

**Structured for Eternity:  
The Constitution of the Self in Relation to God  
in Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Blondel**

A dissertation presented for the degree of Master of Theology  
at the University of Aberdeen

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2011

## **ABSTRACT**

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and Maurice Blondel (1861-1946) are two modern philosophers, the former Lutheran and the latter Catholic, who deal with the relation of the human person to God. Their understanding of divine transcendence and the immediacy (Kierkegaard) or mediation (Blondel) of the presence of God to the human person has implications for spiritual theology, and the development of a uniquely modern theology of the spiritual life. This study examines their thought separately before bringing it into conversation with one another and briefly with spiritual theology. By examining the emergence of the human 'self' and its relation to other creatures, to God and to its own eternal destiny, it outlines important convergences and divergences between these two thinkers who loom large over much of twentieth century theology.

## **DECLARATION**

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that this dissertation has been entirely composed by myself, \_\_\_\_\_, and has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree, that I have done all the work contained herein, and have clearly distinguished all quotations with quotation marks and specifically acknowledged all sources of information.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## ABBREVIATIONS

Full bibliographical details found on pp.54-57.

### A. SØREN KIERKEGAARD

Listed with date of original Danish publication and pseudonymous author, if applicable.

BA	<i>The Book on Adler</i> (unpublished)
CUP	Johannes Climacus, <i>Concluding Unscientific Postscript</i> (1846)
EO2	Victor Eremita, <i>Either/Or, Part II</i> (1843)
EUD	<i>Eighteen Upbuilding Discourses</i> (1843-44)
FSE	<i>For Self-Examination</i> (1851)
FT	Johannes de Silentio, <i>Fear and Trembling</i> (1843)
JFY	<i>Judge for Yourself!</i> (1851)
JP	<i>Journals and Papers</i> , 7 vols.
PC	Anti-Climacus, <i>Practice in Christianity</i> (1850)
PF	Johannes Climacus, <i>Philosophical Fragments</i> (1844)
R	Constantin Constantius, <i>Repetition</i> (1843)
SUD	Anti-Climacus, <i>The Sickness Unto Death</i> (1849)
UDVS	<i>Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits</i> (1847)
WL	<i>Works of Love</i> (1847)

### B. MAURICE BLONDEL

Listed with date of original French publication.

A	<i>L'Action</i> (1893)
EPC	<i>Exigences philosophiques du christianisme</i> (1950)
HD	<i>History and Dogma</i> (1904)
IP	<i>L'itinéraire philosophique du Maurice Blondel</i> (1928)
LA	<i>Letter on Apologetics</i> (1896)
PEC 1-2	<i>La philosophie et l'Esprit chrétien</i> , 2 vols. (1944-46)
VS	<i>Une réalisme supérieure. Le « Vinculum Substantiale » de Leibniz</i> (1930)

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## I. INTRODUCTION

An interest in ‘spirituality’ has been burgeoning for some time now in the late-modern West, but it has a peculiar character. This kind of ‘spirituality,’ unhinged from determinate religious confessions or practices, has its eerie obverse in an academic theology severed from any form of spirituality. This is not a new recognition. While many theologians have taken up work on the once firm but now shaky ground between spiritual and systematic theology,<sup>1</sup> there remains work to be done on *a dogmatic treatment of the spiritual life*—work that was once undertaken, one might add, very commonly (if unsystematically) in the premodern period. While this study will not attempt such a treatment, it will ask some preliminary questions pertinent to such a further project.

There is no space here to rehearse the history of spirituality and theology, their intertwining and subsequent severing.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that something was both lost and gained when theologians became professors rather than bishops.<sup>3</sup> By the time our two subjects of study appear on the historical stage in the nineteenth century, the division between spirituality and academic theology is thought self-evident. One of the burdens of this study will be to show that both Søren Kierkegaard (1813-55) and Maurice Blondel (1861-1949) were in their own ways concerned to show that the drama of the Christian spiritual life has a determinate form and reference, and that this is chiefly Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> The work of Mark McIntosh and Sarah Coakley comes to mind in the British context. See e.g., McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 1998); Coakley, “Is There a Future for Gender and Theology? On Gender, Contemplation and the Systematic Task,” *Criterion* 47 (Spring/Summer 2009): 2-11; idem, “Deepening Practices: Perspectives from Ascetical and Mystical Theology,” in Miroslav Volf and Dorothy Bass, eds., *Practicing Theology: Beliefs and Practices in Christian Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 78-93.

<sup>2</sup> One such attempt is Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 39-118.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar is himself quick to defend scholasticism: “No one would think of denying that the gain in clarity, insight and mastery of the entire field was enormous. More resoundingly than in the time of the Fathers, who, almost as a matter of course, achieved eminence in the schools of antiquity, was the jubilation over the *spolia Aegyptiorum* repeated” (“Theology and Sanctity,” in *Explorations in Theology I: The Word Made Flesh* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 184-85).

Born in Copenhagen in 1813, Kierkegaard was part of an affluent Lutheran family and had a rich literary upbringing. Almost certainly as great a writer as a philosopher or theologian, Kierkegaard's authorship is roughly divided between two periods: an earlier series of books written in a variety of pseudonyms, ending with *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846), and a later authorship in which Kierkegaard writes under his own name and thinly veiled pseudonyms. The main period of his literary activity is remarkably short, beginning more or less in 1843 with *Either/Or*, and ending abruptly in 1851 with *For Self-Examination*.

Kierkegaard was distraught by the state of Danish Christianity at the time, a world in which everyone is "a Christian as a matter of course" (CUP 216). He deployed all his rhetorical skill in an attempt "again to introduce Christianity into Christendom" (PC 36), which meant forcing up the qualifications for becoming a Christian. Just because one is baptized does not mean one has faith—no, for faith is the highest, the most difficult thing of all: "There perhaps are many in every generation who do not come to faith, but no one goes further" (FT 122). Kierkegaard's anthropology is oriented around this question of coming to faith and he proposes a dialectic of despair, which he unfolds as Anti-Climacus in *The Sickness Unto Death*. This will form the frame for our examination of his thought.

Maurice Blondel was born in 1861 in the French region of Burgundy, also to a wealthy family, one of the "circle of Christian bourgeois families of their time who thought of themselves as defenders of the Faith".<sup>4</sup> Living in a situation quite different to that of Kierkegaard's Danish State Christendom, post-revolutionary France was militantly secular and Maurice's parents fought over sending their son to the state-run *lycée*.<sup>5</sup> The decision was not without consequence, for he would spend the rest of his life in the secular system,

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<sup>4</sup> Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), 27.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

studying philosophy at the prestigious Ecole Normale Supérieure and the Sorbonne in Paris, before teaching at the state university of Aix-en-Provence for the remainder of his career. Blondel came to see his work as a philosopher as his apostolate, speaking the gospel in the language of the French intellectual public.

Blondel's principal early writing, his doctoral dissertation *L'Action* (1893), will form the backbone of our presentation of his thought. In its day, it earned him both the consternation of the secular French academy and the bemusement of the Catholic authorities. Whereas the latter were initially glad to see a religious philosopher on the difficult French terrain, Blondel's *Letter on Apologetics* (1896) argued that philosophy must be rigorously rational and criticised the methods typical to Catholic apologetics of the time. After two decades of controversy, Blondel began work on the tetralogy that was to complete his life's work, now dictating some nine volumes because of a retinal haemorrhage which ended his teaching career.<sup>6</sup> He died in 1949, without completing the tenth and final volume.

What unifies these two quite different thinkers, one Lutheran and one Catholic, one Dane and one Frenchman, one fighting secular rationalism and one fighting apathetic Christendom, one rhetorically charged and occasional and one placid and rigorously systematic? Both are 'modern' philosophers: Kierkegaard wrestled with Hegel and Schelling, Blondel with Descartes, Malebranche and Leibniz. But more significantly, both were Christian philosophers who saw the need to bring modernity face to face with the living God and did so through an innovative understanding of the human person as an emergent self

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<sup>6</sup> Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée*, 2 vols. (Paris: Alcan, 1934); *L'Être et les êtres. Essai d'ontologie concrète et intégrale* (Paris: Alcan, 1935); *L'Action*, 2 vols. (Paris: Alcan, 1936-37). The latter two volumes are not to be confused with the doctoral thesis *L'Action* (1893), though the second volume (1937) is a more or less revised version of the earlier project. On this, see Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 657-61. The final piece was *La philosophe et l'Esprit chrétien*, 2 vols. (Paris: PUF, 1944-46). The third and final volume of *La philosophe et l'Esprit chrétien* never appeared.

endowed with an eternal destiny, a destiny to which both their audiences, in different ways, needed to awake. In what follows, we will examine the views of Kierkegaard and Blondel in the same order, first treating their view of the self, then their doctrine of God and finally their understanding of how the self relates itself to God.

First, some brief clarifications about our topic. The doctrine of God is clear enough. The notion of a 'self,' however, demands some definition. We will take 'self' to mean much more than 'human being,' which just denotes one particular creature among others. 'Self' also means more than 'individual' as a site of agency, moral deliberation and reflection. Still further, 'self' means more than 'person' as a subject of social reciprocity and identity. We will take 'self' to mean, in addition to the above qualities, primarily a site of reflexivity: self-consciousness and self-responsibility—especially with regards to one's eternal destiny—mark the 'self' in a way which is not necessarily true of a 'person,' 'individual' or mere 'human being.' How such a 'self' becomes a 'self' and relates to her God forms the main question to be answered in what follows. In connection, the means by which a 'self' becomes aware of and responsible for herself, and whether this is God himself immediately or a mediated means of grace, will be a key part of our investigation.

## II. SØREN KIERKEGAARD

### A. THE SELF

Before discussing the self's relation to God, we must first outline Kierkegaard's view of what is the self and who is God. But this distinction will be revealed as tenuous just because, for Kierkegaard, the self only emerges as one comes to consciousness of one's relation to God. Apart from awareness of the relation to God, there is only the individual enclosed in immediacy and one or another form of unconscious despair. The dialectic which leads to 'faith,' the proper relatedness of the self to itself and to its ground in God, passes through various forms of despair before finally arriving at its end. However, this 'arriving' does not have a static quality, but must continually be re-achieved in the self's 'striving.'

The emergence of the self from the mere 'individual' follows a complex dialectical process in which the person becomes conscious of herself as a self and develops in relating herself to herself, and finally, to her transcendent ground in God. In fact, it will be shown that, for Kierkegaard, the relation to God is operative all the way down. As Anti-Climacus writes, "He who does not have a God does not have a self, either" (*SUD* 40).<sup>1</sup> But it is not a matter of choice, as if one only relates to God in a conscious decision; rather, one is always already related to God but lives in despair where one does not consciously will this relation. As Evans puts it, "There is no ontological freedom from God, but there is ethical freedom".<sup>2</sup> In theological terms, sin is a possibility.

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<sup>1</sup> John D. Glenn, Jr. states it is "generally recognized" that Anti-Climacus' views in *The Sickness Unto Death* are Kierkegaard's own ("The Definition of the Self and the Structure of Kierkegaard's Work," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death* [Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1987], 5).

<sup>2</sup> C. Stephen Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self: Collected Essays* (Waco, Texas: Baylor UP, 2006), 271.

