

H-France Review Vol. 10 (December 2010), No. 197

C. J. T. Talar, ed., *Modernists and Mystics*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009. xii + 152 pp. Bibliography, index. \$44.95 U.S. (hb). ISBN 0813217091.

Review by David G. Schultenover, S.J., Marquette University.

Serious research into the origins and outcroppings of the Modernist crisis in the Roman Catholic Church (ca. 1890–1914) has proceeded in waves. The first wave began with the Second Vatican Council, some of whose commentators observed that what happened at that council was an attempt to deal with a development that had been cut short by Pius X's condemnation of "Modernism" (*Pascendi Dominici Gregis*, 1907) and the promulgation of the Oath against Modernism (*Sacrorum antistitum*, 1910). By the time of the Council, enough time had passed that the Vatican rule governing scholarly access to ecclesiastical archives permitted scholars to study primary sources up to 1903, when Pius X succeeded to the papacy. This wave led to the founding in North America of the Roman Catholic Modernism Working Group of the American Academy of Religion. Members of this group wrote on various aspects of Roman Catholic Modernism over a period of some twenty years, after which the group was reduced to a seminar, and finally folded into other existing groups. The original group now survives informally, with various members gathering around ideas for publishing research on specific topics related to Modernism--as in the case of the volume under review here. The later opening of church archives through the pontificates of Pius X and Benedict XV spurred yet another wave of research, this one carried on largely by German scholars under a generous grant at the University of Münster. Meanwhile, on the North American continent, the informal gatherings of scholars continues apace with recent publications, among them the volume under review. [1]

Why this ongoing interest in a "movement" that many have dismissed? Friedrich von Hügel germanically described it as:

"A strictly circumscribed affair, one that is really over and done--the series of groups of specific attempts, good, bad, indifferent, or variously mixed, that were made towards similar expressions or interpretations, during the Pontificate of Pius X--beginning, no doubt, during the later years of Leo XIII, but ending with the death of Fr. T[yrrell] and with Loisy's alienation from the positive content that had been fought for--also from the suppression of *Rinnovamento* [1909] onwards, and the resolution of so much of the very substance of the movement, not only, or even chiefly, under the stress of the official Church condemnations, but from within the ranks of skepticism dominating what remains of organs claiming to be 'Modernist'" [2]

The reason is because, as von Hügel also observed in the same latter, there is another sense of Modernism, "one that is a permanent, never quite finished, always sooner or later, more or less, rebeginning set of attempts to express the old Faith and its permanent truths and helps--to interpret it according to what appears the best and the most abiding elements in the philosophy and the scholarship and science of the later and latest times."

It is this latter sense of Modernism that brings me to the present volume, which studies a salient feature of what motivated the most important Modernist figures to struggle for a renewal of "the old Faith"

against historical ecclesiastical forces ranged against them. This collection represents a major advance in the field of Modernist studies, in that it at least begins to give due weight to one of the seminal currents of energy that fueled the Roman Catholic Modernist Movement, namely, the mystical element of religion. As such, this collection shows both the central importance of this element and why it represented, usually in unacknowledged ways, to church authorities such a threat to their control.

Chapter one, “The Mystical Element of the Modernist Crisis,” by William Portier and C. J. T. Talar, smartly sets the book’s context. Their opening sentence, “Modernists and mystics make an incongruous combination,” states what, to those only casually familiar with the Modernist Movement, would seem to be the case. But to experts in the field, the combination should not seem incongruous. The standard description of what the Modernists were about coheres closely with von Hügel’s second sense of Modernism, the ongoing *aggiornamento* of “the old Faith” in the thought forms of the present day. What inspired the Modernists at the turn of the 20th century to engage in this process together, albeit loosely, was the sense that Roman Catholicism was being stifled by rigidities (e.g., the Syllabus of Errors, the definition of papal infallibility, and the prescription of Thomism) imposed by ecclesiastical authorities to protect the Church from secularizing forces unleashed by the Enlightenment and seen concretely in the liberal, anti-Church movements across Europe. While such prescriptions might have meant little to the masses of Catholics, the Modernists and their many fellow travelers saw that in the long run such “rigidities” would prevent the Church from developing in a vital and life-giving way, such that in the long run the Church risked losing its more educated elite while keeping the less educated mired in a devotionism that hindered an intelligent faith.

