

Conway, Michael A., 'With Mind and Heart: Maurice Blondel and the Mystic Life' in *Mystical Theology: Eruptions from France*, ed., Louise Nelstrop (London: Ashgate, 2015).

## Introduction

For the greater part of the nineteenth century in France, discussing mysticism, the mystic, or the mystical was treacherous or foolhardy; best avoided. On the side of religion, this position was secured through the condemnation of Fénelon at the dusk of the great century of saints, which, to use the felicitous expression of André Bord, would end by 'beheading religion.'<sup>1</sup> On the university side, the rise of a reductive positivism heavily critiqued, and all but drowned out, any general interest in religion, and, specifically, in mysticism.<sup>2</sup> To give you some idea of this, here are two observations from the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIXe siècle* (1874): 'Mysticism engenders ecstasy and magic, the source of crimes and of madness' (Gérusez); 'All the powers of mysticism conspire to make people stupid' (Proudhon).<sup>3</sup> Not only that, but the rising discipline of psychology relegated, for the most part, all mystical experience to the domain of psychopathology, more specifically, to hysteria.<sup>4</sup> There were, of course, exceptions, but these were marginal to mainstream university thinking. The dawn, however, of a new century would see this position change, so that right from the beginning we see an extraordinary interest in, and discussion of, mysticism and the mystical; and this, somewhat ironically, at the heart of the university that was by now radically secular.

At the *Collège de France*, the outstanding figure (who emerged rather late in the day in terms of the public discourse on mysticism) is Henri Bergson, who entered there in 1900; it was, however, a number of his colleagues, including Édouard Le Roy, Jean Baruzi, and, the sociologist, Louis Massignon, who would set the proverbial ball rolling in terms of this new critical interest in mysticism. Across the road, literally, at the Sorbonne, Henri Delacroix, who taught psychology, gave the major impetus to the reappraisal of mysticism from within the university sector. These are the early leading figures; there are, however, a whole cohort of scholars, mostly in Paris and working in various disciplines, who had an interest in, and published on, mysticism.<sup>5</sup> Although marginal, at least in a geographical sense, to the Parisian scene, Maurice Blondel, teaching until his early retirement at Aix en Provence, would prove to be an important contributor to this emerging discussion and appreciation of mysticism. Blondel, right from the publication of his doctoral thesis, *L'Action* (1893), had an exceptional interest in the philosophical engagement with religion at the university. He saw the neglect of religion by philosophy as an impoverishment both for religion and for philosophy, and, he set

<sup>1</sup> André Bord, *Jean de la croix en France* (Vendôme: Beauchesne, 1993), p.145.

<sup>2</sup> It could, however, be argued that Boutroux and Lachelier in their critique of 'scientism' opened the way for a serious engagement with religion, in general, and mysticism, in particular. Many of their students would become the leading figures, who would explore mysticism—including Blondel and Bergson—at the beginning of the next century.

<sup>3</sup> *Grand Dictionnaire universel au XIXe siècle* (1874), vol. 11, p. 754, s.v. mysticisme.

<sup>4</sup> See Heiner Wilmer, *Mystik zwischen Tun und Denken : Ein neuer Zugang zur Philosophie Maurice Blondels* (Freiburg i. Br.: Herder, 1992). To date, this is the most competent study on Blondel and mysticism.

<sup>5</sup> These would include, for example, Henri Bremond, Lucien Laberthonnière, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, Maurice Pradines, Robert Fawtier, Henri Corbin, Jean Orcibal, and, somewhat later, Alexandre Koyré.

his life's task to rectify this. Thus, it is not surprising that he would react to various publications on mysticism that emerged both from within the university world and from various theological directions, most notably, neo-Thomist, as evidenced by scholars such as Jacques Maritain, Auguste Poulain, and Albert Farges. From his various reactions to others and his own discussions of mysticism, it is evident that Blondel is keen to underline the legitimate and even essential role that philosophy plays in determining what exactly is true mysticism and in differentiating this from a spectrum of false variations that had gained currency in the early decades of the twentieth century. There is a specific [role for human intelligence in mysticism](#) that can and ought to be determined. He shows that the mystic life is essentially a union that involves the whole person and so goes well beyond a reductive neoplatonic henosis. It is a spiritual dynamic that requires an ascetic life, itself an expansion and purification of human being. This life is not imposed from the outside against human freedom, but requires this very freedom and its assent in order to realize concretely its own inner logic. In the end, the mystic life involves us in an infused gift that is our ultimate richness.

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### The Report from Henry Delacroix (1905)

The first major figure to study the mystics [in twentieth-century France](#), and, who draws Blondel into an explicit discussion, was Henry Delacroix (1873-1937). Delacroix was a student of Bergson's at the Lycée Henri IV and, then, at the Sorbonne of Brochard and Boutroux. After an early interest in the German mystics of the XIVth century, he extends his research to the French mystics of the XVIIth century, and then to the Spanish mystics of the XVIth century, notably St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross. The originality of the great Christian mystics, for Delacroix, is that they go beyond the intermittent mysticism of ecstasy that one finds, say, in Plotinus to a continuous and homogeneous mysticism.<sup>6</sup> Consonant, however, with the laïque character of the university of the time, for Delacroix, any study of mysticism must be carried out without recourse to the supernatural; the most sublime states of the mystic do not exceed the power of nature.<sup>7</sup>

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For our purposes, what is of interest is the meeting of the *Société française de philosophie* of the 26 October 1905, where, if I may quote Émile Poulat, 'everything begins'<sup>8</sup> At this meeting, presided over by Xavier Léon, Delacroix presented for discussion a report entitled: 'The development of mystical states in Saint Teresa.'<sup>9</sup> He presents the initial results of a project that will culminate three years later with the publication of his celebrated *Études d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme*. Here we have, for the first time, a method being applied to mystic states in all their complexity: historical, psychological, critical, rigorously objective, and, indeed, respectful of the fact in its alleged completeness. Delacroix underlines the need for a critical historical assessment of the documents associated with the mystics, for a study of the history of ideas and the impact of tradition on individual mystic experiences, and for a psychological analysis of the development of mystic

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<sup>6</sup> See Henry Delacroix, *Études d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme : Les grands mystiques chrétiens* (Paris: Alcan, 1908), preface p. xv.