This makes Kierkegaard's view unique in that it is at once modern, seeing the need for talk of a dynamic rather than substantive 'self',<sup>3</sup> and Christian, grounding the 'self' in God. Dupré observes that Kierkegaard is "the first modern philosopher to place man's relation to God in the very heart of the self".<sup>4</sup> But he does this as a Christian philosopher. This adds a definite shape or quality to Kierkegaard's view of the self which, because it runs all the way through, makes it difficult to distinguish—if this is indeed ever possible—his 'philosophical' from his 'religious' thought.<sup>5</sup>

Anti-Climacus opens the main body of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard's most sustained exploration of selfhood and despair, with the following famous passage:

A human being is spirit. But what is spirit? Spirit is the self. But what is the self? The self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation's relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation's relating itself to itself. A human being is a synthesis of the infinite and the finite, of the temporal and the eternal, of freedom and necessity, in short, a synthesis. (*SUD* 13)

The distinguishing mark of human being for Kierkegaard, as for much of the Christian tradition, is that human being is spirit. This, however, he understands in a particularly modern way: to be 'spirit' means to be a 'self,' a thought surely derivative of Hegel.<sup>6</sup> And to be a self is to be self-reflexive, that is, conscious of oneself and engaged in relating to oneself as a task. This is opposed to being lost in bare immediacy, without self-awareness.

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<sup>3</sup> David J. Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker* (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 76. Daphne Hampson argues that Kierkegaard derives the basic outline of his view of the self from Hegel (*Christian Contradictions: The Structures of Lutheran and Catholic Thought* [Cambridge: CUP, 2004], 281). Gouwens reads in him "an Augustinian narrative understanding of the self" (90). The former is the correct genetic account; the latter, however, retains its plausibility as a structural similarity.

<sup>4</sup> Louis Dupré, "The Constitution of the Self in Kierkegaard's Philosophy," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 3 (1963): 525.

<sup>5</sup> Thus, Kierkegaard is "fundamentally at odds" with atheistic appropriations of his work, as in Heidegger or, more stringently, in Sartre (Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 75).

<sup>6</sup> For a helpful examination of this derivation, see Alastair Hannay, "Spirit and the Idea of the Self as a Reflexive Relation," in Robert L. Perkins, ed., *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 1987), 23-30.

The first steps in the dialectic of the self's emergence, then, deal with the individual's entanglement with immediacy.<sup>7</sup> For one to know oneself as a self, there must be a break with the immediacy of one's immersion in life's activities. As this begins to happen, the self becomes aware that the elements of certain syntheses need to be held together. Thus, "spirit is not to be equated with the true self", at least not initially, "but with the self aware of the options of health and sickness... Spirit here is the emergence of a problem".<sup>8</sup> The problem comes into focus as one becomes aware of the "expansive pole of the self",<sup>9</sup> the former element in the pairings possibility/necessity,<sup>10</sup> infinite/finite and eternal/temporal.<sup>11</sup>

To pursue possibility, infinity and the eternal is to escape immediacy. However, to pursue these in isolation from their dialectical opposite is to despair just as much as to be stuck in necessity, finitude and the temporal. For example, the despair of infinity is "the fantastic" (*SUD* 30). Leaving finitude behind, "the self becomes only more and more volatilised and finally comes to be a kind of abstract sentimentality" which is an expression of despair (31). Rather, a synthesis is needed in which the depth of infinity and requirements of finitude are brought together in the moment to make oneself "concrete"

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<sup>7</sup> A good summary of *The Sickness Unto Death* is to be found in Sylvia Walsh, *Kierkegaard: Thinking Christianly in an Existential Mode* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 96-110. Glenn, Jr. makes a plausible attempt to read *The Sickness Unto Death* in terms of the three stages in the pseudonymous writings: the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious ("The Definition of the Self," 5-21).

<sup>8</sup> Hannay, "Spirit and the Idea of the Self," 32, 33-34.

<sup>9</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 154.

<sup>10</sup> "Freedom" is achieved in the synthesis of possibility and necessity (*SUD* 29). But Dupré oversteps when he speaks of Kierkegaard's "identification of the self with freedom" ("The Constitution of the Self," 506). It is certainly the case that 'freedom' is central to Kierkegaard's understanding of the self. He can say, for instance, "The self is freedom" (*SUD* 29). Gregor Malantschuk also notes that freedom/necessity is the central binary in the development of his thought, around which the other pairings constellate (*Kierkegaard's Concept of Existence*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong [Milwaukee, WI: Marquette UP, 2003], 17). However, the self is not solely defined by freedom, but also by qualities such as consciousness and faculties such as will. On the very same page of *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard writes, "A person who has no will at all is not a self" (29).

<sup>11</sup> Gouwens mistakenly adds unconsciousness/consciousness to these pairings (*Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 76). For Kierkegaard, unconsciousness and consciousness are not properly held together in a synthesis, but rather, the dialectic of the self's development progresses as one becomes increasingly conscious of one's existing as a task. Unconsciousness of this task is wholly undesirable.

(30). What is needed is for the “expansive pole” to wrench one out of immediacy, but then to return to it as part of a healthy synthesis. A similar pattern holds for the dialectical pairings possibility/necessity and eternal/temporal.

Thus, becoming a self is not about choosing the ‘higher’ in each of the pairings. Put in another way, Kierkegaard is not an escapist. Finitude and temporality are just as constitutive of the self as infinity and eternity. Later in *The Sickness Unto Death*, he criticises the one who “wants to begin a little earlier than do other men, not at and with the beginning, but ‘in the beginning’; he does not want to put on his own self, does not want to see his given self as his task—he himself wants to compose his self” (68). This too is despair, namely, “in despair to will to be oneself” (67), but oneself not as one is given but as completely refashioned according to “the most abstract possibility” (68). This is a despair of “defiance” (67), specifically, the defiance of God, who creates a person and locates her in a particular time and place. In the proper progression “a self infinitely becomes responsible for its actual self with all its difficulties and advantages” (55).

The other side of this is “not to will to be oneself” (49), which is the despair of “weakness” (54). This can have two forms: to despair over something earthly or to despair over the eternal. The latter is approaching to the relation to God, and so we must soon halt, even as the whole of the dialectic is tuned to this end and so any distinction between the self ‘as such’ and the self ‘in relation to God’ is dubious. Nevertheless, to despair over something earthly is less clearly despair in relation to God. Anti-Climacus writes, “When the world is taken away from the self and one despairs, the despair seems to come from the outside, even though it always comes from the self” (62). Even though one believes one despairs over a circumstance, one is actually despairing over being *this* self and it is “more

intensive” the more one is conscious of having to choose *this* self as one’s infinite responsibility (62).

The synthesising decision in which the self comes to initial consciousness of itself is not static or fixed but a continual dynamism. It is received as both gift and task (*Gave* and *Opgave*).<sup>12</sup> Because it is a synthesis, the self “is therefore continually striving” (*CUP* 92). Whereas “the systematic is the conclusiveness that combines”, “[e]xistence is the spacing that holds apart”. “Existence itself is a system—for God, but it cannot be a system for any existing spirit” (118). Thus, the self must continually choose itself anew, in all the variability of its temporal and finite existence with its exigencies and in all the passion and depth of the infinite, the dizzying spread of possibilities, and that “something” which is “eternal in it” (*SUD* 62).

This absolute ‘choice’ of oneself brings us to a discussion of the faculties of the self, particularly the *will*, as the last element of Kierkegaard’s view of the self we may discuss without explicit reference to the God-relation. Kierkegaard assigns a variety of faculties to the human person in different writings, including passion (e.g., *CUP* 230), imagination (*PC* 186), conscience (*WL* 143), inclinations and drives (*EO2* 251) and reflection or thought (*FT* 42). Most significant for his conception of the self, however, is the faculty of the will.

As Evans argues, Kierkegaard’s view of the will is a variation on the Aristotelian theory, where an action is chosen after deliberation.<sup>13</sup> His contribution is to see “a distinct act of will as necessary to explain action because the intellect has a kind of infinity about it. The intellect cannot bring itself to closure”.<sup>14</sup> Rather than the intellect reaching a conclusion to its deliberation which is subsequently executed by the will, the will supervenes to

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<sup>12</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 98.

<sup>13</sup> Evans, *Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 314.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 316. Cf. Blondel’s view below, p.28.

complete the intellect's insufficiency. In Kierkegaard's terms, reflection cannot achieve concretion in actuality. In order to bring the ideal into existence the will must intervene and make a decision, a choice that makes the ideal actual. In relation to the dialectic of the self's development, the will is decisive in choosing oneself absolutely (*EO2* 223-24). As Anti-Climacus puts it, "A person who has no will at all is not a self" (*SUD* 29). This is ultimately because without a will, one cannot have faith, which is not considered "as the content of a concept but as a form of the will" (*FT* 249).<sup>15</sup> And faith is the true and sole escape from despair. But first we must consider who the God is in whom the self has faith.

## **B. GOD**

There is nothing at all remarkable about Kierkegaard's doctrine of God in terms of its material content. He accepts almost without reservation the God of 'classical theism.' For example, God in his writings is transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient and immutable. This in addition to central biblical affirmations, such as God being the Creator and Provider for the created world. Kierkegaard accepts the twin Christian dogmas of Trinity and Incarnation, though he shows no interest at all in classical questions such as whether it was fitting for the Son rather than the Father or Spirit to become incarnate, or the relation between the persons and the divine essence.

This lack of interest in such questions is consistent with his concern for 'actuality,' or the 'existential.' Rather than reflect on God 'as such,' Kierkegaard is concerned much more with who God is for the human person: his God is God *pro me* and not at all God *in et a se*. Nevertheless, this does not mean that he shrinks from the use of concepts in his talk of God. Indeed, in the pseudonymous writings Kierkegaard employs a consistent set of four terms as

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<sup>15</sup> "Supplement," citing *Pap.* IV B 87:2 *n. d.*, 1843.

ciphers for God: these are the “unconditioned” (*JFY* 152), the “absolute” (*FT* 56), the “infinite” and the “eternal” (*CUP* 217). Deploying such terminology in the pseudonymous writings has, it seems, two interrelated purposes: toying rhetorically with Hegel’s philosophy of religion, to which he is often responding,<sup>16</sup> and forefronting divine transcendence.

Whereas, for Hegel, these four terms often relate to a mediation which places the individual dialectically in a universal whole, for Kierkegaard, it has the opposite effect, namely, dialectically sharpening what Anti-Climacus calls the “infinite chasmic difference between God and man” (*PC* 63). In the non-pseudonymous *The Book on Adler*, he writes similarly, “*But between God and a human being there is an eternal essential qualitative difference*” (*BA* 181, emphasis in original). To be involved with God, as Kierkegaard wishes to highlight throughout his works, is to be torn out of mediating relationships and placed face-to-face with the transcendent. But this is already to anticipate our final section on the God-relation.

Kierkegaard, as has been said, accepts the God of ‘classical theism.’ Although he rarely employs the terms, he does at least once speak of “omnipresence” and “omnipotence” (*EUD* 310). Most interesting, though, is his deployment of the concept of divine immutability, which the Hongs translate as “changelessness” (*Uforanderlighed*). It is here one sees that although Kierkegaard accepts such a doctrine of God, he chafes at its usual expression. He writes:

[T]his changelessness is not that chilling indifference, that devastating loftiness, that ambiguous distance, which the callous understanding lauded. No, on the contrary, this changelessness is intimate and warm and everywhere present; it is a changelessness in being concerned for a person. (*EUD* 393)

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<sup>16</sup> As well as Hegel-influenced “speculative theologians” such as Martensen. See, e.g., Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence*, 16. See also Michael Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), v. “Absolute,” “Infinity” and “Time, Space and Eternity.”