Understandably, the Modernists felt constrained by ecclesiastical restrictions on their methods of investigation. And when they looked for historical precedent to their situation, so argue Portier and Talar, they found it in the Quietist controversy of the 1690s—the way having been pointed to by von Hügel’s spiritual and intellectual mentor, Abbé Henri Huvelin.[3] “At first glance,” write Portier and Talar, “the Quietist controversies look like an obscure intramural squabble among effete seventeenth-century French Catholics. But to the [Modernists], the Quietist controversies...represent the beginning of a definitive narrowing and suffocating of Catholicism as a living religious tradition” (pp. 3-4). Most of the Modernist figures studied in this collection saw the Quietist controversies as “a decisive turning point” in the Church’s history, resulting in a marginalization of what von Hügel termed the “mystical element” of religion.

In his magisterial, two volume study, *Mystical Element of Religion*, von Hügel argues that for a healthy religious life three elements must be integrated: the mind, heart, and hands: the intellectual, the mystical, and the institutional. Exaggerating one over the others leads to an unhealthy narrowing of religion and harm to its practitioners. Von Hügel and many of his associates were convinced that this is exactly what was happening to Roman Catholicism in their day, with the “constriction and hyper-intellectualization of the tradition [that] culminated in the established neoscholasticism of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century manuals of theology” (p. 4).

Chapter one of this study underscores why church authorities attempted to marginalize “the mystical element.” As Modernist scholars know, the perceived principal enemy of post-Tridentine Roman Catholicism was Kant. He, followed by Schleiermacher, was seen as most responsible for the “turn to the subject” with all the dangers that subjectivism and its concomitant individualism hold for the Church. Authorities saw mysticism as akin to subjectivism and individualism. Mystics could claim immediate divine authorization for their views, thus by-passing mediation and control by ordained authorities.[4] Of course, von Hügel and friends were well aware of the dangers inherent in a mysticism exaggerated at the expense of intellectual and institutional elements. On the other hand, they also knew that overlaying the mystical element with the intellectual and institutional tended to cut the heart out of religion. And it was this element that they saw as a vital impetus to the Church’s historical evolution.

Lawrence Barmann's chapter two--on von Hügel's "seeking and finding" within the Roman Catholic mystical tradition "things more intrinsically loveable" than what he saw in sectarian Protestantism or in the arid, "regimental Seminarism" of post-Tridentine Catholicism--catches superbly the heart of Baron von Hügel's contribution not only to the Modernist movement but also to a Roman Catholicism in need of restoration.[5] Indeed, the Modernists, at least George Tyrrell, Maude Petre, and Loisy and others most influenced by the baron, were seeking a spiritual home, a Catholicism that vivified their lives spiritually and intellectually, as well as institutionally. They sought orthopraxy in the best sense of that word, as well as orthodoxy. Indeed a case could be made that they sought the intellectual and institutional elements insofar as these fed the spiritual life. This would be in tune with Huvelin's advice to von Hügel: "not to aim at orthodoxy as a thing in itself" but to aim "rather, at conscientiousness in...pursuit of truth because conscience *always* takes precedence over orthodoxy" (p. 28).

Barmann's exposition of von Hügel's address, "Official Authority and Living Religion," cogently argues for calling the baron "both a Modernist and a mystic": Modernist, because he saw that the struggle of his day "was no longer between Protestant and Catholic, nor theist and atheist; rather, it was within historical, institutional Christianity, and between the officials of the institutions and loyal members...who realized that many of their doctrines needed re-thinking and restatement in light of the application of historico-critical methodology applied to their sources" (p. 31). Mystic, because he saw that the renewal of Catholicism had to spring from deep and consistent prayer, especially the sacraments and the mystical element in relation to them. In this latter, Barmann notes, the baron was much influenced by Bergson's *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience*, as he himself acknowledged in the preface to his *Mystical Element of Religion*.