<sup>7</sup> See *ibid.*, p. xix.

<sup>8</sup> Émile Poulat, *L'université devant la Mystique* (Paris : Salvator, 1999), p. 26.

<sup>9</sup> Henri Delacroix, 'Le développement des états mystiques chez sainte Thérèse,' *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 6 (1906): pp. 1-3 ; Maurice Blondel, 'Lettre a la Société française de philosophie (1906),' in *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 2, 1888-1913: La philosophie de l'action et la crise moderniste (Paris: PUF, 1997), pp. 517-26.

consciousness. In this report, he demonstrates such a study, taking as his example, on this occasion, St Teresa of Avila. Thus, he enumerates three phases in the evolution of St Teresa's mysticism: first, where she searches out union with God through different degrees of prayer (culminating in ecstasy); secondly, a state of ecstatic pain, where God is experienced as absent; and, finally, a definitive state, which is a permanent transformation of the soul, whereby God is experienced as really present. The soul lives in God and God acts in it.

### *A Question of Methodology*

Blondel, who was unable to attend the *séance*, partly explained, no doubt, by the long travelling distance to Paris and his failing eyesight, responds to Delacroix's 'Report' in a particularly long and carefully drafted letter.<sup>10</sup> This letter will, in time, serve as a preliminary draft, so to speak, for a more substantial study of mysticism which he would present some years later (in 1925). The philosopher from Aix is keen, first, to affirm categorically the importance of a critical philosophical investigation of mysticism, but, also, secondly, to critique what he sees as deficiencies in regard to the prevailing methodology at the university. Whereas he is in full agreement with Delacroix that mysticism ought to be the object of a critical positive science (science positive), he underlines, however, what he sees as an implicit a priori postulate that distorts the discussion, namely, that everything that appears 'in' consciousness comes also 'from' consciousness. Delacroix studies mystic phenomena as being *in* the subject that is affected by them (which, in itself, is the condition of positive research), but he limits this to being *from* the subject alone; and here we have *the* fundamental problem for all attempts to deal adequately with mysticism. Under the guise of a methodological reserve—be it philosophical, ideological, or scientific—we have a prejudice or a bias of a metaphysical order at play that has an enormous influence on the interpretation, and even the initial description, of the very facts that one studies in the first place.<sup>11</sup>

The crucial issue vis-à-vis mysticism, for Blondel, is that given this particular bias, one cannot explain the difference between phenomena that have a pathological element to them and phenomena that show a genuine spiritual integrity. You cannot discern the madman from the mystic! To illustrate this Blondel underlines the difference between ordinary 'perception' and 'hallucination.'<sup>12</sup> On the one hand, in perception something of what is called the universal determinism (or the concrete order) is placed at the services of our personal ends and our practical needs; sensation is, what he terms, dynamogenic.<sup>13</sup> Now, on the other hand, hallucination cuts us off from the regularity and the nourishment of this matrix of the

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Delacroix responds to Blondel by observing that in speaking of neurosis in St Teresa, he did not wish to reduce her mysticism to a pathological phenomenon and that, on the contrary, he noted the real enrichment of her life and her personality.

<sup>12</sup> Here it is worth recalling Blondel's discussion of 'sensation' in *L'Action* (1893). See Maurice Blondel, *L'Action: Essai d'une critique de la vie et d'une science de la pratique* (Paris: Alcan, 1893, 2nd ed., Paris: PUF 1950), pp. 45-50; for the English translation, see Maurice Blondel, *Action: Essay on a Critique of life and a Science of Practice*, trans. Olivia Blanchette (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 56-61. Blondel's doctoral thesis is also available in the first volume of a planned nine-volume edition of his complete works, two of which have already been published: Maurice Blondel, *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. I, ed. Claude Troisfontaines (Paris: PUF, 1995), pp. 15-526.

<sup>13</sup> See Blondel, 'Lettre à la Société française de philosophie (1906),' p. 521.

common order. In one, you have an enrichment of our person through its place in the world order; in the other, you have a serious impoverishment.

When studying religious phenomena (and, in particular, mystical states), we find oppositions that are analogous to that between perception and hallucination. These, however, are even more profound in that they may exhibit, as their distinctive characteristic, either serious mental scars or, on the contrary, spiritual forces of a surprising plenitude and of singular integrity. For Blondel, the manner in which Delacroix treats St Teresa's mystic states, for example, presupposes as resolved the question even of their origin, with the result that he reduces them to being, like hallucinations, neurotic. In more precise language Delacroix supposed them to be an efference without an afference.<sup>14</sup>

The question is, How does one avoid such an apriori bias, and, yet, maintain the autonomy of a critical philosophy? Blondel carefully clarifies that he does not wish, in terms of methodology, that one would begin with an a priori acknowledgment of divine presence, or, for that matter, even the hypothesis of a *divine action*. His issue is that one ought not to exclude, explicitly or implicitly, this possibility in the manner in which one poses the problem and describes the mystic states at the outset.