Thus, divine immutability becomes, instead of *apatheia*,<sup>17</sup> the eternal constancy of God toward the creature in love, a view “fully compatible with God's being affected”.<sup>18</sup> Yet this is not a particularly unique idea among anti-speculative theologians.

God is also understood in terms of common biblical concepts. He is foremost, for Kierkegaard, the Creator and Provider. His understanding is traditional. For example, he accepts *creatio ex nihilo* (EO2 215), the asymmetrical dependence of the creature on the Creator (CUP 136, 260) and the transcendence of divine over created being: “God does not have a share in existence in such a way that he asks for his share for himself” (WL 161). Further, human beings have preeminence among all God’s creatures, having the “high destiny—to be the ruler of creation” (EUD 84).

Similarly, with providence, or “Governance” (*Styrelsen*). Although Johannes Climacus denies providential oversight, saying, “God does not play the role of the Lord in the world-historical process” (CUP 156), this is widely overturned in other writings. Johannes de Silentio writes, “Faith is convinced that God is concerned about the smallest things” (FT 34). But, once again, Kierkegaard is most concerned with relating this role of God to the life of the individual. Hence, his view of providence tends to blur into election. Anti-Climacus writes that God “uses the most varied things as a way and as a means of drawing to himself” (PC 155). God can, as the Creator, indeed use anything to this purpose, and his purpose is “that I be honest in the relationship” with him, for “just as suspicious characters must register with the police, I must report to Governance with regard to this dubiousness of my being a Christian” (JFY 207).

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<sup>17</sup> Though see David Bentley Hart, “No Shadow of Turning: On Divine Impassibility,” *Pro Ecclesia* 11/2 (Spring 2002): 184-206, where he offers the remarkable argument that it is precisely divine *apatheia* that secures divine care for the creature.

<sup>18</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 168.

Further, Kierkegaard, especially in the later non-pseudonymous writings, speaks of God in terms of several traditional divine attributes. Most centrally, of course, “God is Love” (*WL* 62). But he is also good (*EUD* 388), faithful (88), patient (199) and the fatherly “giver” (98-101). Heretofore, everything in Kierkegaard’s doctrine of God has been quite traditional and not particularly innovative, excepting only certain adjustments for the requirements of ‘existence.’ The case is much the same in his Christology and trinitarianism.

As elsewhere, he accepts the traditional conceptuality. Gouwens argues, “The Christ presented in Kierkegaard’s thought is that of orthodox Nicene and Chalcedonian definitions”.<sup>19</sup> But because Christ is so central to Christian existence (in a fashion we will unfold below), Kierkegaard develops a wealth of new concepts, such as the “paradox,” the “incognito” and the “sign of contradiction” (*PC* 30, 131, 125), which illumine the individual’s relation to him, rather than the relation of Christ’s two natures. In comparison, there is a relative dearth of material on the “Spirit” (though see, e.g., *FSE* 82-83). The Holy Spirit appears in different places in the discourses, particularly in the prayers, but is quite underdeveloped theologically.

As Walsh puts it tidily, “while he affirms the doctrine of the Trinity, it is not an organizing principle of his theology... Rather, for Kierkegaard, the individual’s God-relationship is the lens through which the Trinity is encountered and known in human existence”.<sup>20</sup> She then goes on to provide a helpful synopsis:

This relationship begins with an unmediated relation to God the Father, whose fatherliness is not just a metaphor but ‘the truest and most literal expression’ of his being (*EUD* 98-9). The Father then directs us to the Son as our personal mediator and prototype, and the Son in turn directs us to the Holy Spirit for help in striving to become like the prototype (*JP* [2:] 1432).<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>20</sup> Walsh, *Kierkegaard*, 53.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-4.

The very fact that Walsh here draws from a non-pseudonymous writing (*EUD*), a pseudonymous one (the “prototype” is central to *PC*) and a journal entry, shows how uncoordinated are Kierkegaard’s explicitly trinitarian reflections.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, such a trinitarian lack was not unusual for the early nineteenth century, and the mediating work the Trinity performs in Hegel’s philosophy<sup>23</sup> likely made him further resistant to any sort of ‘speculative’ trinitarianism, even while embracing its traditional lineaments.

### C. THE SELF IN RELATION TO GOD

As already evidenced in the exploration of the initial stages of the dialectic of the self’s development, the individual is led up to the relation to God by an interior dialectic of despair, and not by any form of mediation. The polemic against mediation is central to Kierkegaard’s struggle with all manner of evil, from the Danish state church to Hegelian-influenced theologians. Johannes Climacus provides the proper distinction:

Dialectic in its truth is a kindly disposed, ministering power that discovers and helps to find where the absolute object of faith and worship is, where the absolute is... Dialectic itself does not see the absolute, but it leads, as it were, the individual to it, and says: Here it must be, that I can vouch for; if you worship here, you worship God. But worship itself is not dialectic. A dialectic that mediates is a miscarried genius (*forulykket Genie*). (*CUP* 491)

Thus, the dialectic of despair does not itself mediate the relationship with God, but only points the way for the individual willing to venture into the infinite. One is reminded of the significance the ever outstretched finger of John the Baptist in Grünewald’s Isenheim altarpiece held for Barth: “I am not the Messiah but am sent ahead of him” (John 3:28).

Despair, for Kierkegaard, actually increases the closer one comes to ‘faith,’ to ‘salvation.’ Marsh writes, “[E]ven though one unconscious of despair may seem to be closer

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<sup>22</sup> It is not even clear that Kierkegaard’s thought is as tidy or systematic as Walsh’s synthesis seems to suppose. Walsh is tying together strands of his works that remain rhetorically and theologically disjunctive.

<sup>23</sup> Most clearly, G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, vol. 3, *The Consummate Religion*, ed. Peter C. Hodgson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 249-347.

to salvation than one who is conscious, actually the person conscious of despair is closer, because he is closest to the truth of his condition".<sup>24</sup> Anti-Climacus concurs, teaching that "simply because this despair is more intensive, it is in a certain sense closer to salvation" (SUD 62). Consciousness of one's despair, then, is always a good, even while it is spiritually harrowing. Indeed, elsewhere Kierkegaard speaks of the experience as a 'spiritual trial' (*Anfægtelse*).<sup>25</sup>

A certain understanding of the transcendence of God is decisive for the dialectical rather than mediatorial nature of this relation. As Dupré puts it, "[A] transcendence which can be mediated with the immanent is no longer transcendent", rather, it precisely loses its transcendent character.<sup>26</sup> Transcendence can *eo ipso* not be mediated. Kierkegaard explicitly denies several potential mediators such a role. These include (i) history, (ii) morality, (iii) society or the state, (iv) the Church or congregation, and (v) other believers. Less clear is (vi) the case of Scripture, which may have a role parallel to the dialectic itself. Finally, (vii) the only mediator permitted is the "one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5).

The God-relation, to begin, is (i) not mediated by history. This is because historical judgment is a matter of probability. As Climacus writes, "[I]f all the historiographers of the world united to do research and to establish certainty, it would still be impossible to establish more than an approximation" (CUP 576). But it is impossible for an "eternal consciousness" to have an approximation, a 'more or less,' as its basis (PF 1). Therefore, Anti-Climacus regards a "historical Christianity" as "nonsense and un-Christian muddled

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<sup>24</sup> James L. Marsh, "Kierkegaard's Double Dialectic of Despair and Sin," in Perkins, *International Kierkegaard Commentary: The Sickness Unto Death*, 77.

<sup>25</sup> See Simon D. Podmore, "The Lightning and the Earthquake: Kierkegaard on the *Anfechtung* of Luther," *Heythrop Journal* 47/4 (Oct. 2006): 562-78.

<sup>26</sup> Dupré, "The Constitution of the Self," 516.

thinking” (PC 64). Rather, the God-relation, because it is an eternal, absolute relation, must be unmediated by history: “In relation to the absolute, there is only one time, the present” (63). This makes Kierkegaard’s view of the mediation of Christ interesting. “And since Christ is the absolute”, Anti-Climacus writes, “the three, the seven, the fifteen, the seventeen, the eighteen hundred years make no difference at all; they do not change him, but neither do they reveal who he was” (63). Thus, the concept of “contemporaneity with Christ,” which we will discuss below, is central to Kierkegaard’s view of the God-relation.

The relation to God is also (ii) unmediated by moral norms. For Kant, morality has the form of universality.<sup>27</sup> By acting ethically, one is part of a universal form of life. Yet, for Kierkegaard’s Johannes de Silentio, the “absolute relation” to God rends the individual’s mediation in the universal. Rather, “the single individual as the single individual stands in an absolute relation to the absolute” (FT 56). This relation, just because it is absolute, is not mediated by anything, including moral norms.<sup>28</sup>

The state and society (iii) do not mediate the individual’s God-relation. This was particularly important for Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark.<sup>29</sup> In *Practice in Christianity*, published just after the key events of 1848-49,<sup>30</sup> Anti-Climacus writes:

When an individual appeals to his relationship with God over against the established order that has deified itself, it does indeed seem as if he were making himself more than human. But he is not doing that at all, for he admits, after all, that every human being, unconditionally every person, has and is to have for his part the same relationship with God. (PC 91)

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<sup>27</sup> The case of Hegel is more complicated. See Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, v. “Ethical Life and Custom,” “Morality.”

<sup>28</sup> Glenn, “The Definition of the Self,” 18. There is, of course, debate about the status of ethics in *Fear and Trembling*. For an overview, see John Lippitt, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kierkegaard and Fear and Trembling* (NY/London: Routledge, 2003), 135-76, esp. 142-52 and 158-61.

<sup>29</sup> Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 171. See also Bruce H. Kirmmse, “The Thunderstorm: Kierkegaard’s Ecclesiology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17/1 (2000): 87-102.

<sup>30</sup> Kirmmse, “The Thunderstorm,” 92-5.

Thus, what one has in Kierkegaard is not a society mediating individuals and God, but a series of individuals who are all individually related to God. The point is confirmed on the interpersonal level, where God is the “middle term” between person and person (WL 107).

There is no society ‘from below’ nor ‘from above.’

In a similar way, neither (iv) the Church as congregation nor as (v) other believers mediate the God-relation. Although “from the Church... it is possible to learn what is essentially Christian” (CUP 39), what it professes is this: “Christianly, struggling is always done by single individuals, because spirit is precisely this, that everyone is an individual before God, that ‘fellowship’ is a lower category than ‘the single individual’” (PC 223). The key passage continues:

And even if the individuals were in the thousands and as such struggled jointly, Christianly understood each individual is struggling, besides jointly with the others, also within himself, and must as a single individual give an accounting on judgment day, when his life as an individual will be examined. Thus, the congregation does not really come until eternity... where it is, at rest, the gathering of all the single individuals who endured in the struggle and passed the test.

This opens, however, an interesting question about whether Kierkegaard’s ecclesiology rather one-sidedly expresses his actual views. In his early journals, he conceives of a synthesis between ‘Church’ (the institutional) and ‘faith’ (the individual). He “had the notion that the prevailing situation was a product of the times, and that after the age of individualism the Church would be able to return”.<sup>31</sup> In this passage from *Practice in Christianity*, he appears to be displacing ‘after the age’ to the eschaton. However, in the years following, Kierkegaard’s position radicalized such that by 1855 he “rejected ‘the notion of the congregation’ as such”, calling it “the ruination of Christianity”.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 90.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 98.

