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Kathleen A. Mulhern, *Beyond the Contingent. Epistemological Authority, a Pascalian Revival, and the Religious Imagination in Third Republic France*. With a Foreword by Martha Hanna. Eugene, Or.: Pickwick Publications, 2011. xvii + 212 pp. Bibliography and index. \$25.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN-13: 978-1-60899-370-3.

Review by Stephen Schloesser, Loyola University Chicago.

Kathleen Mulhern investigates a late-nineteenth-century deployment of the seventeenth-century thought of Blaise Pascal by French neo-Pascalians (“Pascalisans”). Pascal had never completely disappeared from the French literary scene. Seventy years after his death, he served Voltaire as a foil in the *Remarques sur les Pensées de Pascal* (1734); Condorcet’s edition of the *Pensées* (1776) was but one stage in his ever-shifting relationship with Pascal-Voltaire.[1] In the post-revolutionary Romantic period, Pascal re-appeared in 1835; a new critical edition proposed by Victor Cousin followed ten years later (1844). From the mid-century onward, Pascal’s nationalist function as the French literary genius enjoyed multiple new editions: Vinet (1848), Sainte-Beuve (1848), Havet (1852), Droz (1886), Michaut (1896), and Brunschvicg (1904) (p. 7).

For the purposes of Mulhern’s story, there seems to be a missing link here between 1776 and 1835. That link is suggested by Darrin McMahon’s observation that (largely Catholic) opponents of the *philosophes* during the 1770s-1780s overlooked Pascal’s Jansenist associations (and Rousseau’s own philosophic position) in service of combating “rationalism.” Though clearly differing in world view, both Pascal and Rousseau “argued convincingly that the heart had reasons that reason knows not, that when left to themselves our rational faculties left us lifeless and cold, uncertain and unsure. This was a powerful weapon in an ‘age of reason,’ and opponents of the *philosophes* drew on it repeatedly to attack the pretensions of those who would live by thought alone.”[2] This same delegitimation strategy would be recycled a little over a century later as fin-de-siècle Catholics turned to Pascal’s epistemological claims once again for guidance.

In the late nineteenth century, however, the opponents had changed. One set, descendants of the *philosophes*, was somewhat predictable: Third Republican laicist positivism, scientism, historicism. The other set, descendants of those “enemies of the Enlightenment,” somewhat less so: Roman Catholic integralism, neo-scholasticism, ultramontanism. Although positivists and neo-scholastics were imagined by both themselves and others as binary opposites, they both shared a common trait disavowed by neo-Pascalians (or “Pascalisans”): a high estimation of “reason.” Mulhern delimits her story with two dates marking papal encyclicals. At the outset, *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) attempts to deal with nearly a century of historicist Biblical criticism’s erosion of dogmas. The Pope directed Catholic Biblical scholars to “loyally hold that...nothing can be proved either by physical science or archaeology which can really contradict the Scriptures.” (p. 80). (The Pope’s timing was impeccable as his attack coincided almost exactly with a public debate in France over whether positivistic science was bankrupt.[3]) At the other end of Mulhern’s story lies *Pascendi Dominici Gregis* (1907), the encyclical that condemned (even as it invented) “Roman Catholic Modernism,” leaving a chilling effect on thought in the Church that would endure until the Vatican Council of 1962-1965. In the end, as Martha Hanna underscores in her foreword, Mulhern argues that “the neo-Pascalians failed not primarily because they fell victim to the acerbic anticlericalism of Émile Combes, but because they fell afoul of Vatican orthodoxy” (p. xv). The deployment of Pascal against positivistic rationalism served Catholic anti-laicist interests; but it also simultaneously undercut integralist Catholicism’s fierce conviction that its neo-scholasticism was at least as “rational” as its laicist competition.