Blondel adds emphatically that it is not a matter of concluding immediately to the reality of a transcendent operation. One cannot naively assume the transcendent at the outset of a positive, philosophical investigation. As from the psychological point of view, everything depends, first, on noting precisely the conscious aspect and, then, establishing whether such mystic passivity is similar in its development and by its effects to perception or to hallucination. For even in the simpler phenomena that we can positively establish and class, there is what theologians have called the 'discernment of spirits' to decide between a false, hallucinatory mysticism and a true mysticism. For Blondel, true mysticism nourishes the living powers of the human soul and makes our action more fruitful and universal.

#### André Lalande's *Vocabulaire* (1911) – The 'Science of Mysticism'

As was customary for the production of the *Vocabulaire technique et critique*, André Lalande presented in 1911 a series of entries for discussion among his colleagues, and these included the words 'Mystery' and 'Mystic-Mysticism.'<sup>15</sup> This would provide Blondel with a further opportunity to reflect on mysticism (at least, in the public forum). On this occasion, he is keen to combat another fundamental problem in dealing with mysticism, namely, the very abrogation of reason when examining it. Here it is a matter of rejecting the latent fideism or agnosticism that is evident in some understandings that neglect the subsistent critical role enjoyed by reason in the experience of mysticism. In this, he wishes to affirm, further, that mysticism is a science, exercised in the laboratory of life.

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of Blondel's use of the contrast afference / efference, see Michael A. Conway, *The Science of Life: Maurice Blondel's Philosophy of Action and the Scientific Method* (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2000), pp. 368-73.

<sup>15</sup> During the International Congress of Philosophy of 1900, André Lalande launched the project of producing a critical dictionary of philosophical terms, a project that was realized with the help of the *French Society of Philosophy*. The various entries were sent, for comment, to the members of the Society and to a number of select French scholars abroad. Blondel played an active role as a correspondent and reacted in a substantial manner to many of the entries. See Maurice Blondel, 'Collaboration au "Vocabulaire" de Lalande (1911),' in *Oeuvres complètes*, vol. 2, pp. 709-18, at 715-17.

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Blondel reacts, in particular, to the entries ‘mysticism’ and ‘mystic (mystique)’ (inverting the terms).<sup>16</sup> He makes the obvious point that mysticism is an historical reality, and, therefore, a fact that can, and ought, be investigated philosophically. In particular, it should not be dismissed or discredited simply because of the illusions and the abuses that have been associated with it. In the mystic state we have, he maintains, a direct and immediate contact of the mind with the reality that is possessed. ‘The mystic has the impression of having not less, but more knowledge and light.’<sup>17</sup> In this immediacy there is a depreciation, or even a total effacement, of sensible symbols and the notions of abstract and discursive thought. It can be likened to music, which never has the clarity and precision that one finds in the articulated word. Yet, music can express something which the written or spoken word cannot. To support this view, Blondel cites, the much quoted, from Beethoven: ‘music is a higher revelation than wisdom and philosophy.’<sup>18</sup>

Interestingly, in line with this, he separates out what he calls ‘the science of mysticism’ from physical, metaphysical, or theological knowledge, observing that the difference is analogous to that between the impression of an artist enjoying a symphony and a literary commentary that everyone can understand *even* if one has never heard a note!<sup>19</sup> By a ‘science,’ here, Blondel means the living out of the mystic life. Mysticism in action, this ‘science of mysticism,’ is not to be reduced to a discourse on mysticism. This, he affirms, is a ‘science’ that is obtained not by reasoning, but by a union that is complete love and that Denys calls ‘the mystical doctrine that puts one in the presence of God and that unites one to Him by a sort of initiation that no teacher can teach.’<sup>20</sup> The guarantee and the price of this ‘super-intellectual contemplation’ is the ascetic life that is the apposite preparation for it.

### Jean Baruzi and his *St John of the Cross*

In 1924 Jean Baruzi published his major study of St John of the Cross, entitled: *St. John of the Cross and the Problem of Mystic Experience*.<sup>21</sup> In the 1920’s it was this work from Baruzi that marked significantly the study of mysticism and, more specifically, the interpretation of St. John of the Cross. Baruzi succeeded Loisy at the *Collège de France* and was heavily influenced by Bergson. He discovers in mysticism the complete, concrete flourishing of the creative energy of Platonic spirituality. While everyone admired Baruzi’s erudition and acknowledged the value of this study, many, including Blondel, had their

<sup>16</sup> The main entry on ‘mysticism’ deals with four senses of the word: a) the possibility of an intimate union between the human spirit (l’esprit humain) and the fundamental principle of being; b) the affective, intellectual, and moral dispositions attached to this; c) the great philosophical systems of the world that privilege feeling and imagination over reason (according to eclecticism); d) beliefs and doctrines that are based on feeling and intuition as opposed to observation and reasoning. See André Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie*, 6th ed. (Paris: PUF, 1988), vol. 1, pp. 662-65. For Blondel’s comments, see *ibid.*, pp. 662-64 note.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 662.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* Blondel notes that he is quoting from Romain Rolland’s *Vie de Beethoven* [Romain Rolland, *Vie de Beethoven* (Paris: Hachette, 1903), p. 133].

<sup>19</sup> This ‘science’ is a reflection from ‘within’ as opposed to a reflection from ‘without.’

<sup>20</sup> Denys the Areopagite, *Letter IX*, 1, as quoted by Blondel in Lalande, *Vocabulaire technique et critique*, p. 663.