Inversely, there is no congregation 'from below.' Individual believers (v) do not mediate the God-relation for others.<sup>33</sup> "One person can do much for another", Kierkegaard writes, "but he cannot give him faith", which is the decisive break with despair (*EUD* 12; cf. *SUD* 49). The key formula is: "This person is standing by himself—through my help" (*WL* 275). As with interpersonal relations, the immediate relation of the individual to God is absolute. It can be aided, but not brought about, by another. Indeed, the role of other is to absent himself such that "all the loving one's help infinitely vanishes in the God-relationship" (278).

Scripture (vi) plays the role of "guide" in the God-relation. Therein, the individual is "alone before God, alone with Holy Scripture as a guide" (*PC* 225). But this retains a negative edge: "Oh, to be alone with Holy Scripture—and if you are not, then you are not reading Holy Scripture" (*FSE* 31). Especially in the discourses, Kierkegaard emphasizes both in content and form how "the importance of Holy Scripture is to be an interpreter of the divine to mankind" (*EUD* 327). The apostles and "apostolic words" are given a significant role as a "valid witness", because "apostolic speech is essentially different in content from all human speech" (43, 59, 69). But this is because of their special teaching about Christ, who is the one mediator.

Ironically, Christ (vii), the one valid mediator in the God-relationship, does not give himself directly. Rather, he perplexes as the "absolute paradox" (*CUP* 217). This is God's own "divine cunning" (245), intended to force the individual out of immediacy into the difficulty of decision for or against the "eternal truth... come into existence in time" (209). Since "Christ is the absolute" (*PC* 63), one "becomes a Christian only in the situation of contemporaneity" with him (102). Although he came into existence at a particular time, as

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<sup>33</sup> A fact of especial concern for Jack Mulder, Jr., *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition: Conflict and Dialogue* (Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2010), 200-22.

the absolute, his time intersects all times: “Thus every human being is able to become contemporary only with the time in which he is living—and then with one more, with Christ’s life upon earth, for Christ’s life upon earth, the sacred history, stands alone by itself, outside history” (64).

Here we see that the relation to Christ is determinative of the whole dialectic: “Therefore Christ also first and foremost wants to help every human being to become a self, requires this of him first and foremost... [I]n order truly to draw him to himself he wants to draw him only as a free being to himself, that is, through a choice” (PC 160). In the situation of contemporaneity, despair is fiercest: “At this point the intensification of the consciousness of the self is the knowledge of Christ, a self directly before Christ... Now a self comes directly before Christ, a self that in despair still does not will to be itself or in despair wills to be itself” (SUD 113). And in this situation a choice must be made, *for* or *against*.

But this decision, the decision affecting one’s eternal salvation, is complicated by “a prodigious halt, the halt that is the condition for faith to be able to come into existence”, one is “by the possibility of offense” (PC 39). The “possibility of the offense” lies in the contradiction “to be an individual human being, a lowly human being—and then to act in the character of being God” (97). This is the ‘absolute paradox’.<sup>34</sup> As Malantschuk writes, “[E]veryone has to repeat the difficult process of meeting Christ in his debased form and believing in him under those conditions”.<sup>35</sup> That *this* human person, in his humiliation, is in fact *God*, is the “most profound incognito” (PC 128). “And yet”, Anti-Climacus writes, “he is the Saviour, and for no human being is there salvation except through him” (77). “The

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<sup>34</sup> Evans is unconvincing in arguing that the incarnation “appears to be a contradiction, not because we know that God and man are mutually exclusive genera, but because our sinfulness makes it impossible for us to understand an act which is a manifestation of pure, unselfish love” (*Kierkegaard on Faith and the Self*, 308). His central point, however, that the paradox is not conceptual but existential, holds. But it is not a matter of sinfulness and love but of the infinite appearing in the finite, the eternal in time, and confronting us there.

<sup>35</sup> Malantschuk, *Kierkegaard’s Concept of Existence*, 69.

greatest possible human misery”, therefore, “greater even than sin, is to be offended at Christ and to continue in the offense; and Christ cannot, ‘love’ cannot, make this impossible” (*SUD* 126).

But if one is not offended—if one does not commit the sin against the Holy Spirit by declaring Christianity to be untruth (125)—if one does come to faith, then despair ceases and salvation has come to this house—this house of one. Then, “in relating itself to itself and in willing to be itself, the self rests transparently in the power that established it. This formula in turn, as has been frequently pointed out, is the definition of faith” (131). The self has traversed the channels of despair even up to its dialectically sharpest point, but has now seen out its resolution by placing its faith in the forgiveness of sin offered by Christ, the annulment of despair. Thus, “[t]he person who does not take offense *worships* in faith” (129, emphasis in original), because of the magnificence of the God who offers forgiveness.

“But to worship”, Anti-Climacus continues, “which is the expression of faith, is to express that the infinite, chasmic, qualitative abyss between them is confirmed” (129). In this, he concurs with Climacus: “*Worship* is the maximum for a human being’s relationship with God, and thereby for his likeness to God since the qualities are absolutely different” (*CUP* 413, emphasis in original). Kierkegaard himself explains: “The human being and God do not resemble each other directly but inversely; only when God has infinitely become the eternal and omnipotent object of worship and the human being always a worshipper, only then do they resemble each other” (*UDVS* 193).<sup>36</sup> But this ‘eternal and omnipotent object of worship’ is not God *simpliciter*: “If this madness were possible, that an individual human being was God, then to be consistent one would have to worship this particular human being” (*PC* 49). Christ himself is the object of our worship in faith.

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<sup>36</sup> Cited in Walsh, *Kierkegaard*, 72.

There is further demand placed on the one who would worship Christ, who forgives our sin. Later in *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus criticises the one who would be only an “admirer” of Christ and not also an “imitator” (241). Yet the sharp distinction between the human being and God does not cease, for “to be a Christian certainly does not mean to be Christ (what blasphemy!) but means to be his imitator” (106). Because “his life was *the truth*” (245, emphasis in original), Christ’s “whole life in all its aspects must supply the norm for the life of the following Christian” (*JP* 1: 273).<sup>37</sup> Christ’s life was the “Prototype” (*PC* 202; *JFY* 207) for which ours is an imitation, or a following after.<sup>38</sup> It is in this infinite difference which remains in our worship and imitation that we most ‘approach’ likeness to God. But there is one further way: love.

In a celebrated passage from *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard makes the claim: “If there were no spring at the bottom, if God were not love, then there would be neither a little lake nor a man’s love. As the still waters begin obscurely in the deep spring, so a man’s love mysteriously begins in God’s love” (27). Later on, he writes that “as Christianity’s joyful message is contained in the doctrine of humanity’s inherent kinship with God, so is Christianity’s task humanity’s likeness to God. But God is Love, and therefore we can be like God only in loving” (62-3). As our love grows out of the deep spring of God’s love, we grow in ‘likeness’ to the One who is love. And yet the ontological chasm still holds, for as Gouwens rightly claims, “Despite the ‘well-spring’ image, Kierkegaard does not state an *identity* between divine and human love. Human love is rather modeled upon Christ as an ‘imitation,’ a distinctively human love”.<sup>39</sup> For Kierkegaard, this is the greatest source of

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<sup>37</sup> Cited in Gouwens, *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 173.

<sup>38</sup> Hampson notes that Kierkegaard stands in the Lutheran *Nachfolge* and not the Catholic *imitatio* tradition: “What Kierkegaard speaks of is, in Danish, a *Kristi Efterfølgelsen*, a following after Christ and the exact equivalent of the German *Nachfolge Christi*” (*Christian Contradictions*, 266).

<sup>39</sup> *Kierkegaard as Religious Thinker*, 195, emphasis in original.

comfort, that even in our closest intimacy with and likeness to God, in worship, in imitation and in our little and often failing human love, we remain infinitely qualitatively distinct from him:<sup>40</sup> “And then should not the thought that in relation to God we are always in the wrong be inspiring, for what else does it express but that God’s love is always greater than our love?” (EO2 353).

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<sup>40</sup> That the ‘infinite qualitative distinction’ is a source of spiritual comfort rather than despair is the thesis of Simon D. Podmore’s excellent new volume, *Kierkegaard and the Self Before God: Anatomy of the Abyss* (Bloomington/ Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 2011). Unfortunately, it came to my attention too late to make the use of it which it deserves.

### III. MAURICE BLONDEL

#### A. THE SELF

Blondel develops his anthropology in a philosophy of action. The human person is continually, and inevitably, in action. But does this action have meaning? Does it have a destiny to which it tends? In his 1893 doctoral dissertation, *L'Action*, Blondel seeks to answer these questions by means of a phenomenological analysis of human action. He proceeds upwards by way of various syntheses, showing that the problem of action is not resolved by the different 'determinisms' out of which it develops—physiological, psychological, social. Reason continues to ascend higher. The continual infinitising pressure of the will seeks an end beyond any finite object, an infinite end to equal its own desire, something equal to its own infinity. This end, reason finds, is present nowhere in immanence, constructed as it is of finite goods. Action demands a transcendent completion.

As a Catholic, Blondel sought to develop a philosophy which, in his words, "though entirely distinct from the supernatural order, would be the natural and necessary underpinning of that order".<sup>1</sup> Though rigorously undertaking such a project in *L'Action*, it did not fail to arouse suspicion at its defense at the Sorbonne.<sup>2</sup> Nearly forty years later, however, he continued to defend its strictly philosophical character: "I introduce nothing, I enter in no way upon the least content of Catholic religion. I stop at the threshold".<sup>3</sup> It is this notion of the 'threshold' which most aptly describes Blondel's early project in *L'Action*.

There, he develops all that follows of necessity from the human phenomenon of action, all

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<sup>1</sup> As cited in Oliva Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel: A Philosophical Life* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2010), 64.

<sup>2</sup> See *ibid.*, 3-24.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Blondel, "Y a-t-il une philosophie chrétienne ?," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 38/4 (1931): 604.

that would have to be were there to be a revelation that would demand a human response, without yet determining if a revelation had taken place or what its content would be.

At the base of human action, various reasons for action appear, embracing the whole dimension of physiological and psychological motivators. These are not all equal in strength nor direction, nor do they organize themselves. Rather, there must be “the immanent action of a power capable of embracing the whole multiplicity of contraries in a superior unity, and this one must call reason” (A 112). Reason is a superior organising power, the faculty entrusted with sorting and discerning between the “rival reasons” offered to it (112). There is an infinite stretch of such potential reasons, and so a “regulative idea of infinity” vis-à-vis multiple, finite motives (117). Further, no one reason is sufficient to force an action, but reason itself intervenes, “participating in an infinite power”, to give life to an act. This “synthesis” of “the power and the idea of infinity” is “what one calls freedom” (121).

But the infinite quality of action finds no adequate expression in the finite concrete acts to which it gives birth. A pressure emerges, a tension between the faculty of the will, which is infinite in idea and power, and the objects of the will, which are multiple and finite. Blondel writes, “This then is why, in proposing freedom as an end, one senses a disproportion between the power of the will (*la volonté voulante*), *quod procedit ex voluntate*, and the object of the will (*la volonté voulue*), *quod voluntatis objectum fit*” (A 132). But “[i]t is necessary to equalize the will” (133), because “action does not appear to be able to encounter its support or conclusion except in an infinite reality” (305). The problem reaches a head, however, because all the objects of immanence are finite. Whence this ‘infinite reality’? Blondel instructs us: “In order to give an equivalence to our voluntary action, it is necessary to look within us to the point where what is ours ceases” (347).