The baron's paper enumerates and expresses "seven characteristics" that mark the serious Christian and "seven contrary peculiarities" that "characterize official acts as such" (p. 32). These von Hügel boils down to two laws: 1) the official element of any religious society "is only a part...of a dynamic whole. And...the whole includes the 'new and daring (if but faithful, reverent and loving) outgoing of the discoverer and investigator' who is also a necessary part of the whole"; and 2) "Official organisation and Authority are ever the means, necessary means, of life; means, not ends; of life, not of death" (pp. 35-36). This paper, delivered when von Hügel was finishing his massive *Mystical Element*, condenses the latter. Tyrrell's candid reaction to the baron's paper is priceless: "Your paper on 'official authority' seems to be most satisfying & constructive; but I wonder how much [your audience]...understood of it...I should have put all that into 300 svo pp. & sold it for 5/- nett; & people would have said it was overcrowded & obscure. *For you* each word is chosen & placed with full explicitly consciousness & meaning. But what audience will appreciate that? Not even the Cherubim or Seraphim...I don't think anything has helped & satisfied me so much as this last paper of yours, & I shall be doling out bits of it for years to come according as it sinks into my mind & bears fruit there" (p. 37).

With astute mining of the relevant primary and secondary literature, Talar follows Barmann's suit with a robust exposition of Henri Bremond's *Apologie pour Fénelon*, the bishop whose *Explication des maximes des saints sur le vie intérieure* (1697) Bossuet criticized; in 1699 Pope Innocent XII condemned thirteen propositions extracted from this work. Why this attention to Fénelon in this collection relative to Modernism? Because Bremond, an intimate of identified Modernists and suspended *a divinis* for having prayed over excommunicate Tyrrell's grave, produced the monumental *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux*, which limned the mystical aspect of the Church's life that lay decidedly outside the strictures of neo-Scholasticism and that supplied much dynamism to the Modernism movement. Tyrrell, for one, was fond of saying that the saints are the church's real teachers. Fénelon along with Madame Guyon, Talar convincingly argues, was central not only to Bremond's *Histoire* but also to the context of Modernism, with its attempt to restore some emphasis on religious experience as prior to and more fundamental than theological reflection.

Talar deconstructs the more popular conception of the Fénelon-Bossuet duel and contends that the two bishops sought “only to come to an agreement” but that a complex court and Roman political conspiracy “set within a broader conflict between Port-Royal and the Jesuits” kept fanning the flames of opposition—the Jesuits supporting the cause of Fénelon and Guyon.(p. 47) Bremond’s “noncanonical” portrait of Bossuet, Talar suggests, likely played a role in the Indexing of his *Sainte Chantal* in May 1913. Talar concludes that Bremond’s publications “played a significant role” in “the rehabilitation of mystical experience” (p. 61). At the same time, I would point out, they alarmed ecclesiastical police who, since at least the time of Hecker and his alleged implication in Americanism with its alleged fostering of individualism and “the active virtues” under the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit, felt their own executive, mediating authority thereby challenged.[6]

Chapter four on Maurice Blondel is a posthumous publication by Michael Kerlin. He saved the best for last, describing Blondel’s philosophical thought as “itself a form of prayer, having its fulfillment in the mystical and relating this idea across Blondel’s career. Blondel’s career was beleaguered by opposition to his working at the “interface of faith and reason, theology and philosophy” and by those who “denied the legitimacy of any philosophical approach to the mystical” (pp. 63-64). He argued that “the mystical” is not irrational but is seen in the Roman Catholic tradition as a connatural knowledge found in ordinary experience. For example, “Mozart is able to hear the whole of a symphony in a sovereign idea”—this is connatural knowledge, which “permits us constant experience of the Godhead, rendering us *connatural* with God” (pp. 66-67).