Within this seven-year period, Mulhern surveys the work of three Catholic figures: the physicist Pierre Duhem, the philosopher and apologist Maurice Blondel, and the philosopher-theologian (Père) Lucien Laberthonnière. Each of these has been the subject of study in different fields: Duhem primarily in the philosophy of science; Laberthonnière in Roman Catholic Modernist studies (a somewhat tragic figure since, as a cleric, he was most severely censured and submitted to a Roman interdict on future writing); and Blondel whose thought has undergone a revival in recent years.[4] Devoting a chapter to each of these individuals, Mulhern's singular contribution is connecting these three seemingly disparate figures by means of shared neo-Pascalian influences and orientations.

Before launching into the fin-de-siècle, Mulhern provides a chapter surveying Pascal's thought, his own seventeenth-century context, his controversial and somewhat paradoxical functions in Catholic and French history, and his later reception. For Pascal, human beings live suspended over an abyss between the two extremes of infinity and nothingness (*l'infini* and *le néant*). Out of the many memorable lines in the *Pensées*, perhaps this one (from fragment 188) most succinctly sums up Pascal's value for the late-nineteenth century: "Reason's last step is the recognition that there are an infinite number of things which are beyond it" (p. 125). This awareness of the chasm between finite reason and cosmic infinity evokes a caution familiar to any rider of the London Underground: mind the gap.

Duhem's anti-positivistic attention to the gap between models and reality followed a path already being forged by Henri Poincaré and Austrian Ernest Mach. "The true physicist works with theories while always understanding them to be representations, not explanations," Duhem wrote in "La Théorie physique" (1904-1905). "Though he will be constantly tempted to believe that the relations a theory perceives correspond to reality, the physicist must always set aside these suspicions and hopes in order to focus on data observation" (p. 99). Mind the gap. And yet, Duhem refused the positivist's presumption that even such data observation can be theory-neutral: "An experiment in physics is not simply the observation of a phenomenon; it is, besides, the theoretical interpretation of this phenomenon" (p. 101).

Blondel's doctoral dissertation entitled *L'Action* (1893) has been the subject of numerous studies. His "philosophy of insufficiency" provided a philosophical touchstone for much Catholic theology in the twentieth century, especially that of Transcendental Thomism (e.g., Joseph Maréchal, Karl Rahner).[5] The "insufficiency" is that gap between our aspirations as imagined against an infinite horizon and our limited (and ultimately incapable) finite means to achieve them. These tropes familiar to Blondel scholars take on fresh meanings when placed alongside Duhem's philosophy of science and within the neo-Pascalian milieu. In *L'Action*, Blondel grounds his "insufficiency" of the intellect within the broader debate (circa 1895) over French positivism's validity: "What is even a simple fact? Can we place ourselves in the presence of any positive, palpable, complete fact? No, every fact is already a complex fiction, an organic integration, a mental construction...Science leaves an enormous amount unknown in the world; in vain do we seek from it reasons for acting...It cannot furnish us with a single motive for action" (p. 113). In the absence of such available motives, Blondel concluded three years later that "only practical action, the effective action of our lives, will settle for each one of us, in secret, the question of the relations between the soul and God"—and the motive for this action must have at least the possibility of deriving from "the solicitations of the hidden God" (p. 126). Here, in one brief passage, are two of Pascal's main legacies in an emerging post-positivist context: the heart has its reasons of which the intellect knows nothing; and "The Hidden God."

Laberthonnière argued for the same individual interpretative character of appropriating dogma. The objective creedal material and the subjective act of believing needed to be unified in an individual's life experience. In "Le Problème religieux" (1897), discussing systematic (speculative) theology and positive (experiential) theology, Laberthonnière wrote: "One can with Pascal call the one the knowledge of the

heart, and the other knowledge by the intellect" (p. 136). Further developing this trope three years later, Laberthonnière elevated the *inquiétude* emanating from suspension over the abyss—the gap of insufficiency—to a privileged position in the interior life (even for “mystics”). “Before being able to call [on God] we sense him in the infinity of our hopes, in the unceasing discontent in which we find ourselves, in all that we do and all that we are, in the feeling of the inadequacy of everything” (pp. 149-150).