To this we will return, but for now Blondel marks two formal qualities of this need. From the side of human action, this completion in an infinite end is both “*necessary*” and “*impracticable*” (A 319, emphasis original). Action demands its equalisation, its completion, and yet it cannot supply its own need. Help must come from outside. From the side of transcendence, the fulfillment of action is gratuitous. Yet, as Blondel writes only a few years after *L’Action*, “the gift which is gratuitous and free in its source becomes for the subject of it inevitable and obligatory” (LA 154). Once offered the opportunity to fulfill its essential lack in an infinite end, the gift thus offered becomes binding. Such a revelation demands a positive response, for, as he would write much later, “no one can shirk it with impunity” (PEC 1: 67).

So situated, the human person remains with “an open fissure”, a “place prepared” for the advent of a transcendent fulfillment.<sup>4</sup> A person cannot remain in such a state of inconsistency, of lack. Reason demands that the will’s infinite power be equalled by an infinite object. “Reason”, thus, “is catechumenal”, in Coutagne’s phrase.<sup>5</sup> There are certain preparations that can be made on the side of human action to properly await a revelation bearing the fulfillment of its own inherent lack. Fifty years later, Blondel writes<sup>6</sup>: “Only a work of the soul, but a work which is normal, which imposes itself on a conscience upright and open to moral and religious realities, can prepare a reception which renders the lesson of signs and the stimulations of grace effective” (PEC 2: 29). But for now, we leave the human person ready and waiting.

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<sup>4</sup> Maurice Blondel, letter to Werhlé, *Archives de Philosophie*, February-March 1961, 118-119; cited in Jean Lacroix, “Blondel et la dialectique du Désir,” *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 71/12 (1973): 689.

<sup>5</sup> Marie-Jeanne Coutagne, “Le Christ et l’énigme du monde: La christologie blondélienne 1916-1925,” in *Le Christ de Maurice Blondel*, ed. René Virgoulay (Paris: Desclée, 2003), 112.

<sup>6</sup> Or rather, dictates. In March 1926 (he died in 1949), Blondel suffered a retinal haemorrhage. Remarkably, he published a seven-volume tetralogy in later life by way of this dictation. See Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 320ff.

## B. GOD

As with Kierkegaard, so too with Blondel: his innovativeness lies in his view of the self, not his doctrine of God. In *L'itinéraire philosophique de Maurice Blondel*, a set of three interviews given in 1928, Blondel gives a description of three conceptions of God ingredient in and necessary to Catholicism. In the first, God is a “mysterious Transcendence... defiant toward all anthropomorphism” (IP 249). In the second, God is “the Object *par excellence*, the perfect ‘Intelligible,’ the principle of all essences and existences, the Ocean of being and truth” (250). In the third and final view, which is “the ‘Good News’ itself”, there is “evoke[d] the sublime word of Saint John: *Deus caritas est*” (250). Even this third view, the most clearly and specifically Christian, “were one to be inspired by it as by an exclusive notion, would be falsified; and this, instead of magnifying it, would diminish it” (251). This provides a helpful frame for examining Blondel’s doctrine of God. We will treat the three views in reverse order: (i) the God of charity, (ii) the God of being and truth, and (iii) the transcendent God.

Blondel’s God of charity (i) is most evident in his trinitarianism, which bears affinities with the Augustinian Richard of St. Victor’s model of lover, beloved and common object of love.<sup>7</sup> In *La philosophe et l’Esprit chrétien*, he writes, “The Father is charity and donative light, clarifying and embracing; the Son, the eternal Word, is a Pontiff, sacrificing himself to his Father, and from whom, as from the Father, proceeds the Spirit, consubstantial Love, unifying and beatifying” (1: 25). What *is* unique about such a theology is the way it seems to inscribe the suffering work of redemption into the eternal relations of the Trinity. But the Augustinian frame is clear: the Father is origin, *fons divinitatis*; the Son reciprocates this

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<sup>7</sup> See Richard of St. Victor, *De Trinitate* 3.14, “Quod communicatio amoris non potest esse omnino minus quam in tribus personis,” in idem, *De Trinitate: Texte critique avec introduction, notes et tables*, ed. Jean Ribailleur (Paris: Vrin, 1958), 149-50.

donation with his own loving self-gift, and the Spirit is the divine *osculum* who “consummates the Unity of the Trinity itself” (VS 106).

The God of being and truth (ii) is present inchoately from Blondel’s earliest work, but comes to the fore in the tetralogy he developed in later life as an extension and consolidation of his early work in *L’Action*. In the 1920s and ‘30s, he worked on a trilogy on Thought, Being and beings, and Action.<sup>8</sup> Here, Blondel takes up the same project he initiated in his doctoral dissertation, but with a view to thought and being, as well as action. The goal is to show that human thought and being are incomplete and call forth a supernatural completion, just as the goal in *L’Action* was to show the insufficiency of human action to achieve its own internal teleology. He deploys tensions between *la pensée pensante* and *la pensée pensée* and Being in itself and finite beings in order to show up these aporiai, which receive their resolution only in a supernatural fulfillment.

The transcendence of God (iii) is foundational to Blondel’s entire project. God must be utterly transcendent, because human action has need of a completion it can in no way attain on its own. In an important excursus, Blondel delineates his understanding of transcendence:

And if there is a transcendent presence and action in the human person, or in the world which we call immanent, it is not at all that this intrusion falls from another, exterior world; it is in the most intimate, the most secret depths that this ascendant stimulation and call from on high can surge, under forms which brook, one may say, no local collision, no conflict, no confusion. Therefore, there is no contradiction, no difficulty in reconciling the two metaphors St. Augustine employs to suggest the idea of the transcendent: ‘*Deus superior summo meo, Deus interior intimo meo*’; for, in this matter, if our human language has recourse to sensible expressions, it is to make us surpass the spatial, temporal or even psychological order.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée*, 2 vols. (Paris: Alcan, 1934); *L’Être et les êtres. Essai d’ontologie concrète et intégrale* (Paris: Alcan, 1935); *L’Action*, 2 vols. (Paris: Alcan, 1936-37).

<sup>9</sup> “Aspects actuels du problème de la transcendance et conception rationnelle du surnaturel,” in *L’Action*, vol. 2, *L’action humaine et les conditions de son aboutissement* (Paris: Alcan, 1937), 515.

Transcendence, then, is not a spatial relation; it is not a matter of ‘near’ and ‘far,’ for these too are creatures. Blondel, however, wants to make a further distinction, one between the ‘transcendent’ and the ‘supernatural.’ Human beings, as we saw already in *L’Action*, participate in the infinite, the transcendent. For our every action, we participate in transcendence.

“[T]he word supernatural”, on the other hand, “designates that which, within the transcendent, is essentially inaccessible to us”.<sup>10</sup> Human persons can know by the use of reason that they have need of a transcendent fulfillment, but they cannot foresee whence or how this may take place. It may only be “charitably communicated by a gratuitous gift to spiritual beings, totally incapable as they are of previewing, postulating or assimilating this mysterious condescension by their own forces”.<sup>11</sup> But once this strict transcendence is established—*ab origine mundi*—“there is no risk”, Blondel wrote in a letter to Eugène Maubec, “in insinuating to the deepest roots of nature this sap whose purity is unfading and which no promiscuity spoils”.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, in *L’Action*, he makes the curious claim that “[i]n order to reach humanity, it is necessary that God traverse the whole of nature and offer himself to him under the most rude material species” (A 449). Why this necessity for the transcendent to give itself to a human person? Because, Blondel answers, an unmediated contact with God would overwhelm a human being: no one can see God and live. But a person “is protected against the overburdening of infinite truth” by “the letter and matter, all that constitutes sensible workings, that which composes, properly speaking, action, the body of action” (449). For God to reach humanity under such conditions, God must reveal himself through ‘the letter,’

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 522.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 523.

<sup>12</sup> *Lettres philosophiques de Maurice Blondel* (Paris: Aubier Montagne, 1961), 211; cited in Xavier Tilliette, “Le panchristisme dans *L’Action* et les premiers écrits,” in *Le Christ de Maurice Blondel*, 37.

or what Blondel elsewhere calls *la pratique littérale*, and ‘matter’: “Where”, Blondel asks, “is the solution to the problem of immanence and transcendence? It is in the Incarnation and Communion”.<sup>13</sup>

### C. THE SELF IN RELATION TO GOD

The human person who remains waiting and open is faced with a decision. She is in what Blondel calls a ‘transnatural’ state. The human person, he writes, “is no longer..., has never even been in a state of pure nature, called as he is, immediately and from his origin, to an ascension” (*PEC* 1: 134). This ‘transnatural’ state is “neither pure nature, nor supernatural possession, suspended as he is between contradictory solutions, dependent on our decision in the face of an imperious alternative” (135). Human nature is not something solid, onto which may be grafted, as a kind of *superadditum*, a supernatural gift. Rather, human nature hangs poised between life and death. “[A]ll our spiritual dynamism” (*PEC* 2: 138), “the game of determinism, the conflict which has surged in consciousness, is forcibly resolved in an alternative which offers to the human will a supreme option” (*A* 351). Should a person decline the supernatural gift, it would mean death. Since “[t]he interior life only subsists by a perpetual expansion and fecundity” (142), to refuse the infinite to which it presses is to cut off the internal élan of one’s own life. It is necessary; not to grow is to die.

Nevertheless, there is a kind of death necessary for the reception of the infinite, the supernatural. “One does not acquire the infinite as a thing; one does not give access to it in oneself except by emptiness and mortification” (*A* 383). This philosophical necessity is supernaturally justified by analogies with both the events of redemption and the constitution of the Trinity. Blondel states, “[T]hat which God has onerously done for

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 19; cited in Tilliette, “Le panchristisme,” 39.

humanity, a person must, in some fashion, do onerously for God: *se ipsum exinanivit* [Phil. 2:7]" (*IP* 253-54). Just as the Son emptied himself to enter the world of immanence, a person must empty herself to receive his gift of supernatural life. But further, "[A]n experience would be necessary to permit the supernatural loan to become a meritorious acquisition and to constitute a kind of sacrifice, of spiritual death, of restitution analogous to that which, inside the Trinity, the Son, under the flame of Charity, offers to his Father" (*PEC* 1: 115). The reception of supernatural life cannot be merely passive, but must be actively received, since human action is the place of the 'open fissure' through which it may enter.

But it is the will in particular which is the site of reception. In a kind of self-effacement, "the creature must empty itself of itself, accepting voluntarily and by a true cooperation the substitution within it of the divine will for the egoism proper to its nature" (*EPC* 238). This sacrifice of "one's own will is, for a person, the path of life" (*A* 383). Blondel explains, "For, on the one hand, it is by the canal of action that revealed truth penetrates thought which losing anything of its supernatural integrity; and, on the other hand, if believing thought... has a meaning and a value, it is because it leads to action and finds in literal practice its commentary and its living reality" (400). The will of God is not of uncertain content for Blondel. Rather, it is quite clearly laid out in 'the letter'.<sup>14</sup> This is why he speaks of 'literal practice' (*la pratique littérale*) as vivifying, for obedience to the letter in faith<sup>15</sup> is the way by which supernatural life insinuates itself into the human person. "The true letter", Blondel concludes, "is therefore the reality itself of the spirit: it manifests to us the life which is inaccessible at its ground; it communicates it to us, in order that we may engender it and make it live again in us" (420).