Kerlin observes that Blondel distinguishes two types of intelligence: 1) forming concepts and reasoning abstractly; and 2) intuition in contrast to discourse. And although intuition contrasts with discourse, it is real, if not notional, knowledge; it is knowledge by connaturality or affinity as against knowledge by notions (Aquinas). These two forms of knowledge, while distinguishable, are in fact inseparable. The latter form is dynamic (*la pensée pensante*—the mystical) vis-à-vis the former (*la pensée pensée*) (p. 68). These two forms of knowledge correlate to two dimensions of philosophy: “direct knowledge in action [the mystical] and the reflection on this action [the notional]” (p. 70). The key to Blondel’s thought is his grasp of the reality and role of “the mystical” in human knowledge and discourse: humans have a natural affinity for God/the Transcendent that draws us and leads us on. This insight is at the heart of Blondel’s magnum opus, *L’Action*.

Talar’s chapter five, composed from the perspective of conflict narrative, begins with an illuminating account of Mère Cécil Bruyère, the Abbess of Solemnes and protagonist of Albert Houtin’s *Une grande mystique* (1925). Houtin had been a novice at Solemnes in 1887, left the monastery and subsequently became an identified Modernist who left the Church in 1912 and became a freethinker. His book discourses on the memorandum left by a certain physician trained under Jean-Martin Charcot, Joseph Sauton, who became a professed monk at Solemnes and described Bruyère’s alleged mysticism as essentially hysterical. This memorandum, sent to Roman authorities in 1892, led to the suspension of Abbot Paul (Henri Delatte) who had jurisdiction over Bruyère, while she was investigated. Supporters of the Abbot and Abbess appealed to Emperor Franz Joseph and Queen Cristina of Spain to intervene with Pope Leo XIII; Leo decided on a diplomatic solution and reinstated Delatte in late 1893.

Talar argues that Houtin, on the basis of his “freethinking” and (decidedly limited) experience at Solemnes, and on Sauton’s memorandum, “allowed only one possible source of mystical experience: naturalistic illusion” (p. 98). For a contrary and contemporary interpretation Talar appeals to Jean Baruzi’s judgment in his *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l’expérience mystique*, which appeared a year before Houtin’s book. Baruzi concluded that Sauton’s memorandum did not provide adequate data by which to evaluate Bruyère’s behavior. One would at least have to study her autobiography, journal, and letters, but these were not accessible. Henri Delacroix, in a long review of Baruzi’s book, supported Baruzi’s conclusions. He first impugned Sauton’s testimony as “blinded by his feelings of rancor, by his instinctive and acquired distrust, and by the medical biases that he had acquired in the climate created

by Charcot's work" (p. 99); he then argued that Bruyère's behavior was consistent with that of many mystics and not a sign of mental illness.

In conclusion, Talar compares Guy-Marie Oury's biography of Bruyère, *Lumière et force* (2005) with Houtin's; Oury, taking into account the testimony of numerous contemporary spiritual adepts who saw Bruyère as a saintly, authentic mystic, paints a very different portrait. Oury characterizes Houtin's "biographical notes on the professed at Solesmes" as "'nearly uniformly negative and partial,' more caricature than characterization. Houtin could be severe on those whose positions diverged from his own. Houtin's work extended suspicion of Bruyère's mysticism to *all* mysticism and therefore played into church authorities' suspicion of mysticism.

The final chapter, Harvey Hill's "Henri Bergson and Alfred Loisy," helps fill a gap in Modernist studies, which have too little attended to Bergson. Hill describes the sticking point of this collection (and a neuralgic point of the Modernist crisis) best: "Many Catholics around the turn of the twentieth century viewed appeals to religious experience as suspect. After all, Protestants often emphasized religious experience over against the objective truths enunciated by the Catholic Church through the centuries. And looming behind the Protestant emphasis on experience was the even more fearsome specter of Kantian subjectivism, the idea that all truth was relative to the knower. In response, many Catholic intellectuals turned to neo-Thomistic philosophy and theology, which were believed to provide a solid foundation for a properly orthodox Christian faith in properly deferential lay Christians" (p. 104)—and I would add, *not only lay Christians*.