<sup>21</sup> Jean Baruzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l’expérience mystique*, introd. Émile Poulat, ed. revue et augmentée (Paris: Salvator, 1999).

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reservations. The theologians, in general, were quite critical: philosophical efforts at understanding mysticism were judged to be the marks of atheism or naturalism.

The following year, after a request from Xavier Léon, Baruzi sent a set of propositions on 'Saint John of the Cross and the problem of the noetic value of mystic knowledge' to the *Société française de philosophe* for discussion at a meeting to be held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> of May 1925.<sup>22</sup> An exceptional meeting of the Society ~~transpired, resulting in a~~ double issue of the *Bulletin*.

### **Baruzi's Theses**

Baruzi believed that the phenomenological and noetic character of mysticism could only be studied in those individuals who expressed it. Yet, although he is the pre-eminent example, St. John of the Cross could not serve to define the mystic experience in general without taking into account other characteristics that are found elsewhere. There is a specific *logic of mysticism* in St. John of the Cross that reflected his desire to find the criterion that would keep him on the mystic path. In this, all phenomenality per se is rejected so that 'the mystic experience cannot be the experience of an object, in the realist sense of the word. Neither is it a test (épreuve) of a presence, since all sentiment of presence is still a phenomenon.'<sup>23</sup> The mystic experience is transcendent to phenomena, no matter what they be, so that there is only, what he terms, 'certitude of the divine,' when our representations are no longer in play.<sup>24</sup> The word 'night' summarizes the character of this experience.

Furthermore, it is only on a path of passive purification that we are introduced to the supernatural: 'that is to say not into a new world that is substituted for the old one, but into the permanent and essential world, free from all obstacles.'<sup>25</sup> This, then, raises, according to Baruzi, a number of problems for the philosopher that include the status of knowledge associated with mysticism and the relationship that exists between mysticism and religion. He asks, in particular, 'How are we to understand, the "theopathic state"?' – a term that he borrows from Delacroix to characterize the living sense of the presence of God in the soul, and which is to be differentiated from psychosis.

### **Blondel's Letter to the Society**

Expressing both his regret at not being able to attend the *séance* and his basic agreement with Baruzi's 'mystical phenomenology,' Blondel observes that science never gives an exhaustive analysis of reality.<sup>26</sup> John of the Cross, he suggests, turned to the poetic form so as to suggest the inadequacy of discursive language, which inevitably distorts what it wishes to grasp. Blondel then proceeds to make a number of remarks, which adumbrate his own understanding. For the purposes of this paper, I will simply draw out a number of points that are indicative of his position.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Baruzi et al., 'Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de la valeur noétique de l'expérience mystique,' Séance du 2 mai 1925, *Bulletin de la Société française de Philosophie* 25(1925): pp. 25-88, at 25-28. The Theses (together with remarks made by Baruzi to open the discussion) are also available in: Jean Baruzi, *L'intelligence Mystique*, textes choisis et présentés par Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron (Paris: Berg International, 1985), pp. 59-68.

<sup>23</sup> See Baruzi et al., 'Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème,' p. 26.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Maurice Blondel, 'Lettre de M. Maurice Blondel,' Appendix, in Baruzi et al., 'Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème,' pp. 85-88, at 85.

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### 1) The 'Science of Mysticism' and the Mystic Path

There is no doubt that the study of mysticism is a matter of the concrete and the singular (and so of individual persons); but it is also a matter of the universal and the total.<sup>27</sup> In this regard Blondel is in agreement with Baruzi that one must—in terms of methodology—study mysticism in specific individuals. However, two points of clarification need to be made here: first, given that there can be no 'exhaustive' analysis or science of lived reality, the only decisive competence is real participation in the spirit itself, which effectively inspires mysticism; secondly, even though the science of mysticism is apparently incommunicable, it is not a matter of isolated individuals, who have nothing in common. Blondel insists that there is an element of the universal in these various singularities, and it is the same universal that is diversely incarnated in them.

And so, for Blondel, it is incorrect to over-emphasize the difference between individual mystics or even between mystics and what we might term ordinary souls. However infinitely diverse the expressions of the mystic life may be, there remains intact a hidden frame that is necessary and solid. Baruzi himself, Blondel remarks, presents St. John of the Cross as an 'extreme case,' which means that he is at the term of a series of persons who present the mystic life. This implies that there are degrees, and, therefore, continuity in the expressions. And this, in turn, marks the fact that the mystical life itself is a matter of a movement *per gradus debitos et continuos* (through due and continuous steps). Indeed, what makes St. John of the Cross different is that he has managed to discern the false ways, to purge mysticism of all parasitic facts, to remove the accessory scaffolding, and to liberate us from all that is *nothing* (*nada*) so as to lead us to the only *all* (*todo*).

Whereas Blondel agrees with Baruzi that St. John of the Cross was concerned to establish a *criterion*, he underlines that St John did not separate the theoretical point of view from the practical design to which he was totally committed. This practical design is to lead souls by the most direct route to their heights, which is the essence of his method. And this design is only scientific because it is practical. Whatever knowledge St. John has is always at the service of the practical design and is never for its own sake; ultimately, it has as its object the *lived nescience* that leads to what he terms a 'true Ontology.' This Ontology, in its turn, includes nothing that is passing or illusionary and does not let anything that is real or eternal escape it. And the price here is the purgative and the illuminative life; it is only through ascetic living that one might hope to achieve such a grasp of the real.