In a fourth chapter on “Telling Stories About Authenticity,” several “Pascalists” (including Blondel and Laberthonnière) apply their deconstructive technique to the study of history itself, deconstructing that noble dream of historicist objectivity. Blondel treated history as Duhem treated science: “The observer, the narrator, is always more or less of a poet; for behind what he sees the witness puts an action and a soul so as to give the fact a meaning;...behind these critical data the historian inserts a general view and wider human preoccupations” (p. 173). There was enough here to offend everyone. The Republic had relied heavily upon the study and propagation of history as a “science” in its schools: stories of the past legitimated the state and delegitimated its (mostly clerical) enemies. Brunetière followed Aristotle in arguing that history, telling stories about unrepeatable accidental events, could not be a science; moreover, “any historical representation said more about the historian’s perception than about the factual content of the representation” (p. 177). So much for Taine and Michelet. As for the Catholics, Leo XIII had proposed a policy of *ralliement*, Catholics making peace with modernity and “rallying around the Republic.” Mulhern notes that this was more than a political policy; it was “a historical statement, severing France’s monarchist past from its future French identity, and as such left the French Catholic Church in a state of disarray.” She concludes: “[t]he Church recognized that its simple definitions of historical facts and their links to Catholic dogma were being challenged by the same secular models of historical criticism that were leading the State to reshape its future” (p. 188).

Beyond the Contingent is Mulhern’s reprinted 2006 dissertation. As such, it suffers some drawbacks that might have been repaired with more research, revision, and reflection. The dissertation genre requires laying out the historical context in both its long (since the seventeenth century) and short (nineteenth-century) durations; as reproduced here it is somewhat lacking in both depth and concision and could have been considerably shortened. Conversely, there has been a great volume of work published during the last five years on Roman Catholic Modernism in general and Blondel in particular. Largely revisionist, this material situates what has been previously seen as a narrowly confessional crisis within much broader intellectual and cultural trends. Mulhern’s argument would be bolstered by being located within this larger context, most especially in the transatlantic exchange of the pragmatists, especially William James and Henri Bergson. (Note, for example, Duhem’s self-description of his “positivist and pragmatic” view of nature [p. 98].) Her work might also benefit from a more explicit historiographical location of both her own perspective, as well as that of the authors to whom she is indebted. For example, Mulhern discusses Duhem in terms of Karl Popper’s principle of falsifiability first formulated during the 1930s: since we can never know all possible future elements (Pascal’s “last step”), all present discoveries are provisional and hence theoretical (p. 93). But Margaret Eastwood, to whose *Revival of Pascal* (1936) Mulhern regularly returns, did not have the benefit of Popper’s insights or other emerging philosophies of science. A similar gloss might be made on Lucien Goldmann’s seminal *The Hidden God* (1964), published just as the “Death of God” movement was entering its heyday. Finally, there are stylistic and structural elements that might have been better shaped with revisions made over time.

Notwithstanding these minor points, Mulhern has produced a work that is both innovative and strongly suggestive for future exploration. Pascalian tropes of epistemological darkness, inscrutable signs and mystery, and human ineffectuality all echo fin-de-siècle symbolist and decadent projects; there are passages here that might have come from Joris-Karl Huysmans’ anti-naturalist fiction or Léon Bloy’s symbolism of history. The centrality of Pascalian anxiety provides a hermeneutical lens for reading Abbé

Henri Bremond's contemporaneous works: they take *inquiétude* as the starting point for "conversion" in modernity.[6] Similarly, it seems worth exploring both convergences and differentiations in turn-of-the-century revivals of the seventeenth-century figures Pascal, Malebranche, and Spinoza.[7] In the same vein, the recovery of Pascal's "Hidden God" for the fin-de-siècle fully accords with Michel de Certeau's account of the privileged "invisible" that differentiated late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century "mysticism" from predecessors.[8] Finally, Charly Coleman has recently drawn attention to the "Hidden God" legacy in his survey of recent Enlightenment historiography and shifting theories of "secularization." [9] Mulhern's work uncovers what seems to have been, in retrospect, yet another hidden layer in modernity's archaeology.