In 1932 Bergson published his *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*, which identified the two sources as "social instinct and mystical intuition....Central to Bergson's thesis was the idea that mystics could transcend their historical and social context and then, based on this transcendent experience, introduce a dynamic element into an otherwise static religion" (p. 106). Loisy rebutted with *Y-a-t-il deux sources de la religion et de la morale?* (1933), arguing that "religious development did not occur as a result of periodic incursions of a dynamic element into otherwise static institutions. Rather, it was an ongoing process, all of which stemmed from a basic mystical impulse that Loisy identified as a sense of social solidarity" (pp. 106–7). I would support Loisy's judgment in this sense: the mystical element is not a "periodic incursion" but is always present in the religious institution, even if not acknowledged or resisted as ungovernable.

Hill's historical situating of the debate over dynamic-vs.-static societies in the Interwar era shows the necessity in institutions of a dynamic element to relativize the institutional to avoid the fanaticism that can lead to annihilation of the "enemy." Bergson, Hill says, was prescient on the causes of war and on the necessity of eliciting mysticism as a pragmatic prophylaxis against war; mysticism, Bergson argued, aids in transformation of closed societies into a more "ascetic ideal" that can counter the "two principal causes of war: overpopulation and overconsumption" (p. 108). Loisy agreed with this analysis. He too believed that crises that threaten populations are essentially religious, in that "too many people [have] parochial loyalties." While loyalty is a necessary quality of cultural groupings, it has to be directed toward "the common good...of all people," not just of one's "own." Loyalty, Loisy contended, "is the very sentiment of sociability, of morality," but it "must be transformed into a complete sense of humanity." In other words, one's "natural love of neighbor" must be transformed into a love for all humanity." For this to happen, what is required is "the power of devotion," the power of the mystical. (pp. 108-9)

In his argument, Bergson identified two sources of morality: one that fosters social cohesion (this pertains more to "closed" societies); and the "human morality" of "an open soul," of one who can transcend love of one's group to love of all humanity, this in response to the *élan vital* that animates all creation and directs evolution. The first is fostered by the social pressure of the closed society; the

second, fostered by “aspiration” of the mystical sense of the open society, offers the best hope for survival in the modern period. These two types are capable of coexisting and tend to blur in experience.

The foregoing analysis is equally applicable to religion. Bergson sees two types: closed or static and open or dynamic. Myth plays a critically important role in religion. For Bergson “myths were the ‘imaginary representations’ generated by the intelligence...to prevent the application of the intelligence from undermining the social order” (p. 113). However, intelligence tends to enforce strict boundaries against outside threats (death, ultimately), thus creating a closed society (or religion) that can lead to a self-defeating paralysis and demise of the society (or religion). So myth and static religion tend to be defensive and “inherently conservative” (p. 113). To survive and flourish, society and religion need the mystical, the dynamic element of religion, to infuse vitality into religion and society. “‘The ultimate end of mysticism,’ Bergson argued, “‘is the establishment of a contact, consequently of a partial coincidence, with the creative effort which life itself manifests. This effort is of God, if it is not God himself. The great mystic is to be conceived as an individual being, capable of transcending the limitations imposed on the species by its material nature, thus continuing and extending the divine action.’” Thus, through the mystical element, God’s creative action, indeed, God’s love, is brought to bear on society and religion for their vital evolution. Thus, Bergson argued, mystical union with God, while it can be accompanied by “abnormal psychological states like ecstasies or visions” (p. 115) is incomplete unless it manifests itself in love for neighbor without boundaries.

The mystical, therefore, enables the transcending of historical and cultural contexts, ultimately for the good health of one’s current culture and religion—quite in line with Jesus’ teaching in Luke 9:24–25. Indeed, for Bergson, Jesus’ own mysticism is what enabled the founding and flourishing of a dynamic new religion that could both cohere with yet necessarily transcend Judaism.

