

Changing modes of theological rationality

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A modern tradition in foundational theology: analysis of modes of thinking

Only in Schüssler Fiorenza's third period does the paradigm of foundational theology focus on its type of rationality. She defines the rationality of 20th century foundational theology as the "transcendental foundation of Christian revelation and of Christian theology". That means that all Christian theological issues, such as human freedom, human beings' place in the cosmos, the meaning of Jesus and the role of the church, are formulated in relation to the concept of revelation. Revelation is the perspective in which a question becomes a theological problem.² What is the relation between human freedom and divine revelation, between human beings' place in the cosmos and divine revelation, et cetera? Finally, Schüssler Fiorenza's definitions imply that methodologically 20th century Christian theology presupposes that the relation to revelation must necessarily be considered with due regard to the knowing subject's assumed autonomous relation to itself. That puts an end to the many dichotomies between revelation and freedom, revelation and cosmos, revelation and confession of Christ. The relation between revelation and humans' place in the cosmos, its relation to human freedom and its relation to the church are all problems embedded in the knowing subject's assumed autonomous relation to itself.

An important and influential example of this consciousness of the knowing subject's assumed autonomous relation to itself is to be found in the oeuvre of Johann-Baptist Metz. He introduced the concept *mode of thinking* (*Denkform*) into foundational theology. He originally³ meant the formal principle of the *being thought* in a given (theological) construct. The category 'mode of thinking' does not refer to the logical or psychological nature of a construct, be it a concept, an idea or an argument. To Metz a construct includes *Seins-verständnis*.⁴ Concepts, propositions, theories are in themselves ways of relating to the world. Thought 'shapes', forms (in the Aristotelian sense of the word) our relation to reality. "*Das ein Denken*

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² Cf. Eicher, P. (1977), *Offenbarung. Prinzip neuzeitlicher Theologie*. München: Kösel.

³ Metz, J-B. (1962), *Christliche Antropozentrik: über die Denkform des Thomas van Aquin*, München: Kösel.

⁴ Op. cit., p. 30, n. 6.

Characterisierende ist nicht primär das in ihm Ausgesagte, sondern der vorgängig in jeder Aussage waltende Horizont.” The horizon of our thinking always includes a particular relationship to reality. But, says Metz, the history of philosophy contains ‘*epochale Differenzen*’. The relation to reality changes over time. For many centuries Western thought was governed by a cosmocentric orientation. Later it made way for an anthropocentric horizon. Metz cites Thomas Aquinas as a clear example of this shift.

Metz’s concept of mode of thinking implies a distinction between the content of a theological category and the mode in which it is probed in theological reflection. “The task of foundational theology is to take note of the mode in which theology is done,” says the theologian Logister.⁵ The distinction between mode of thinking and theological reflection enables us to examine the rational content of a theological construct in terms of its origin, merits and limitations. Thus one can distinguish between the substance of a theological concept and its relation to ecclesiastic doctrine. The notion of mode of thinking introduces pluralism and falsifiability into theological theory of science and frees theology from the demands and authority of church doctrine. The radical impact of this new term becomes clear if we compare Metz’s proposal with that of his teacher Karl Rahner many years later in his *Grundkurs des Glaubens*.⁶ Rahner, too, allowed for pluralism in his theological theory of science. Scientific theology itself, he averred, has evolved a vast number of separate disciplines, besides accommodating a wide range of philosophical traditions.⁷ But this pluralism makes him insist on the unity *of* and the unity *in* theology, especially in the framework of its current theory of science and the diversity of addressees it has by now acquired. In his view human knowledge is characterised by the unity-in-difference between self-identity and reflection.⁸ A conception of reality (e.g. of theology) is based on the autonomous relation to oneself which always inheres in knowledge of reality as other-to-oneself. This unity of reality and the person’s original self-awareness is already present in human beings’ free self-realisation.⁹ Reflection is a realisation of this human existential quality. To be sure, it entails an objectifying, generalising distance from the object of knowledge. But, says Rahner, that distance, functioning in and via language, still presupposes the original self-awareness and self-presence. Conceptualising (e.g. in theology) always relates adequately and asymptotically, albeit

⁵ Logister, W. (1980), *Verkeerde vragen zijn fataal. De korrelatie tussen denkvorm en denkinhoud binnen de theologie als fundamentealtheologische opgave*. Inaugural lecture, Tilburg: Theologische Faculteit, p.26. [Our translation.]

⁶ Cf. K. Rahner (1999), *Foundations of Christian faith. An introduction to the idea of Christianity* (translation of *Grundkurs des Glaubens. Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Freiburg: Herder, 1976), New York: Crossroad.

⁷ Op. cit., 19.

⁸ Cf. op. cit., 15.

