and Développement of the Dogma*] (Paris: Cerf, 1988); *Newman et Blondel: conscience et intelligence*, ed. Keith Beaumont, Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, Pierre de Cointet (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2012).

³⁰ *Lettres de monsieur É. Gilson adressées au P. de Lubac et commentées par celui-ci*, 119.

³¹ *Id.*, 136.

support for some references.”³² However, the older Blondel gave a vibrant tribute to Newman and to the “salutary moral influence of his work and his personal guidance” for the centenary of the latter’s conversion (1945).³³

Gilson and Newman

Surprisingly, while the opposite would have seemed more logical, given the families of thought, Gilson was more positive towards Newman than Blondel. (One may speculate that, since he was teaching in English-speaking North America,³⁴ Gilson knew better the true Newman, not the one ‘bremondised’ and ‘tyrellised’ and having a somewhat sulphuring smell, as Newman was known by most French thinkers including Blondel [even if he knew him also through Ollé–Laprune]). In addition, Gilson was less likely to be the victim of suspicions of modernism (notwithstanding Blondel’s insinuations noted above).

The relation between Gilson and Newman does not seem to have been thoroughly studied, but some points may be stressed concerning our research:

1. A month before the famous March 1931 SFP meeting, Gilson evoked Newman’s *Apologia* in a central passage of the first series of Gifford Lectures (see below).

2. Gilson published in 1955 a rather copious introduction to *A Grammar of Assent*, which showed a good understanding of the work, even if his interpretation is sometimes questionable. A good half of his introduction discusses the distinction between notional and real (see below).

³² According to Peter Reifenberg, it is necessary to put this declaration in its context, which is the setting aside by Blondel of what he called ‘first metaphysics,’ that of being for the benefit of his ‘squared metaphysics’ (*‘métaphysique à la seconde puissance’*), founded on the concept of action which he had developed in the eponymous book. This assertion looks rather strange, as Newman is definitely not a strong champion of the so-called ‘first metaphysics’ and quite foreign to Blondel’s differentiation set here (Cf. Peter Reifenberg, ‘Ollé-Laprune et Blondel, héritiers de Newman’, in E. Gabellieri et P. de Cointet, éd., *Maurice Blondel et la philosophie française (Maurice Blondel and french philosophy)*, Parole et Silence, Paris, 2007, p. 79-101. For Reifenberg, Blondel’s detachment from Newman is moreover to be understood in light of his marked detachment from Olle-Laprune, the great French Newmanian of his generation, who is usually considered as his first mentor.

³³ Cf. *Newman et Blondel: conscience et intelligence*, 281.

³⁴ If in France Blondel, but not Gilson, is spontaneously associated with Newman, it seems that it is not the case on the other side of the Atlantic in Newmanian studies. This may be due to the fact that Blondel is not very well known there.

3. In the same introduction, Gilson advanced an interesting parallel between Newman and St. Bernard, and he concluded: “Newman did not write as a disciple of the masters of scholasticism, whose works illustrated the thirteenth century; he wrote in the free style of a twelfth century master.”³⁵ This echoes in its own way what he wrote at his most open about Blondel. Moreover, for Gilson, Newman, in his *Apologia* wrote “without entering in any formal philosophical discussion”³⁶ and, in his *Grammar of Assent*, he was not doing the work of a philosopher but giving “a first sketch of what philosophers would call today a phenomenology of religious belief.”³⁷ Here, too, the parallel with what Gilson thought of Blondel and philosophy is strong.

4. In *Wisdom and Time*, Gilson drew a brief picture of the successive contributions of Christian intelligence to the revealed Given: Apologists and the age of Fathers of the Church, then great medieval masters—he wrote down the names of a few of them. Arriving at the modern masters, he mentioned only “writings of Cardinal Newman and of so many others,” before adding that by “piling these ‘mountains of theology’ one on the other . . . you will not find there anything more or anything other than what every Christian can understand of his catechism, nothing that is not implied in the Apostles’ Creed, any truth which is not first received from the word of God.”³⁸

5. A further link may be found with the notion of Christian philosophy. The notion was, as Gilson has shown, relatively common in the nineteenth century. But it is not to be found either in the works or the letters of Newman (even when he was accused of having invented ‘Christian philosophy’ in 1863³⁹). Except once—when in an enthusiastic letter to Pope Leo XIII in support of the Thomist Encyclical *Aeterni Patris*—he wrote: “Wise and seasonable act . . . [with his] rootedness in Christian philoso-

³⁵ Cf. John H. Newman, *Grammar of Assent, with an introduction by Etienne Gilson* (New York: Double day, 1955), 18.