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<sup>14</sup> He has in mind particularly the practice of the sacraments, which we will treat below, and the moral life exemplified in the Beatitudes. See *PEC* 2: 107-212.

<sup>15</sup> "Sans doute la pratique n'opère ni par aveugle magie ni par mécanisme brut; il y a des actes morts, sans esprit et sans âme, dévotion extérieure, aussi vaine ou pire que toute autre superstition" (*A* 417).

Indeed, Blondel makes use of sexual imagery to describe this new birth. He writes, “[I]n voluntary action, there operates a secret hymen of the human will and the divine will” (A 371).<sup>16</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of a “point of insertion” for the divine life (LA 163). But this is not just a birth of a new human person; rather, Blondel is willing to speak of a new birth of God in human action. “Each act”, he writes, “inspired by a thought of faith begins the birth of a new person, because it engenders God in a human life” (A 412). He elaborates, “We all have to give birth to ourselves, in giving birth to God in us, θεοτόκοι” (420). In this way, we will be “*tanquam Deus Dei*, according to the expression of saint Augustine” (IP 258).

Blondel uses various terms to describe this developing union of divine and human wills, which, as it were, engenders God in the soul. In *L’Action*, he speaks of the “necessary *the-ergy* which reintegrates the divine part in human working” (A 352). He also writes of action as that which “associates, in a perfect synthesis, two apparently incompatible natures. Wills can only be thus married, in such a manner as to form, in a close cooperation, the same thing, *ut unum sint*” (423). In addition, there is in action a “symbiosis of nature and grace” (PEC 2: 103). This is *la vie théandrique*, the new life that is at once human and divine (149 et passim). It is evident that it is not so much the particular metaphor that is significant for Blondel, but the way in which each marks both the closeness of union and yet the continuing heterogeneity of natures. As we will see later, even in the most closely developed union, even in the eschaton, there remains the essential difference between human nature and the supernatural.

Now that we have examined Blondel’s view from the side of humanity in its philosophical exigencies, we turn to his later work, where he freely treats of the mysteries of Christian revelation and correlates them with the philosophical structure he has

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<sup>16</sup> He uses the image of the “hymen” at least four other places (“Pour la philosophie intégrale,” *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie* 37/42 (1934): 59; PEC 1: ix, 153; EPC 164).

established. Christ, as we saw even in Blondel's trinitarianism, is primarily the eternal Pontiff, "our great high priest who has gone through the heavens" (Heb. 4:14). He writes of "the sublime role of He who is called the eternal Pontiff, because, already inside the trinitarian life, he is the bond of light and of love, and also because, between the Creator and creatures, he made himself the bridge (*le pont*), *Pontifex*, the passage reuniting the extremities" (*PEC* 1: 89). But Christ not only made himself the bridge; rather, it is "the trinitarian counsel who decided to made humanity in its resemblance by the mediation of the eternal Word becoming incarnate and assuming our nature" (50). God undertook the salvation of lost humanity, a humanity which had irremediably—for its own part—declined its supernatural vocation, and to do this, the Son "traverse[d] the whole of nature" (A 449) to reintroduce us to his supernatural life.

Though becoming incarnate in a particular place and time, there is a necessity, according to Blondel, for Christ's mediation to be "independent of times and places; truly universal and of a permanent efficacy; perpetuating itself not as something future or past, but as the eternal present" (A 399). This is necessary for the mediation of divine life to human beings in all times and places, not only those in those thirty years in Palestine. For human action, the receptacle of the supernatural gift, mirrors this eternal provision with its unending need: "[l]ts mediation is not at all passing, but permanent; it is the perpetual means of interior conversion" (408). The sacrifice of Calvary, which makes restoration for the "virtually deicidal character of sin" (*PEC* 1: 157), closed as it is to the infinite gift of life, "is therefore a reality which one can call permanent and eternal" (180).

Blondel, however, did not consider “explicit historical confrontation” with Christ necessary for the reception of the supernatural gift.<sup>17</sup> There is a way to receive the graces mediated universally and eternally by Christ without having to encounter him in time and space. But what is this way? The answer is straightforward: Tradition. The Tradition of the Church is “God delivering himself to humanity”, it is Christ himself handing himself over to us (*PEC* 2: 82): “The Tradition is the realisation of this veiled and present life of Christ who... assures the essential and divine animation of his mystical Body” (79). It is necessary, then, to clarify what Blondel means by Tradition.

Tradition is not simply another source, an oral one perhaps, in addition to and alongside Scripture. Rather, the Tradition is the whole of the Church’s life *in toto et singulo*. Put simply, “[T]radition”, Scott writes, “is the life, the action, of the Church”.<sup>18</sup> Just as a person receives the supernatural gift through voluntary adherence to the divine will, so too does the Church receive its supernatural life as a communion through the revivifying presence of its Tradition. As Blondel wrote in *L’Action*, “[I]t is like the thought of this spiritual organism and the contribution of each member of this great body to the functions of the spirit” (413). Tradition is acting on *la pratique littérale*, the commands of the Saviour, and keeping these commands brings both light and life:

A man can carry out completely what he cannot entirely understand, and in doing it he keeps alive within him the consciousness of a reality which is still half hidden from him. ‘To keep’ the word of God means in the first place to do it, to put it into practice; and the deposit of Tradition... cannot be used and developed, unless it is confided to the practical obedience of love. (*HD* 273-74)

Just because the Church is one Body, however, does not mean that all exercise the same role vis-à-vis the Tradition and the mediation of Christ’s grace in and through it.

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<sup>17</sup> Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 707.

<sup>18</sup> William A. Scott, S.J., “The Notion of Tradition in Maurice Blondel,” *Theological Studies* 27/3 (1966): 392.

The infallible Magisterium is a divinely guaranteed regular means of assistance (*HD* 277-78). But most interesting, for our purposes, is the way Blondel speaks of the priesthood.<sup>19</sup> “[T]he priest”, he writes, “is Christ continued” (*PEC* 2: 159). The priest’s role in the distribution of the sacraments, which form part of *la pratique littérale*, is indispensable:

Thus, the whole plan for an adoptive assumption and supernatural transforming union is realised by the priesthood of which Christ is the supreme Pontiff. It is the positive realisation of this deiform destiny that the priesthood of Christ and his priests have, as an end, to elevate humanity; and thus, the social sacrament *par excellence* is that of Orders, to which run all the others to prepare its conditions of existence and final achievement. (164)

The priesthood’s mediation is essential for the service of the sacraments, which are instruments of grace for the mystical Body. Yet there is one sacrament Blondel has particularly in mind: only a priest can consecrate the Eucharist.

The “supernatural life”, Blondel writes, “takes a body, if one can so speak, in our flesh itself and even in the matter and by the matter of the sacramental instrumentation” (*PEC* 2: 122). As we noted above, no grace can be offered to the human person unmediated, for that would overwhelm her. All grace which comes to her must ‘take a body.’ This is especially true of the sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ. The Eucharist, “doubly corporeal”,<sup>20</sup> is called “the eucharistic banquet, mystical hymen of the human creature and its God” (*PEC* 1: 153), because it is here above all that the supernatural life comes to dwell in human persons, the Body of Christ in a human body. Because it bears the gift of life, it effects, “so to speak, an inverse transubstantiation, in order to insert us into its own life” (*PEC* 2: 169). There is an “[a]ssimilation, we may say, but in a sense inverse to that of earthly food: it is to assimilate us to him that God gives himself to us” (169).

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<sup>19</sup> Blondel himself considered the priesthood, but saw an apostolate in his life as a philosopher. On this, see Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 97-105.

<sup>20</sup> Pierre de Cointet, “Le Médiateur. La Trilogie et La Philosophie et l’Esprit chrétien,” in *Le Christ de Maurice Blondel*, 178.

Even in the early *L'Action*, assimilation to the supernatural life appears as a philosophical necessity: "It is a total assimilation that must obtain, an assimilation of the whole organism to this principle of superior life" (412). The means of this assimilation is clear, even here: "From the moment that we maintain this vivifying force in ourselves, it performs in our fleshly mass, in our desires and in our appetites a slow work of transubstantiation and conversion" (412). The reception of sacramental grace is transformative of the natural human person; its "insertion" into us "reforms and transfigures the functions of nature" (420). In a later work, he writes, "[A]ll our faculties, having come from God, must unite, complement each other and perfect the synergy of which Saint Paul said that to live in plenitude is to live Christ himself" (*PEC* 2: 213). The reception of the supernatural gift, the infinite life in the self is experienced as a "dilation" of the human person, in order that the finite may be capable of the infinite. At the time, this "intrusion of the infinite into our natural limits" may "seem lethal" and cause great spiritual agony, but it is only in this way that we truly become ourselves (239).

In an additional chapter added to *L'Action* before its publication, Blondel writes, "It is impossible to really touch another being, impossible to touch oneself without passing by way of this 'one thing necessary' which must become our only will" (442). There is no immediate communication between beings, even between the human person and her self. All must pass by way of God to truly attain another. The path of our human destiny "seems to have for its end to remove us from ourselves, foremost in order to give ourselves to God, and then to render ourselves to ourselves", but in so doing, "enriching us with the divine presence itself" (*PEC* 1: 55). "[I]ndividual determinations", he states, "are, for a human being, the condition and the means of his immense dilation: if he has a divine vocation, if, at the heart of the infinite itself, he must remain a distinct person, it is not in ceasing to be an

individual... The true infinite is not in the universal abstract, it is in the singular concrete" (A 448-49).

The relationship of the self with God remains one of "mutual compenetration and of union in incommensurability".<sup>21</sup> Both hold: the intimacy of the union and the heterogeneity of the natures so joined. Indeed, to attain proper definitional rigour, Blondel turns to a biblical word: "[T]he exact term is that of adoption, most apt to secure the substantial distinction at the same time as the paternal, fraternal and totally vitalising intimacy of the trinitarian habitation in us in the life of grace, and of our personal habitation in the life of glory" (*PEC 2* : 287). Blondel is enough of a theologian to know that even in the eschaton, God remains God, and only so do we become fully ourselves.

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<sup>21</sup> "Pour la philosophie intégrale," 52.

## IV. COMPARISONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### A. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

In this final section, we will focus on two topics that were addressed in the separate treatments of Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Blondel. First, their understandings of divine transcendence and its relation to creaturely immanence. Second, and relatedly, the understanding of and theological justification for the mediation (Blondel) or immediacy (Kierkegaard) of God's presence and grace. We will conclude by moving from philosophical and systematic theology to options in spiritual theology. First however, some preliminary remarks about surprising similarities and unsurprising differences between our two thinkers.

Unsurprisingly, Kierkegaard and Blondel exhibit typical Protestant-Catholic differences. Kierkegaard, in the voice of Anti-Climacus, claims, "Very simply and, if you wish also, very Lutherably: only the consciousness of sin can force one, if I dare to put it that way (from the other side grace is the force), into this horror... Admittance is only through the consciousness of sin; to want to enter by any other road is high treason against Christianity" (CUP 67-8). Blondel, on the other hand, believes that there are certain natural preparations that may take place to form a proper spiritual disposition, open to the proffered supernatural gift. This is marked by the basic difference between the former's *The Sickness Unto Death*, a dialectical analysis of the progression from the sin of despair into faith, and the latter's *L'Action*, a phenomenology of properly functioning human action, awaiting its transcendent fulfillment.