### 2) Epiphenomena?

Again Blondel is in agreement with Baruzi as to the importance of the elimination of all the sensual and intellectual supports, which include detachment from all sentiments of illumination, of presence, of divine contacts, etc., where others have, falsely, searched for the essential characteristic of the mystical life. It is curious that Blondel has no further comment to make on the epiphenomena that were, at the time, even in the most reputable of treatments, associated with mysticism (visions, ecstasies, elevations, private revelations, stigmata, etc). The explanation for this may well be a family one: Blondel was married to Rose Royer, whose mother, Madame Royer, was a declared mystic and associated closely, on a national level, with devotion to the Sacred Heart. It was alleged that she experienced many such ancillary supports in her mystic life. Additionally, it transpires that she died in early April

<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of the dialectic relationship between the singular (or particular) and the universal in *L'Action*, see Conway, *The Science of Life*, pp. 293-96.

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1924, when Blondel was working on this material. And so, it may well be that he did not wish to labour any critique of such conjoined phenomena so as not to offend, inappropriately, his mother-in-law or her memory.<sup>28</sup>

### 3) *Beyond Henosis: Personal Union*

Turning to the word ‘night’ in St. John of the Cross, Blondel remarks, rather interestingly, that it is only a metaphor, which is expressive and useful, because the majority of the terms of science are drawn from the sense of sight. It needs, however, to be complemented by other images drawn, for example, from hearing and touch. All such images serve to eradicate the multiple forms of harmful *individuality* in preparation for the *personal* union by fusion. This union is not of essences but of wills that understand and love each other. This, Blondel underlines, is a critical point as mystical union is not simply a return of essence to the Essence of the divine. It is not some sort of Plotinian *henosis*. This union is not a return or absorption: it is an assumption and ascension.<sup>29</sup> It is never the automatic result of a principle, whereby all that had to be done was to remove some inopportune contingencies or fictive barriers. Rather, it implies a spiritual work of purification and of growth. No expression of thought could direct our thinking to a sort of hyper-order. It is a matter of grace and of freedom: on the one hand, an anticipatory act of divine charity that renews in the soul the mystery of the Word incarnate, and, on the other hand, a personal and meritorious correspondence that is filially confident. It is a wholesome embrace that goes beyond all gnosis.

### 4) *The Negation of Negation*

Blondel explores briefly what he terms the dynamic of the negation of negation or equally the disillusioning of illusions. Mystical experience has intrinsically a value that is not simply empirical, but that is also rational, ontological, and eminently religious. This knowledge is of a ‘negative character.’ It is about detachment, and it is about a love that is manifested in true religious ascesis.

Mysticism maintains all its power and its integrity in the face of any philosophy, however liberating that philosophy might be, because it leads to other certitudes. In mysticism, the most austere deprivation and the most crucifying trials are a reflection of a unifying beatitude. ‘Despite the opposition between the Cross and Glory, the ascetic method is fundamentally indispensable and inherent to the contemplative doctrine and to the unitive solution.’<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> See Wilmer, *Mystik zwischen Tun und Denken*, pp. 158-65; see also Henri Bremond/Maurice Blondel, *Correspondance*, vol. 3, *Combats pour la prière et pour la poésie* (1921-1933), *Études Bremondiennes* 3 (Paris: Aubier, 1971), p. 154.

<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere he speaks of ‘assimilation’: see Maurice Blondel, *Exigences philosophiques du christianisme* (Paris: PUF, 1950), pp. 217-303; for further discussion, see James Le Grys, ‘Blondel’s Idea of Assimilation to God through Mortification of Self,’ in: *Gregorianum* 77(1996), pp. 309-31.

<sup>30</sup> ‘En dépit de l’opposition entre la Croix et la Gloire, la méthode ascétique est foncièrement indispensable et inhérente à la doctrine contemplative et à la solution unitive’: Blondel, ‘Lettre de M. Maurice Blondel,’ p. 87.

It is this effective ascesis which maintains us, so to speak, on an altogether different plane to philosophical or ‘metaphysical contemplation.’<sup>31</sup> Mysticism requires an ascetic action to achieve its certitude. It is essentially a life to be lived out practically and not one to be known merely through (philosophical) reflection—which amounts, in any case, to a kind of hearsay. It is only through such lived and living action that it sustains its own inner dynamic and logic. Metaphysical contemplation alone is fatally speculative, ideological, and representative, and cannot ever take the place of effective ascesis. Yet, through the ascetic action that uses our natural faculties we arrive only at an ‘acquired contemplation.’ This is still only a preparation and nothing yet of the ‘theopathic state’ that is the mystic life in its richness.<sup>32</sup> This is so, because in order to *suffer* (pâtir) God—i.e. to be invaded, so to speak, by God—it is necessary that God *act*. That which is essentially and specifically mystical is infused and not acquired. It is the gracious contribution of the operation that is initiated by God, but considered no more from the anthropomorphic idea that we make of him to invigorate ourselves, but in the reality of his free intervention. This, Blondel claims, explains the nuptial hymn of the Canticle of Canticles that uses, but exceeds, the terms and earthly accent of human love.