NOTES

[1] David Williams, "Signposts to the Secular City: the Voltaire-Condorcet Relationship," in T. D. Hemming, E. Freeman, and David Meakin, eds., *The Secular City: Studies in the Enlightenment: Presented to Haydn Mason* (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter Press, 1994), pp. 120-133; see esp. pp. 126-132.

[2] Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 35.

[3] Harry Paul, "The Debate over the Bankruptcy of Science in 1895," *French Historical Studies* 5/3(1968):299-327; cited in Mulhern.

[4] A consultant to the Holy Office remarked that Blondel's "poor theological ideas" were able to be tolerated because he was "a young lay professor"; in the case of Laberthonnière, however, "we cannot accept from a priest, who should be a precise and rigorous theologian, what we can tolerate from a layman" (p. 153).

[5] See my review of Gregory B. Sadler, *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation* (2011), especially note 1 (<http://www.h-france.net/vol11reviews/vol11no233Schloesser.pdf>). Maréchal, known for his synthesis of Thomism and neo-Kantianism, reads quite differently within a neo-Pascalian context: "As long as any condition whatsoever will look to us as 'limiting,' we shall be certain that the absolutely last end of our intelligence lies beyond it, or, which amounts to the same thing, that the formal object of our intelligence extends beyond this limitation. For the awareness of a limit as limit contains logically, within the very order where the limit occurs, the knowledge of a further possibility." Compare Rahner: "In the fact that [man] experiences his finiteness radically, he reaches beyond this finiteness and experiences himself as a transcendent being, as spirit. The infinite horizon of human questioning is experienced as an horizon which recedes further and further the more answers man can discover." See Joseph Donceel, ed., *A Maréchal Reader* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), pp. 163-164; Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 64; and Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, translated by William V. Dych (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1978), p. 32.

[6] Henri Bremond, *L'inquiétude religieuse. Aubes et lendemains de conversions* (Paris: Perrin, 1901); Bremond, *Newman. / 2, Psychologie de la foi* (Paris: Bloud, 1905); Bremond, *L'inquiétude religieuse. 2e série, La Conversion de Pascal, Le Silence de Dieu, Le Scrupule de saint Jérôme, L'évolution du clergé anglican, Mysticisme et controverse, La légende d'argent* (Paris: Perrin, 1909). These works lay the groundwork for Bremond's magisterial study, *Histoire littéraire du sentiment religieux en France depuis la fin des guerres de religion jusqu'à nos jours*, 11 vols. (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1916-1933). Although he evaded censure, Bremond

was closely associated with the Roman Catholic Modernists both personally and professionally.

[7] See my 2007 review of Richard J. Fafara, *The Malebranche Moment* (<http://www.h-france.net/vol10reviews/vol10no28schloesser.pdf>); and Victor Delbos, *La notion de substance et la notion de Dieu dans la philosophie de Spinoza* (Paris: A. Colin, 1908); Delbos, *Le Spinozisme: [Spinoza] Cours professé à la Sorbonne en 1912-1913* (Paris, 1916); Delbos, *Figures et doctrines de philosophes: Socrate, Lucrèce, Marc Aurèle, Descartes, Spinoza, Kant, Maine de Biran* (Paris: Plon-Nourrit, 1918). After Delbos's untimely death in 1916, his papers were entrusted to Maurice Blondel.

[8] Michel de Certeau, "Mysticism," tr. Marsanne Brammer, *Diacritics* 22/2(Summer, 1992):11-25.

[9] Charly Coleman, "The Persistence of Religion in Modern Europe: Resacralizing the World: The Fate of Secularization in Enlightenment Historiography," *The Journal of Modern History* 82/2(June 2010):368-395.

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