Surprisingly, however, Kierkegaard and Blondel exhibit a series of close-knit convergences that can be partially attributed to their common role as modern philosophers. Both make the human subject, and her emergence as a self, central to their thought. Both value actuality over ideality, existence over bare thought. Both espouse a vital role for the

faculty of the will and give it a decisive function with relation to the intellect or reason and the actualisation of human action. This might be unremarkable but for the position given to the “absolute decision” (Kierkegaard, *CUP* 488) or the “supreme option” (Blondel, *A* 351) in the human person coming to himself before God. This choice is also, for both, something that needs to be continually reactualised. Both further propose that the structure of selfhood is universal in such a way that coming to God is possible outside the revelation of Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

## **B. DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE**

But so much for preliminaries. The category of transcendence needs closer attention for the role it plays for both thinkers. Let us return to some texts we have already examined above and spend more time with them. Kierkegaard’s “infinite qualitative difference” (*PC* 140; *SUD* 126) between God and a human being acts as *the* ontological frame for the ethical-soteriological drama of despair and faith. To invoke this framework in his pseudonymous works, as we noted, he employs a consistent set of four ciphers: the “unconditioned” (*JFY* 152), the “absolute” (*FT* 56), the “infinite” and the “eternal” (*CUP* 217). This has the function, for Kierkegaard, of forcing up the difference between God and humanity to its maximum, challenging the presumption of Danish Christendom’s claims to kinship and immediacy with God. Encountering this God is not comfortable, but harrowing, vertiginous: the yawning chasm between the transcendent God and lowly humanity is a source of

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<sup>1</sup> That is, if Climacus is to be trusted: “If someone who lives in the midst of Christianity enters, with knowledge of the true idea of God, the house of God, the house of the true God, and prays, but prays in untruth, and if someone lives in an idolatrous land but prays with all the passion of infinity, although his eyes are resting upon the image of an idol—where, then, is there more truth? The one prays in truth to God although he is worshipping an idol; the other prays in untruth to the true God and is therefore in truth worshipping an idol” (*CUP* 201). Blondel states clearly, “[L]a Justification reste universellement accessible, par l’âme de l’Eglise, à tous ceux qui ne pèchent point contre la lumière et contre l’appel intérieur, fût-il anonyme en se présentant sous des formes suffisantes à l’option surnaturellement salutaire” (“Pour la philosophie intégrale,” 59). See also, for “l’âme de l’Eglise” and the possibility of mystics outside the Church, Maurice Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique* (Paris: Bloud & Gay, 1925), 59.

anxiety. The God who comes to Abraham, on Johannes de Silentio's reading, is infinitely demanding. Kierkegaard's view of divine transcendence seems directly—infinately—opposed to immanence.

And yet, the non-pseudonymous and Anti-Climacean works present a somewhat different picture. Is divine transcendence of the sort that it is excluded by immanence? Where the creature is, there God is not? In *Works of Love*, Kierkegaard writes, "God does not have a share in existence in such a way that he asks for his share for himself" (*WL* 161). God is not one existent alongside other existents, but graciously gives existence to all that is. For that reason, God is both intimately close and far above all created things. God is the Creator, the infinitely transcendent, who is nevertheless infinitely close to the one in need:

But the person who knows himself [to be capable of nothing] is well aware that God does not dwell in temples, but he also knows that God is with him at night when sleep refreshes and when he awakens in an alarming dream, is with him in the day of need when he is searching in vain for comfort, in the tumult of ideas when he listens in vain for a liberating word, in mortal danger when the world does not help, in his anxiety when he is afraid of himself, in the moment of despair when he is working out his soul's salvation in fear and trembling. He knows that God is with him in the moment when anxiety rushes upon him with lightning speed, when it already seems too late and there is no time left to go to the house of the Lord; then he is with him, swifter than the light that pierces the darkness, swifter than the thought that chases away the fog—present—yes, present as swiftly as only one can be who was already present. (*EUD* 322-23)

Yet even closer, and even farther, does God come in Christ. As Anti-Climacus writes, "No teaching on earth has ever really brought God and man so close together as Christianity, nor can any do so, for only God himself can do that" (*SUD* 117). Only God himself can cross the abyss, the 'infinite qualitative difference' between God and a human being. And this he does in the Incarnation, in order to cross even the one mark that can never be a mark of likeness between God and humanity: the forgiveness of sin (122). Yet even here, God in Christ retains the possibility of distance "by means of the offense" (117). God is not transcendent

in such a way that he cannot take on lowly human flesh; divine transcendence, in other words, is not spatial, not local. God's presence is not excluded by the presence of a creature, such as Jesus of Nazareth. But it is guarded, ethically-soteriologically, against human self-exaltation by the paradox, the possibility of offense, the gravest form of despair.

Blondel's view of transcendence is far less dialectical. There is, he writes, "no local collision, no conflict, no confusion" between divine transcendence and creaturely immanence.<sup>2</sup> It is not a matter of "intrusion" from an "exterior world", but rather, God surges from the "the most intimate, the most secret depths" of the human consciousness, even as he remains utterly transcendent and inaccessible.<sup>3</sup> This is, in fact, the whole journey of *L'Action*, tracing the "ascendant stimulation and call from on high" that reaches us from within the very phenomena of human action, stretching toward the infinite. At first, it appears that Blondel's view of divine transcendence is the opposite of Kierkegaard's understanding: rather than standing infinitely removed from immanence, God is at its very core, while still remaining distinct from it.

The story, however, is different again if we turn from this later excursus to a key section in the earlier *L'Action*. In the additional chapter added for publication, Blondel is discussing the "immense dilation" a person undergoes in receiving this infinite life (A 448). Yet, he adds, this dilation does not absorb a human being into an undifferentiated infinity or absolute, but allows him to retain his "individual determinations" (448). For, Blondel argues, "[t]he true infinite is not in the universal abstract, it is in the singular concrete" (449). As Anti-Climacus puts it, "God does not avail himself of an abridgment; he comprehends (*comprendit*) actuality itself, all its particulars", and moreover, "is present in person at

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<sup>2</sup> "Aspects actuels du problème de la transcendance et conception rationnelle du surnaturel," in *L'Action*, vol. 2, *L'action humaine et les conditions de son aboutissement* (Paris: Alcan, 1937), 515.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

every point, is everywhere present at every moment” (SUD 121). God’s omnipresence, in other words, is not diffuse; God does not spread out his presence throughout the creation, but rather is immediately and fully present at each and every point and time. The consequence of this form of presence is that finite creatures retain their determinations when they are acted upon—even ‘dilated’—by the infinite God.

Yet here Blondel introduces a restriction which separates him decisively from Kierkegaard. Continuing from his defense of “the singular concrete”, he claims, “By this very fact is manifested, in all its grandeur, the role of that which one calls the letter and matter, all that constitutes sensible workings, that which composes, properly speaking, action, the body of action. For”, he explains, “it is by this matter that the truth of the oppressive (*l’accablant*) infinite communicates itself intimately to each individual; and by it each person is protected against the overburdening (*l’accablement*) of infinite truth” (A 449). Blondel recognises the same consequences that would hold for an immediate encounter with the infinite as does Kierkegaard, yet he avoids them by positing a necessary mediation of the transcendent: “In order to reach humanity, it is necessary”, therefore, “that God traverse the whole of nature and offer himself to him under the most rude material species” (449). Blondel and Kierkegaard hold the same view of divine transcendence vis-à-vis creaturely immanence,<sup>4</sup> a non-conflictual, non-locative understanding, and yet hold opposite positions on the mediation of divine presence. For the former, divine transcendence includes the possibility of finite, creaturely means of grace; for the latter, divine transcendence precludes any straightforward, non-paradoxical mediation of grace.

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<sup>4</sup> If Kierkegaard’s pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous works can be justly synthesized, as I have done.

### C. THE QUESTION OF MEDIATION

How can this be? Are Kierkegaard and Blondel simply repeating Protestant and Catholic theologies of mediation or immediacy without correlating them with their doctrines of divine transcendence? Does the claim of Lévy hold, that “[o]ne and the same doctrine cannot share in two other doctrines, totally incompatible between themselves, without losing all its internal coherence”?<sup>5</sup> Divine transcendence and the mediation or immediacy of the divine presence are coordinated doctrines, are they not? The solution perhaps lays in the very fact that Kierkegaard and Blondel both hold the same notion of transcendence, as paradoxical at that may sound. For both, God’s transcendence is non-locative, not opposed to presence in immanence. God is not far ‘above the heavens’ in a way that would mean he is absent from the earth. But this also means that God has sovereign freedom vis-à-vis the creation. God may be, as he wishes, present mediately or immediately, paradoxically or straightforwardly, because neither option is excluded by his utter transcendence.

Thus, Kierkegaard and Blondel do simply repeat Protestant and Catholic understandings of immediacy and mediation, but without conflict with their shared doctrine of divine transcendence. The emphases of the two thinkers are certainly in different areas: the former centers on the abyssal gulf between the Creator and the creature, the infinite and the finite, whereas the latter centers on the ungraspable closeness of the Creator’s infinite and supernatural fulfillment to the finite creature. Yet both finally must accept the other pole of the doctrine, because a non-locative understanding of transcendence is necessary to secure the coherence of Christianity’s central teaching: the Incarnation of the “one mediator between God and humanity” (1 Tim. 2:5). God is not so high above the earth that he cannot “empty himself” (Phil. 2:7) and “become flesh” (John 1:14). And just because

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<sup>5</sup> Antoine Lévy, *Le créé et l’incréé. Maxime le confesseur et Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 52.

it is *God* who is incarnate in Jesus, there is a descent, an advent from absolute otherness rather than from within immanence.

Each then develops his theology of immediacy or mediation without impediment from his doctrine of divine transcendence. Blondel adopts, in common Catholic fashion, a metaphysics of participation, in which “sacramental matter” (A 420) shares in the life-giving font of the Trinity, without for all that having identity with that life. Kierkegaard, on the other hand, develops a grammar for the non-mediatory roles of other creatures. Scripture ‘interprets’ (EUD 327) and ‘witnesses’ to the gospel (59), and ‘guides’ one along the way (PC 225). A believer may ‘help’ (WL 275ff.) another, but not to the decisive point.<sup>6</sup> This is much different from Blondel’s claims that “we have to become, in ourselves and for others, co-Redeemers”, like Mary (PEC 1: 190), or that the Eucharist is the “effective and permanent prolongation of the incarnate Word” (PEC 2: 64). Rather than bearing God’s presence themselves, for Kierkegaard, these other aids only point toward the God paradoxically present to us in Christ.

#### **D. SPIRITUAL THEOLOGY**

From this position then, we may extend our inquiries in the direction of spiritual theology. In the history of spirituality, Hans Urs von Balthasar notes a “sea change” occurring around the time of the Reformation.<sup>7</sup> Instead of the classical language of divinisation and of union with the divine nature, the language shifts to that of obedience to the divine will. This takes its most influential form in St. Ignatius’ *Spiritual Exercises*:

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<sup>6</sup> As much as Jack Mulder, Jr. tries to make of de Silentio’s claim that Abraham is “a guiding star that saves the anguished” (FT 21), principally to aid his Mariology, it amounts to no more than this: one person may help another toward faith, but cannot give it to her (*Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition*, 215ff.).

<sup>7</sup> Mark McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 106.