³⁶ Id.

³⁷ Id.

³⁸ *A Gilson Reader*, ed. Anton C. Pegis (New York: Doubleday, 1957), 328–329. A question remains: even if Gilson did not try to paint a ‘Thomistic’ Newman, yet he did not hide Newman’s sympathy for Thomism (as he did the same with Bergson). So why he did not have the same attitude towards Blondel? Beyond the factual reasons given above, the question remains, as the quite positive lines of his 1962 book are rather short.

³⁹ Cf. John H. Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, vol. XIX, 67 (in a letter from Richard Holt Hutton to Newman).

phy.”⁴⁰ The title of the Encyclical was *On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy* (but Newman did not quote it), and this spontaneous letter may be considered as a strong support to the kind of Christian philosophy Gilson supported.⁴¹

Gilson, Blondel, Newman

From these preliminary investigations, it seems that Newman does not offer much direct material for easing the quarrel between Gilson and Blondel on Christian philosophy, which took place forty years after his death. But, indirectly, three tracks are worth exploring.

1. *Notional and real.* A part of the Gilson–Blondel dispute relates to the accusation of ‘bathing in the real’ on one side and of ‘conceptualism’ on the other. It may be tempting to see this disagreement as an offspring to the question of ‘notional vs. real’ as it was raised by Newman in the *Grammar*. The study of Jan Henri Walgrave (a great scholar on Newman, according to whom Blondel was the greatest Catholic philosopher of the twentieth century) on ‘real’ and ‘notional’ in Blondel and Newman identifies a deep kinship in their common differentiation between notional and real knowledge. But Walgrave adds that in Blondel there is a gradual process of realization of actual knowledge, while in Newman it is imagination, in Coleridge’s sense, which is the essential dynamic factor of real assent.⁴² So, Newman cannot be used in a straightforward way from a Blondelian point of view against Gilson; but, more interestingly, we have briefly seen that Gilson on his side brought the greatest attention to this aspect of the *Grammar of Assent*. In Gilson’s eyes, Newman’s thought on the two assents is not a philosophy of knowledge, but rather a “phenomenology of religion,” referred to as apologetics in that Newman proclaimed the goal of his work to be religious—and he valued it for being such. Moreover, Gilson criticized any forced opposition between the two forms of assent: “one should beware of another one (misunderstanding), namely, imagining that, in the doctrine of Newman, notional assent is an imperfect form of real

⁴⁰ Cf. John H. Newman, *Letters and Diaries*, vol. XXIX, 212. Gilson’s similar enthusiasm for the Encyclical is well known. I could not find any enthusiastic reference of Blondel to this Encyclical, even if he revered Leo XIII for his 1893 Encyclical *Rerum Novarum*.

⁴¹ John Crosby in Laurence Richardson, *Newman’s Approach to Knowledge* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Gracewing, 2007), IX.

⁴² “‘Real’ and ‘Notional’ in Blondel and Newman,” *Internationale Cardinal–Newman–Studien* XIV (1990): 142–156.

assent.”⁴³ In conclusion, then, there is a thin link between Blondel and Gilson through Newman, but it would be artificial to say more concerning a closer connection, as they treat the distinctions between assent in quite different ways.