Hill argues that Bergson and Loisy agreed that “a religious transformation” was needed to overcome the crisis of civilization represented by World War I and its aftermath. Bergson saw the barrier to transformation was static religion. Dynamic religion could have helped and encouraged progress, but the Catholic Church “could not embrace the modern world and assume leadership of those forces working for progress”; and in his terms, Loisy left the Church precisely because it was “static rather than dynamic” (p. 118).

Loisy, however, vigorously disputed Bergson’s “model of historical development on two grounds.” He rejected the notion of “a transcendent, supernatural source of evolutionary power in favor of the natural, historical development of society itself. Second, he denied the discontinuity that Bergson saw in history as a result of these divine incursions.” Loisy argued that change “occurred as a part of the natural life of any religion without the sharp breaks that Bergson wanted to identify.” Rather, for Loisy, historical development “did not proceed by sudden incursions of God so much as by natural and cultural processes.” And as opposed to Bergson’s two types of religion, static and dynamic, Loisy proposed three: primitive, national, and universal, each of which included elements, at least potentially, of all three types; Bergson’s dynamic religion was present in all three and developed “‘naturally and progressively, not by an abrupt leap and by the sudden explosion of a religion transcending all that had preceded it’” (p. 122).

Hill nicely rounds off his treatment of Loisy and Bergson by exposing the strengths and weakness of both arguments. Most striking is Hill’s contention that Loisy “overstated his differences with Bergson....Bergson recognized that his ideal types did not exist in history. Mystics did not, and could not transcend their social contexts so entirely as to mark a total break with the religion they inherited.” Loisy was largely refuting “an oversimplified version of Bergson’s philosophy....In fact, Bergson’s distinctions of dynamic and static,” Hill avers, “seem helpful in identifying different impulses that appear within religions, just not as a classification system for different religions themselves. Bergson himself could well have accepted this qualification.” And “Loisy’s identification of mysticism with the sense of

social solidarity seems reductionistic. It corresponded to his interpretation of religious history and established a firm theoretical foundation for the religion of humanity that he hoped to see develop. But it did not correspond to the descriptions that many mystics have given of their experiences.” (pp. 133-34)

Missing from this collection is a study of George Tyrrell’s thought on mysticism. Probably the editors were unable to get a Tyrrell scholar to contribute an essay within the time frame of this project. That is unfortunate because at the heart of Tyrrell’s meandering, ad hoc theology is the mystical element of religion. His essential insight is found in his seminal essay, “The Relation of Theology to Devotion,” and in his pseudonymous monograph *Religion as a Factor of Life*, the heart of which he published under his own name as *Lex Orandi*. In sum, *Modernists and Mystics* is essential reading for a deep understanding of Roman Catholic Modernism.

NOTES

[1] Darrell Jodock, ed., *Catholicism Contending with Modernity* (2002); Lawrence Barmann and Harvey Hill, eds., *Personal Faith and Institutional Commitments*, (2002); Harvey Hill, Louis-Pierre Sardella, and C. J. T. Talar, eds., *By Those Who Knew Them: French Modernists Left, Right, and Center*, ed. (2008); David G. Schultenover, S.J., ed., *The Reception of Pragmatism in France and the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890–1914* (2009);

[2] Letter to Maude Petre, March 13, 1918, in Baron Friedrich von Hügel, *Selected Letters, 1896–1924*, ed. Bernard Holland (London: Dent, 1927) 248)

[3] See Huvelin’s *Bossuet, Fénelon, le quiétisme* (1912)

[4] See Leo XIII’s brief *Testem benevolentiae* [1899], the shot across the bow addressed to Cardinal James Gibbons, which many saw as calling into question Isaac Hecker’s views on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.)

[5] I am not referring to Pius X’s understanding of this term as signaled by his motto, *Instaurare omnia in Christo*).

[6] See David G. Schultenover, S.J., *A View from Rome: On the Eve of the Modernist Crisis* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), pp. 39–61).

David G. Schultenover, S.J.
Marquette University
david.schultenover@marquette.edu

Copyright © 2010 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of

H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172