Ignatius builds his whole spirituality upon the concept of choice; that is, upon God's choice, accomplished in eternal freedom, which is offered to man to choose for himself. This new 'identity' and 'fusion' between the Creator's choice and that of his creature begins ever more surely to replace the classical ideal of identifying their essences, the ideal of 'deification'.<sup>8</sup>

Immediately then, we can mark one key way in which Kierkegaard and Blondel would distinguish themselves with regard to options in spiritual theology. Both are modern thinkers, and to the degree that they are, they would embrace this "recasting of the classic spiritual itinerary from an essentialist to a voluntarist frame of reference".<sup>9</sup> Kierkegaard's sources—other than the Bible, of course—were largely modern.<sup>10</sup>

Blondel, however, was influenced much more by premodern figures: he cites Bernard of Clairvaux and Thomas Aquinas in his dissertation *L'Action*, for instance (403 n.1, 421). His later work treats thinkers such as Augustine and St. Thomas.<sup>11</sup> For this reason, his spiritual vision remains a hybrid of the classical divinisation schema and the modern pattern of obedience to the divine will. In the same work in which he speaks of "divinisation" and our "assimilation" to the divine life by consumption of the "heavenly food" of the Eucharist (*PEC* 2: 169), Blondel can write the following words: "For, in the last analysis, that which serves in this life to guide us towards what is essential, is to search for and to be made to see the singular will of God in us and upon us. There is the pathway of heaven: to see God,

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<sup>8</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Mission*, trans. Donald Nichol (NY: Sheed & Ward, 1954), 225-26; cited in McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 106.

<sup>9</sup> McIntosh, *Mystical Theology*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> For Kierkegaard's relation to a series of patristic and medieval figures, see Jon Stewart, ed., *Kierkegaard and the Patristic and Medieval Traditions*, Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources, vol. 4 (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Blanchette notes that Blondel began introducing lecture courses on Aquinas and Albert the Great in 1910-11 and on Augustine in 1920-21 (*Maurice Blondel*, 267ff., 360) The year 1930, the fifteen hundred year anniversary of Augustine's death, saw Blondel publish several articles on the Church Father, including "Saint Augustin, l'unité originale et la vie permanente de sa doctrine philosophique," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 37/4 (1930): 423-469; and "Les ressources latentes de la pensée augustinienne," *Revue neo-scolastique de philosophie* 23 (1930): 261-75.

even if through the most testing darkness” (202). The question of the will of God leads us to another topic in spiritual theology: mortification.

Being “born again” (John 3:3) to be a “new person” (Col. 3:10) requires a death. As Paul writes, “our old person was crucified together with him” (Rom. 6:6). But this involves a continuing death, what Paul elsewhere calls “putting aside the deeds of darkness” (13:12) or “putting off your old person” (Eph. 4:22). This ‘mortification’ has always been a part of spiritual theology, involving in different ways at different times a divestiture both of one’s self and of one’s attachment to other creatures. To give a broad, analytic typology—these types often appear together in any one thinker—spiritual theology has tended to offer three options with regards to attachment to creatures: first, an asceticism of the body may be matched an asceticism of the mind, a *via negationis* that demands the stripping of mental images of creatures in order to “approach the Immaterial immateriality”;<sup>12</sup> second, a contemplation of the Creator in and through creatures,<sup>13</sup> and an acceptance of quotidian life as the good gift of the Creator; and third, a devotion to God’s presence with and/or in particular creatures which are objects of his salvific action, such as meditation on the consecrated Eucharistic host or the biblical events of salvation.

With regard to these three options, Kierkegaard and Blondel both espouse a dialectical vision in which one passes through (i) an ascetic renunciation of all creatures in order to (ii) be returned them in a new gesture of faith, which nevertheless maintains the

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<sup>12</sup> Evagrius of Pontus, *Chapters on Prayer* 66, in Robert E. Sinkewicz, trans., *Evagrius of Pontus: The Greek Ascetic Corpus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: OUP, 2003), 199. Further on this topic, see Columba Stewart, O.S.B., “Imageless Prayer and the Theological Vision of Evagrius Ponticus,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 9/2 (Summer 2001): 173-204.

<sup>13</sup> Again, Evagrius Ponticus offers a fine example: “In the gnostic life, Evagrius distinguishes two stages of what he calls natural contemplation (*gnosis physike* or *theoria*): (1) second natural contemplation, that is, the gift of seeing God’s presence in the whole of visible creation (as later in Pseudo-Dionysius and Bonaventure – the *vestigia Dei*, traces or footprints of God); and (2) first natural contemplation, that is, where the monk’s insight pierces through visible signs to see invisible or incorporeal beings and the whole invisible order of creation” (Kevin Corrigan, *Evagrius and Gregory: Mind, Body and Soul in the 4<sup>th</sup> Century* [Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2009], 69).

first gesture. Blondel, further, accepts (iii) a special consecration of “sacramental matter” (A 420). Kierkegaard, conversely, (iii) offers many examples of impassioned meditation on the biblical events.<sup>14</sup> For Kierkegaard, the movement from (i) to (ii) is best illustrated by the distinction between the “knights of the infinite resignation” and the “knight of faith” (FT 38). In the story of Abraham and Isaac, Abraham has infinitely resigned himself to the death of his son, since Isaac’s sacrifice is demanded by the Absolute. And yet, according to no earthly hope nor calculation, Abraham “actually goes further and comes to faith” (37), believing that he shall have Isaac back. But this is no balancing of resignation and faith; rather, the resignation is infinite and the faith is true in spite of it, for as de Silentio claims, “only the one who draws the knife gets Isaac” (27).

Blondel writes similarly of the necessary renunciation of creatures, but with a different focus. Rather than renouncing the creature itself, Blondel demands that we “substitute for all our attractions, for all our interests, for all the natural preferences of our will, a law, an order, an absolute authority, in which we set in our act an initiative other than our own” (A 377). This is, of course, the divine will and initiative, revealed in *la pratique littérale*. In just the same dialectical motion, however, this “perfect and universal detachment reattaches us very purely to everything, with neither affiliation nor contempt; for it renders us at once very indifferent to particular forms of action and very devoted to the great and supreme motive which alone communicates to everything else and to the least of things their infinite price” (378; cf. *PEC* 2: 45). For both Kierkegaard and Blondel

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<sup>14</sup> E.g.: “If I did not have Job! It is impossible to describe all the shades of meaning and how manifold the meaning is that he has for me. I do not read him as one reads another book, with the eyes, but I lay the book, as it were, on my heart and read it with the eyes of the heart” (R 204). For detailed discussion of Kierkegaard’s use of individual figures in Scripture, see Lee C. Barrett, ed., *Kierkegaard and the Bible*, 2 vols., Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 1 (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2010).

then, one passes through resignation and detachment to arrive at a singular devotion to the will of God.

This state has been variously called *impassibilitas*, *apatheia* and *indiferencia*.<sup>15</sup> This state of the soul, the self, achieved through the mortification of one's own desires and the renunciation of creatures as goods in and for themselves, creates a "positive freedom" vis-à-vis finite goods.<sup>16</sup> The individual is subsequently a space of sheer openness to the demands and provisions of the divine will for their life, without for all that disdaining the good creation. In the words of St. Ignatius of Loyola:

Therefore, we must make ourselves indifferent to all created things, as far as we are allowed free choice and are not under any prohibition. Consequently, as far as we are concerned, we should not prefer health to sickness, riches to poverty, honor to dishonour, a long life to a short life. The same holds for all other things. Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.<sup>17</sup>

This was, one could say, the sole and engulfing concern of Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Blondel: to seek 'the end for which we are created,' the supernatural life of God, himself the beginning and end and life and joy of the human person, the beloved creature so dear to the Father that he sent his only Son into the world as a sacrifice to restore to it the singular, eternal destiny he intends. That the journey back to the arms of God could be so harrowing and so sweet, so intimate and so vertiginously disorienting is a witness to the infinite stakes of this drama within time: "For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your very self?" (Matt. 16:25-26).

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<sup>15</sup> The brief from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation," identifies the three (§18, available at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_19891015\\_meditazione-cristiana\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19891015_meditazione-cristiana_en.html)).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, §18.

<sup>17</sup> Louis J. Puhl, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: A New Translation Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1951), 12, §23.

## V. CONCLUSION

Our examination of the thought of Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Blondel has returned us to the point from which we began: What would a theology of the spiritual life in our own day look like? In the process, we have breached questions in philosophical, systematic and spiritual theology. We have only scratched the surface, not only of the thought of Kierkegaard and Blondel themselves, but also of what implications their thought may hold for constructing a positive doctrinal account of the human person's relationship to God and emergence as a self, aware of and responsible for the choice which decides her eternal destiny. In particular, we have done little to set their philosophical-theological considerations in a dogmatic frame.

In Kierkegaard, we saw that each individual moves through a dialectic of increasing despair, which, as it progresses, leads one both further and further into despair and closer and closer to God. The human person is a synthesis of finitude/infinity, necessity/possibility and eternity/temporality. Becoming a self involves becoming conscious of and responsible for one's composition as *this* particular synthesis of these pairs and not another. This is the way one receives one's creaturehood from the Creator rather than refusing to be a creature. Eventually we are led before Christ, the one who mediates between us and God and offers to forgive our sin, the sin of despair, for everything that does not come from faith is sin (Rom. 14:23). In the situation of contemporaneity with Christ, we must make the 'absolute decision': whether or not to become a Christian, to have faith.

Blondel showed us that the phenomenology of human action contains within it a pressure toward the infinite. A disproportion between an infinite will and finite objects bequeaths to the human person a search for an object of the will which equals the power of

the will. But there are no infinite objects among creatures. Only a transcendent source can complete the natural movement of the will; only God can give this in revelation. But further, God must give himself mediately, because an unmediated encounter would overwhelm the creature. The human person must empty himself of his own will and substitute for it the divine will by seeing in this revelation the supernatural fulfillment of one's own natural desire, and deciding to obey it in the practice of the moral life and the sacraments (*la pratique littérale*). This obedience to the positive commands of Christ and reception of creaturely means of grace insinuates the life of God in the human person, filling him to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph. 3:19).

The concern of both Søren Kierkegaard and Maurice Blondel was action, actuality. Both thinkers found this priority of action over bare speculation in the gospel accounts.<sup>1</sup> “Follow me”; “Take up your cross”; “Forgive your brother from your heart”; “Love one another”. Whatever good is to be made of scholarly work—and here Blondel was certainly more positive than Kierkegaard—both recognised that, Christianly speaking, the ideal is not the real, however closely it may mirror it. However much it may clarify the conditions of existence, those divinely set conditions demand a decision, a decision which bears an eternal weight and determines my destiny. In words that could have been written by either thinker, it is “my action” that “changes my life” (*JFY* 116).

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<sup>1</sup> For Blondel, see Blanchette, *Maurice Blondel*, 44: “His first thought in studying action is associated with the Gospel because, as he writes, ‘in the Gospel the power to manifest love and to acquire God is attributed to action alone,’ whereas in our day ‘we no longer are able to suffer in order to act and to produce. There is no heart. People know, understand, refine, contemplate, enjoy; but they do not live,’ whereas in the Gospel we read: ‘in Him was life and the life was the light of men’” (citing *Carnets intimes*, vol. 1 [Paris: Cerf, 1961], 85). For Kierkegaard, see e.g., the discussion of the “professor” (*JFY* 194ff.).

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