### **The Problem of the Mystical (1925)**

In the summer of 1925 Blondel was working earnestly on the problem of mysticism and the mystic state. This leads to the publication of his definitive study of mysticism per se, in which he develops in greater detail and in a much more systematic form the points that he had already proffered in reaction to Delacroix, to Lalande’s *Vocabulaire*, and to Baruzi. The text itself is enormously complex, so, for the purposes of this paper, I will present the structure, the basic argument, and the main concerns. The work is divided into two main parts (I and II) with an Introduction and a short Conclusion.<sup>33</sup>

#### ***Introduction***

In the Introduction Blondel observes that the new interest in mysticism is an extremely complex state of affairs that can be explained only by taking into account a whole range of factors. These include a reaction to the excesses of a restrictive positivism, the experience of war, and the oppression and reductionism that had accompanied a civilization of scientific materialism. For those who remain dissatisfied, such factors lead to the emergence of other indestructible human needs beyond the material that require recognition. A further

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<sup>31</sup> For John of the Cross ‘contemplation is the mystical theology which theologians call secret wisdom and which St. Thomas says is communicated and infused into the soul through love’: The Dark Night 2, 17, 2, *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Washington: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1979), p. 368.

<sup>32</sup> As already noted, the term ‘theopathic’ refers to the life of the soul in God, according to the spiritual rhythm described by the mystic (see Jean-Louis Vieillard-Baron, ‘Presentation’ in Baruzi, *L’Intelligence Mystique*, pp. 59-60). Blondel describes this term, used by Baruzi, as ‘an expressive term’: Blondel, ‘Lettre de M. Maurice Blondel,’ p. 87. In these discussions, it was first used by Delacroix.

<sup>33</sup> See Maurice Blondel, ‘Le problème de la Mystique,’ in *Qu’est-ce que la mystique? Quelques aspects historique et philosophique du problème*, Cahiers de la nouvelle journée 3 (Paris: Bloud et gay, 1925), pp. 2-63.

explanation is the simple desire of many to understand human being in all its conscious complexity.

This interest, however, Blondel claims, has given rise to confusion around the meaning of mysticism, where all kinds of phenomena are included in its purview: hazy fervours of instinct, the troubled effusion of feeling, good and bad romanticism, displaced eroticism, rapture of the mind, etc. Blondel wishes to show that in many respects mysticism is none of these, and, in fact, it is the opposite. He is adamant that despite the complexity of the mystic life (in terms, for example, of the relationship between the natural and the supernatural orders), reason and philosophy have a distinct and critical role to play and this *in* mysticism itself.<sup>34</sup>

### **Part I**

Blondel proceeds to examine a number of positions that he judges to be inadequate. I will consider these briefly.

#### *A) Mysticism Beyond Reason*

The first position is that which understands mystical states as being utterly beyond reason. Mystical facts are seen to be subjective illusions or strange phenomena that are beyond any form of scientific explanation. The mystical and the reasonable mutually exclude one another. Here the French philosopher has in mind, most probably, writers such as Maurice Barrès and those influenced by him, who associated mysticism with the irrational, the world of feeling, and, above all, with melancholy and intoxication.<sup>35</sup> For Blondel, however, the world of the mystic is far from subjective, obscurantist, and irrational. And so he rejects this position by arguing on a deeper level of reason, observing that even if one does not wish to recognize a reasonable element in mysticism, one can, at least, still reason to explain one's position. There are no facts outside of reason, against reason: 'one can speak of illogism, not of alogism.'<sup>36</sup>

#### *B) Reductive Positivism and Inflated Supernaturalism*

Given that mysticism per se can and ought to be the object of rational inquiry, Blondel asks about the method(s) that one might use in doing this. He examines two positions that attempt to study mysticism from the outside, so to speak. These positions can be dealt with together in that they are the extremes that mirror each other; the first, at the limit of incredulity, seeing only delusions; the second, at the limit of faith, seeing only celestial mystery and a region

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<sup>34</sup> 'It may seem foolhardy (téméraire) to look for a reasonable, and even rational, element there where many find only folly or at least irrationality, and where others see only pure supernature without either intervention or cooperation of human being since the mystic says of himself to be tied with regard to his own powers and passively handed over to the divine will': Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> See Wilmer, *Mystik zwischen Tun und Denken*, p. 39.

<sup>36</sup> Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, 8. Here Blondel adapts Aristotle's comment on metaphysics: 's'il faut philosopher, eh bien philosophons ; s'il ne faut pas philosopher, il faut encore philosopher, ne fût-ce que pour préciser les raisons de nier': *ibid.* I just note, in passing, that in Wilmer's *Mystik zwischen Tun und Denken* the French text here is given incorrectly and is, therefore, quite confusing: see Wilmer, *Mystik zwischen Tun und Denken*, p. 40, n. 125.

that is forbidden to human exploration. The first is convinced that mystical facts can be explained naturally; the second claims that they have an exclusively supernatural origin, and human reason has no role to play there. Blondel proceeds to show the inadequacy of the pure 'naturalist' position, on the one hand, and of the pure 'supernaturalist' position, on the other. He argues that one amounts to an artificial positivism that reduces mystic experience exclusively to the realm of objective data and so mutilates, prejudicially, the very reality it wishes to study. The other, in considering it to be exclusively supernatural, not only sets mystic experience beyond rational examination, but, equally, renders it alien to ordinary Christian living.<sup>37</sup>

### C) Purely Speculative Methods

He then turns to three methods, in which the role of reason is subordinated to theses that pertain to the supernatural order. In the formulation of the theses themselves, philosophy has no specific role to play. The concern here is to avoid any illegitimate intrusion of philosophy, where the initiative of divine gifts ought to remain complete and entirely gratuitous. Various authors, while recognizing the indispensable role of speculation and of rational discernment, nonetheless, set up a barrier that ought not to be crossed. In these positions reason is limited in being subject to apriori teachings or prescriptions. Only this, it is thought, protects the integrity and gratuity of divine initiative.