2. *Sacramental Principle*. A second possible approach is that of “what might be called with Newman the sacramental character of the Christian world,” according to Gilson, who presented it in the fifth chapter of the *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*.⁴⁴ Whatever explanation of the sacramental character of the Christian world is considered, “it always exceeds the physical level of science to reach the metaphysical level and prepare the transition to the mystical level.”⁴⁵ The reference to Newman leads to the “mystical or sacramental principle” discussed in the *Apologia*. Gilson, inspired by Newman, was here close to Blondel’s positions in his 1929 *Le problème de la mystique* [*The Problem of Mysticism*], or Blondel’s statement that “metaphysics does not finish with theories; speculation requires a living and practicing metaphysics,” that is, the practice of mysticism.⁴⁶ The closeness between Gilson and Blondel becomes even greater when, in the same chapter of the *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, Gilson traces the dynamic of this sacramental principle to the goodness of God, namely to His love, which enables us to be ourselves as causes and thus “delegating . . . a certain participation in His power, along with a participation in His actuality,”⁴⁷ or, to use Blondel’s words, with a participation in the “metaphysics of charity.”

3. *Consciousness (conscience) and understanding*. According to a recent Newman–Blondel symposium, consciousness (conscience) and understanding in Newman and Blondel is an ‘immense subject’ (Cardinal Poupard).⁴⁸ In 1931, this issue was far from being foreign to Gilson, as it

⁴³ Cf. Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 14.

⁴⁴ Page 101 of the French edition (Vrin, 1983). Gilson added that the expression is taken by him in a more metaphysical sense than Newman’s historical one, but the relation of things to God which it indicates remains substantially the same.

⁴⁵ Id.

⁴⁶ Cf. *La Pensée*, II (Paris: Alcan, 1934), 326. One may think here of Gilson and Blondel converging also through St. Bernard—Blondel was deeply influenced by the Cistercian master. Cf. J. Leclercq, *Maurice Blondel, lecteur de saint Bernard* (Bruxelles: Lessius, 2001), and Gilson will publish his *La théologie mystique de saint Bernard* [*The Mystical Theology of St. Bernard*] in 1934.

⁴⁷ *Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 101, French edition.

⁴⁸ Cf. *Newman et Blondel: conscience et intelligence*, ed. Keith Beaumont, Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, Pierre de Cointet (Paris: Parole et Silence, 2012), 7—see in this book especially

was showed by the seventeenth of the Gifford Lectures, *Intention, Conscience and Obligation*. This is evident in particular with its typology of the relationship between intellect and will in the concept of conscience, in which Gilson shows as an historian that the medieval authors were no less divided than the modern ones about the nature of moral conscience. Whereas Thomas Aquinas is more ‘intellectualist’, Gilson noted, ‘Augustinian’ thinkers starting with St. Bonaventure link intelligence and will as joint sources of conscience. Six centuries before Newman and seven centuries before Bernard Lonergan or Blondel, they bound together ‘conscience’ and ‘consciousness’, intellectual and moral conscience, establishing (to use the terminology of Lonergan) that the roots of both metaphysics and morals are “in the dynamic structure of rational consciousness.”⁴⁹ Moreover, Gilson, following St. Thomas Aquinas, set consciousness not “as a separate faculty of the will or reason but as an act, or rather acts,” converging here with Blondel. However, this topic is not an essential one in Gilson work: the terms ‘conscience’ or ‘consciousness’ did not appear in his *Elements of Christian Philosophy*. Moreover, the reference to Newman is completely absent in his writings in this field.

Why Gilson Criticized Blondel (and Vice Versa)

Under this Gilsonian title, I would like to conclude with another potential way of mediation between Gilson and Blondel through Newman: if not a conciliator, he may have for us another indirect function, to help for a better understanding why Gilson and Blondel were different and could not but differ.

In his *Philosophical Notebook*, Newman writes indeed: “In most departments of writing, to speak of self is egotistical—not so in metaphysics . . . Metaphysics is a conditional science, conditional on the truth of those starting points which commended themselves to me, not perhaps to another one.”⁵⁰ Following Gilson’s advice to provisionally accept “this language created by Newman for his own needs”⁵¹ and not discussing this

pages 205–279. The French word ‘conscience’ means at the same time both English words ‘consciousness’ and ‘conscience’.

⁴⁹ Cf. Bernard Lonergan, *Insight, An Essay in Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 636.

