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Louise Nelstrop and Bradley B. Onishi, eds., *Mysticism in the French Tradition: Eruptions from France*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2015. xvii + 295 pp. \$135.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-4724-3939-0.

Review by Moshe Sluhovsky, Hebrew University.

Mysticism is an historical reality, and, therefore a fact that ought to be investigated historically. This statement, a variation on a point made by the early-twentieth century French philosopher Maurice Blondel, is not as self-evident as it may seem. In fact, for most of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the majority of French scholars, first and foremost among them philosophers, dismissed mysticism as “a source of crimes and madness,” as the *Grand Dictionnaire universel du XIX siècle* (1874) put it, a religious conspiracy to make people stupid. Much of French psychology in the nineteenth century was, in fact, an attempt to understand mysticism by explaining it away: mystics were mentally unstable, delusional, or—more often than not—hysterics. So, when Blondel, the professor of philosophy at the University of Aix-en-Provence, wrote about mystical events as worthy of a philosophical investigation, he inaugurated a new chapter in the history of both mysticism and philosophy.

In fact, there is a fundamental tension between mysticism and philosophy or between the domains of the transcendent and the immanent. This is because mysticism is not just an experience, as we tend to think; it is also a type of knowledge. Mystical experiences convey knowledge that is often very different from the knowledge that is reached by employing our faculties and senses. And just as philosophers ridiculed mystics, theologians regarded philosophical attempts to understand mysticism as naturalism, or, worse, atheism.

Michael A. Conway’s contribution to the collection under review does overdue justice to Blondel’s importance to the development of the scholarly study of mysticism in France. Blondel was part of an eruption of interest in mysticism that took place in the first third of the twentieth century, shaped, to a large degree, by the work of Henri Bergson, the Jewish philosopher who reshaped the relations between Catholicism and philosophy in France and to some degree even led to mass conversion of French intellectuals to Catholicism. Following Blondel, Catholic philosophers in France strove to narrow the gap between the two systems of knowledge, and asked, for example, how are we to comprehend theopathic states (the living presence of God within the soul), what is the nature of mystical knowledge, or how to discern between mystic state and psychosis, a question whose history is as old as mysticism itself.

From Blondel and Henri Bremond, through Jacques Maritain to Jean-Luc Nancy, Michel de Certeau and Jean-Luc Marion, twentieth-century France has witnessed an unparalleled

rapprochement between the two forms of knowledge, as well as the construction of a toolbox and a vocabulary that enable scholars to take mystical experiences and mystical knowledge seriously and discuss them respectfully. The collection of articles *Mysticism in the French Tradition* is both an example and an analysis of this engagement. The chapters in the collection began life in the annual Mystical Theology Network conference that took place in Dublin in 2013. It is the nature of edited collection that topics and quality of articles vary, and this collection is no different.

The collection is divided into three parts, each one approaching mysticism from a different angle. The first deals with the philosophical investigation of mysticism and the complex relations between philosophy and theology in French thought. Tina Beattie reads Lacan through a New-Thomist perspective, and Emmanuel Falque calls for a return to a theologically-shaped philosophy. Pamela Sue Anderson offers an original feminist critique of what she calls “psycholinguistic feminism” that locks women in asymmetrical relations to a male divinity, and Jessica Frazier uses Indian mysticism to suggest a more fluid and flowing mysticism that enables a connection with others, a connection that is often impossible in the isolation of the soul in Western mystical traditions. Underlining these debates is the contemporary French philosophical discussions of the relation of self and other and of the boundaries and/or porosity of the self.

The third section centers on images and imaginations. Mystical experiences, after all, are visions or visualizations, that are then often articulated verbally or pictorially. Historians will benefit especially from Terence O’Reilly’s article on François de Sales’s mystical theology and his articulation of the relations between meditation and contemplation and between active and passive prayer. As O’Reilly shows, de Sales was committed to writing to a wide audience that included uneducated people and even Calvinists, and his theological treatises must be read within the political and religious context of early seventeenth-century France. Ruth Whelan’s contribution focuses on Élie Neau, a globetrotter French-born Huguenot seaman merchant, who ended up in French captivity, chained on the galleys and then in a dungeon in the port of Marseilles. Her careful reading of the edition of his writings and letters, a compilation that was edited by his pastor, Jean Morin, in 1699, deals with the different traditions that this uneducated man absorbed, the influence of contemporary Catholic mysticism, and the polemical usage of his experiences of divine love. Neau, she suggests, incorporated Dutch late-medieval and Dutch Reform concepts he encountered in his years in the Caribbean islands into the Catholic traditions he was exposed to in his captivity to develop a Protestant mysticism that was Christocentric and physical in ways that were more typical of female Passion mysticism than of any Calvinist tradition.

For historians, the most easily accessible part of *Mysticism in the French Tradition* is the second, in which a number of articles address the issue of continuity and change in French mystical traditions. John Arblaster asks whether the thirteenth century saw a radically new development in mystical theology or whether the theology of the century was a continuity of preceding centuries. Focusing on Marguerite Porete, the first person to be condemned and executed for mystical heresy (d. 1310), Arblaster shows the similarity between her mysticism and that of the twelfth-century William of St. Thierry, and argues that, indeed, what had been acceptable in the earlier period became heretical by the thirteenth century. Edward Howells ask a similar question regarding Pierre de Bérulle, the leading French mystic of the second half of the sixteenth century, and as such a contemporary of Teresa of Avila and Ignatius of Loyola,

two of the most important mystics of the Christian tradition. Bérulle, Howells convincingly shows, was crucial for the development of new forms of devotion in France in the early modern period. He participated in the “democratization” of access to devotion and in the cultivation of devotion to Jesus’s life and ministry.

Rob Faesen also opens his article with the notion of change. “It is often assumed that spirituality took a new direction in the early modern period,” he asserts (p. 149), and then goes on to prove the point by looking at how one contemporary, namely Jean-Joseph Surin, experienced spirituality. Surin is well known today due to the works of Michel de Certeau, who devoted much of his writings to Surin.[1] And, indeed, as Faesen shows, Surin was well aware that something new was taking place, namely, growing attraction to annihilation of the self and a complete and genuine abandonment to the love of God.

It is perhaps unavoidable that a collection of articles on the French mystical tradition will focus on the century that Henri Bremond, the most important historian of French spirituality in the modern period, called “the century of saints” (and by saints he meant mystics).[2] Between the end of the Wars of Religions and the condemnation, silencing, and imprisonment of Madame Guyon a hundred years later, France was the fertile soil on which Spanish, Dutch, and Italian mystical tradition and innovations germinated and flourished. Scholars of religious history of France in the early modern period will find much that is fascinating in this collection.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, Michel de Certeau, ed., *Correspondance de Jean-Joseph Surin* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1966) and Michel de Certeau, *La Possession de Loudun* (Paris: Julliard, 1970).

[2] Henri Bremond, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours* (11 vol.) (Paris: Bould & Gay, 1916-1933; réédition, Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 2006). See also, Michel de Certeau, *La Fable mystique* (Collection Bibliothèque des Idées) (Paris: Gallimard, 1982).

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