In dealing with these positions, the theoretical issue is that of knowledge by connaturality, and this, in particular, in the light of an earlier critique of Blondel's position by Jacques Maritain.<sup>38</sup> The precise question that Blondel is concerned with is that of the possibility of knowledge being attached to the individual, to the material, and to the concrete so that it is of both the universal *and the singular*. And the deeper issue is that of affirming that God is not an ideologue, the contemplator of ideas, who is indifferent to those *singularities* (in their singularity) that are beings in flesh and bone. In order to conform to our God, to know and to love as one ought to love and know, our minds and hearts are not directed to the Good (au Bien), an idea, but to the Righteous (au Bon), a person. And God does not assimilate types, but strives to form this *unum corpus, in quo multi sumus, corpus autem corporale et spiritale* (one body, in which we are many, a body both corporal and spiritual). Otherwise, Blondel maintains, we must admit a fatal rupture between life and thought so that the moral option and the use we make of our freedom is of no lasting consequence and concerns only what is perishable and accidental. This is, ultimately, to claim that the world continues, when persons and their acts pass away, when it is the world that will pass away, and our acts and our person that will continue.

## Part II

For Blondel, the entire problem of mysticism weighs on the difficulty of preserving two aspects, which seem to be true and necessary, but, yet, are irreconcilable. On the one hand, there is the danger of exaggerating the continuity between ordinary life and the mystic state, since they follow one another in a coherent whole through insensible gradations; and, yet, on

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<sup>37</sup> It is clear that the fundamental question is that of the relationship between the natural and supernatural order.

<sup>38</sup> See Maurice Blondel, 'Le procès de l'intelligence,' in Paul Archambault et al., *Le Procès d'Intelligence* (Paris : Bloud & Gay, 1922), pp. 217-306; also George S. Worgul, 'M. Blondel and the Problem of Mysticism,' *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 61(1985): pp. 100-22, at 103-112.

the other hand, there is the temptation to isolate them so that the mystic life is held at a distance and, so to speak, on the margins of life, and even of Christian living.

The precise role of reason needs to be carefully delineated. It clearly cannot furnish us with the mystical state, but it can contribute in that it can ratify and freely increase (redoubler) that in which it has no part. In contributing, reason can exercise a sort of freedom of perfection in that it is capable of recognizing in mysticism the only satisfactory response to the fundamental questions that it can and ought to envisage and pose, but which it cannot of itself resolve.

Blondel suggests that this amounts to showing three things that are to be maintained and understood. First, the gap to be filled (le vide) that subsists in all our knowledge; secondly, the realization that it is only 'infused contemplation' that is capable of filling this gap in a positive and real way; and, thirdly, the recognition of the absence of all common measure between that which comes from us and, the infused gift, that which comes from God. I will now briefly attend to these three steps.

### 1) *The Enigma of Human Thought and Action*

The central idea here is showing that all our human endeavours remain incomplete, and so, open a space of possibility for the mystic life. Meaning remains always open-ended and is never fully achieved. The fundamental realization of our inability to grasp concrete reality in any definite sense leads some to abandon this search altogether. Yet, we do not perceive anything sensible or know anything of the intelligible if we do not harbour the possibility and the need of a complete and singular communion with that which is real. To be content with mere essences in neglecting individual beings in their substance is not to know, to understand, or to love. The degree to which we do not embrace the *individuum ineffabile* (inexpressible individual thing) is the degree to which we remain, in this life, strangers to the soul of beings.<sup>39</sup>

Taking this criterion, Blondel examines human knowing in its various forms in order to show that concrete reality remains refractory to their achievements. There are three fundamental reasons for this, and the resolution to the quandary that is posited here leads us invariably to the mystic life.

The first reason is that it is impossible for sensible knowledge to be complete, which means that the direct way of knowing has a limited bearing.<sup>40</sup> The second reason is that speculative and ascetic knowledge cannot think, and does not know, singularity per se. Indeed, the more that one establishes the necessity of passing by God in order to know oneself and to know reality in its singularity, the more one realizes the natural impossibility of achieving this and the need to cross over into that which mysticism calls 'the cloud of unknowing.'<sup>41</sup> And, finally, the third, and most significant, reason is that 'God is not an object that one captures (capter) or that one crosses (traverser). ... God has his mystery, he is the mystery itself: *Ignotum quid, absconditus Deus* (something unknown, a hidden God).'<sup>42</sup>

<sup>39</sup> See Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, p. 47 n. 1.

<sup>40</sup> '[C]'est qu'il est impossible que la connaissance sensible boucle, selon l'expression de Secrétan': Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, p. 48, emphasis original. Here 'boucler' means to fasten or to close, etc. To understand the detail of Blondel's statement, one could read the section in *L'Action* on the inconsistency of sensation: Blondel, *L'Action*, pp. 45-50. For a discussion of the direct /indirect way of knowing, see Conway, *The Science of Life*, pp. 254-60.

<sup>41</sup> Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, p. 49.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

God is above and beyond whatever might be thought of him. And this science, although negative, is not only true, but also contributes in preparing the gap (le vide) that nothing human can fill.<sup>43</sup> God alone can respond to this emptiness, and as He wishes.

### 2) *The Luxury of Divine Conformity – Infused Contemplation*

Whatever we may *acquire* through our own thought and action emerges ultimately as deficient. When, however, the gap is filled through an *infused* gift, and we realize the contemplative union of light and love, we see that everything ought to serve as preparation for, and accompaniment of, this perfectly defined and specified state. The transition here, to human eyes, can be unremarkable, but, in reality, a step is taken, which only the divine all-powerful can accomplish. In the place of the discursive mode and those syntheses that prefigured this solution, infused contemplation substitutes a mode that is not abnormal, but supra-normal or pre-normal. It anticipates the future form of the spiritual life and has already been partially consummated in the Christ. It is, Blondel asserts, an incarnation by real extension.