⁵⁰ Cf. *Philosophical Notebooks of John Henry Newman*, vol. II, ed. E. Sillem (Louvain: Nauwelaerts, 1969), 87 and 89.

⁵¹ Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 10. One may note than Gilson himself, when he wanted to treat as simply as possible the ‘experience of a being’ started (even if ‘with reservation’)

sui generis sense of his use of the word ‘metaphysics’, we may follow him regarding Gilson and Blondel: both of them tried to report on the personal first principles of their respective philosophies that no concept can adequately fully express. And so Newman’s remark could explain the painful astonishment of Gilson and Blondel when they realized conscience, which for each of them was absolutely evident and formed the starting point of their own philosophy, was not the same as it was for the other. Gilson’s painful surprise in his March 1931 letter to Blondel, as mentioned above (“I cannot but believe that I do not understand you”), is very clear on this point. But is it really so surprising when the core of reality, God, is an ‘I’ who has created other ‘I’s’?

Newman as *tertium datum* reconciling Gilson and Blondel reveals himself to be rather poor. Nonetheless, this is not a reason to resign oneself to the dispute between these two pre-eminent thinkers of the past century. If, in the French Catholic philosophical landscape of the early 1930s, any major figures were capable of going beyond the shackles and the blinkers, and of providing a specific testimony of the greatness of Christian thought, it was both of them (and a few others): two lay people—with what this meant in terms of freedom from clerics—two men who did not come out of the ghetto of Catholic schools (except a few years for Gilson), two teaching fellows in the French State system and not in the Catholic seraglio (and also two men from Burgundy). Their quarrel leaves one with a bitter taste of mess. But, just before the failed debate of 1931, a thinker wrote that among Gilson’s ‘beautiful works’ were his conclusions about St. Bonaventure and St. Thomas, namely that “these two syntheses are incompatible with each other while one and the other are legitimate as opposing aspects of a truth larger and thicker than all systems;”⁵² but he added that, for his part, he could not resign himself to it, and that he felt it both possible and desirable to attempt a ‘unifying transmutation’. He sent his book to Gilson, who took the time to reply: “Nor do I consider the antithesis Thomas *vs* Bonaventure (or rather, Thomas *vs* Augustine) as unbridgeable.” The name of the thinker who wrote to Gilson was Maurice Blondel.⁵³ Let his name

with a personal testimony (É. Gilson, *Constantes philosophiques de l’Être* [*Philosophical Constants of Being*] (Paris: Vrin, 1983), 145–147).

⁵² Cf. *L’itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel. Propos recueillis par Frédéric Lefèvre* [*Maurice Blondel’s Philosophical Itinerary: Interview by Frederic Lefèvre*] (Paris: Spes, 1928), 129–130.

⁵³ For Blondel, cf. id.; for Gilson reply, see Long, “The Blondel–Gilson Correspondence through Foucault’s Mirror,” 359–360.

and Étienne Gilson's be put instead of Bonaventure (Augustine) and Thomas, and finish on this note of hope.

GILSON—NEWMAN—BLONDEL?

SUMMARY

The article analyzes the dispute between Étienne Gilson and Maurice Blondel. Their dispute is quite notorious and, even though all the reasons behind it are unknown, casts a shadow on the French philosophy of Christian inspiration in the last century. For both Gilson and Blondel are among the most illustrious representatives of it. The article attempts to reconcile Gilson and Blondel by referring to John Henry Newman. According to Henri de Lubac, "Blondel greatly admired Newman and, in that, Gilson joined him;" moreover, St. John Paul II, in *Fides et Ratio*, not only proposed the names of Newman and Gilson among the five thinkers of Western thought that he considered to be significant examples of "fruitful relationship between philosophy and the word of God" in their "courageous research," but he also, considered their "philosophical works of great influence and lasting value." The former Pope stated, "a philosophy which, starting with an analysis of immanence, opened the way to the transcendent," just after devoting two paragraphs to praise the modern Thomistic revival and its fruits (§57–58). Could, then, blessed John Henry Newman be a possible *tertium datum* between Gilson and Blondel?

KEYWORDS: Gilson, Blondel, Newman, Christian philosophy.