Blondel likens this state of infused contemplation to receiving an advance of an inheritance, but without taking full possession of it. The mystic state is neither of the earth nor of heaven: it continues to require purification by the night of the senses, of the understanding, and of the will. In prefiguring something here on earth of the blessed life, it simply enriches the scale of human experience and of divine glories. And he concludes this section by remarking that it cannot be said ‘to be a stage, on the path, nor that it is a digression and an outgrowth outside of the path; it is luxury, “the necessary superfluous,” the superabundant witness, which is not an anomaly, without, however, being “the rule.”’<sup>44</sup> Thus, while being in harmony with the normal life of faith, it is its supreme blossoming, and, as such, a foretase of eternal life.

### 3) *The Role of Reason in the Mystic State*

Blondel finally turns to the more specialized question of the role of reason at the highest level of the mystic life. The issue, more generally, is that of the human in the mystic state. Blondel asks, for example, if it is correct to speak of the ‘psychology of mystics,’ since the mystic state, by definition, is beyond the psychological. And this is particularly pertinent when it is a matter of infused contemplation, where it is operating grace that reigns, so to speak, imperially and alone. To deal with such questions, Blondel suggests, one must first recognize

<sup>43</sup> In other words, philosophy itself can determine its own inadequacy and in doing so prepares the way for God.

<sup>44</sup> Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, p. 53. Heiner Wilmer makes a very important observation on Blondel’s use here of the ‘necessary superfluous’: ‘Der Wendung “le superflu nécessaire” kommt in der Beschreibung des mystischen Zustandes eine hohe Bedeutung zu. Den dieser Wendung zugrunde liegenden Gedanken von der Ungeschuldetheit der Gnade muß Blondel betonen, da das Bild des “verborgenen Keims” die Gefahr läuft, an den immanentistischen Ansatz einer Evolution schon vorhandener Übernatürlichkeit denken zu lassen. Durch die Rede vom “superflu nécessaire” verdeutlicht Blondel, daß im mystischen Zustand dem Menschen etwas von dem Erbe ausbezahlt worden ist, das er sich im natürlichen Zustand erhofft hatte. Diese “Teilzahlung” übertrifft bereits alle Erwartung. Doch der erste Teil des Erbes läßt den Mystiker erst recht “auf den Geschmack kommen.” Nichts ersehnt er so sehr, wie das ganze Erbe antreten zu dürfen, das Leben in Glückseligkeit’: Wilmer, *Mystik zwischen Tun und Denken*, pp. 105-6, misspelling corrected.

that the incommensurability, on the one hand, of operating grace and, on the other, of the passive docility of the mystic, is not that of God, on one side, and nothingness remaining nothingness, on the other. Rather it is the paternal relationship of *He who is*, on one side, with, on the other, 'the poor soul, *who is not*,' but whom divine charity enables to be and renders deiform.<sup>45</sup> Once again, Blondel contrasts this relation of charity with the absorption of essence in, what he terms, 'Alexandrian ecstasy.'<sup>46</sup>

And here two remarks from St. John of the Cross, Blondel finds, are singularly important. The mystic saint first remarks that not only should one not meddle in extraordinary ways, but one should disregard them. Even if they be authentically divine, we should resist them, as they will produce their effect without us. The second remark, which is more significant, is that at the supreme level of the mystic life and after the sometimes tumultuous phases of the ascension, everything becomes appeased. There are no more ecstasies, and a freedom is achieved that is expressed in living obscurely the perfect life according to the order of reason and nature restored and sublimated.

The essential point for Blondel is underlining that although the mystic life comes completely from above, it remains profoundly human. It is not a tyrannical imposition from the outside that violates our freedom. The truth is not in a contemptuous and wearied pessimism; rather it is in this universal charity, which reconciles and orders, without confusion, all the phases and the degrees in the ascension to the mystic life. The mystic does not follow the path of disenchantment, *au contraire!*

### Conclusion

I have examined Blondel's contribution to the university discussion of mysticism in early twentieth-century France. His central concern is showing that there is a specific role for human intelligence in the mystical, and it is this that ratifies the importance of philosophy in clarifying mystic experience in general and differentiating true and false mysticism in particular. In reaction to Henri Delacroix's work, Blondel marked out a number of deficiencies in regard to the methodology being used at the university in exploring the mystical, and in reaction to various entries for Lalande's *Vocabulaire* and Jean Baruzi's study of St John of the Cross, he underlines that the mystic realizes a plenitude of life that leads to a more fruitful and more universal action. The decisive factor, however, is real participation in the spirit itself of mysticism, where there is no substitute for the practice of the ascetic life. Finally, I discussed Blondel's systematic investigation of mysticism in *The Problem of the Mystical* from 1925, which clarified the precise role of reason, which cannot of itself command or procure the infused gift that is central to mystic experience, but which, nonetheless, has a crucial role to play in preparing, recognizing, and ratifying mystic ascent.

### **Abstract**

A significant and surprising interest in mysticism emerged in the French (secular) university during the early decades of the twentieth century. Key figures included, among others, Henri Delacroix, Jean Baruzi, Louis Massignon, and Jacques Maritain. Maurice Blondel joined in the debates on a number of occasions, presenting, in 1925, a particularly important study, *The Problem of the Mystical*. This paper will examine the context and contributions made by Blondel in clarifying the role of philosophy in discerning authentic mysticism.

<sup>45</sup> Blondel, *Le problème de la mystique*, p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

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