⁹ Cf. op. cit., 16.

partially, to the goal of this self-identity. In this transcendental experience cognition always implies the knowing subject's subject relation to its cognition. And the experience also includes – in a non-thematic (Rahner calls its 'anonymous') way, namely as a goal – what we call God. In its unfathomability, says Rahner, the transcendent is always the already self-evident. 'All clear understanding is grounded in the darkness of God'.¹⁰ Given this grounding, the unity *in* theology is basic to the unity *of* theology. In this transcendental analysis the various theological disciplines, as well as the relation between philosophy (of religion) and theology, ultimately have the same foundation. That is particularly pertinent to the relation between dogmatic and foundational theology. Since the 19th century foundational theology's special task has been to secure the internal unity of theology as a science. Thus the emphasis was on epistemological questions associated with the knowing subject. Rahner belongs to this tradition and consciously seeks to perpetuate it.

Thus there is a long tradition in theological theory of science that grounds the discipline in an epistemological concept. Magnus Striet summarises it thus: Immanuel Kant's project remains valid, namely to express the essence of religion via the dimension of human *reason* (*Vernunft*) in an anthropologically adequate manner for modern thinkers.¹¹ Striet goes so far as to say that in modern thought Kant is indispensable for any attempt to give the rationality of faith an unquestionable foundation, a *fundamentum inconcussum*.¹²

From this it is clear what Metz's category of mode of thinking implies for the foundation of a theological theory of science. Even though Metz uses the term to advocate an anthropological turn in theology by reconstructing it in the work of Thomas Aquinas, *in essence* he is introducing a pluralistic, falsifiable principle into theological theory of science. After all, the category 'mode of thinking' intrinsically refers to a particular, historical attribute of theological theory of science. In his book in 1962 Metz still considered mode of thinking to be an ontological category, but by introducing it into theological theory of science – and that was his innovation – he made room for a historical approach to theological research. Church doctrines, too, are modes of theological thought and in that sense open to criticism. Theology has a *Seinsgeschichte* and thus changes as our relationship to reality changes – in fact, it has to keep up with changes if it is to accomplish its fundamental task.

The particular, historical character of theological theory of science was subsequently elaborated by Metz in projects like his new 'political

¹⁰ Op. cit., 22.

¹¹ Cf. Striet, M. (2005), "Erkenntnis aller Pflichten als göttlicher Gebote". *Bleibende Relevanz und Grenzen von Kants Religionsphilosophie*, in: Georg Essen & Magnus Striet (Hrsg.), *Kant und die Theologie*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 162-186, here 167.

¹² Op. cit., 168.

theology' and his biographical theology, and in diverse, radical ways by many other theologians. Any number of hermeneutic and contextual theologies emerged. Today, at the beginning of the 21st century, it is clear that the histories of the self-emancipation and oppression of various Christian communities worldwide have become the context of many practical hermeneutic variants of theology that often develop in conflict with each other. By 'practical hermeneutics' I mean theologising as critical analysis of and reflection on the ways in which religious communities and individual believers in specific situations explore and probe their existence as the scene of God's actions. The cardinal question in a practical hermeneutic theology is how human life should be interpreted *coram Deo* in the historical vicissitudes and conflicts in which particular 'actors' enact their histories, that is to say as the scene and the history of God's presence.

New questions and diversity

The theological project of accounting for faith finds itself in a totally new and complex situation. In all the forums of public discourse that Tracy¹³ identifies the discussion has, as it were, been turned upside down. The starting point can no longer be found in – at any rate partial – agreement with the Christian religious tradition and in – at any rate partial – conformity between present-day notions of rationality on the one hand and scientific theologising on the other. In the forum of the religious community thinking oriented to God (*Denken naar God toe* – Piet Schoonenberg's definition of theology in his farewell lecture in 1977) is faced with an unprecedented situation of despair, in the forum of society with an enormous crisis of meaning, and in the scientific forum with conflict, not only about specific arguments but also about the meaning and scope of theological reasoning as such. All this has, in a manner of speaking, inverted the argument and the direction of the question of theology. Theology needs to find its 'subject' (the mystery of God) anew and develop the object (its own argument) anew in terms of aesthetic experience. And in so doing its concern should still be to account publicly for the orientation to God and to accept pluralism as a fundamental enrichment of the human condition.

As a result of this inversion of the dialogue theologians are studying the artistic mode as a relevant supplement to the mode of thinking. That is a major reason for their interest in aesthetics. The theologian Vergauwen maintains that nowadays aesthetic experience is the *locus theologicus*.¹⁴ To

¹³ Tracy, D. (1981), *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism*, New York: Crossroad.

¹⁴ Cf. Vergauwen, G. (2002), Zustimmung und Stimmigkeit. Die Rationalität theologischer Rede, in: P. Neuner, *Glaubenswissenschaft? Theologie im Spannungsfeld von Glaube,*

many aesthetic experience has nothing to do with correspondence between the image and what it portrays. Its foundation, says Vergauwen with reference to the philosopher Vattimo, is a weak ontology. At the very least it implies that in aesthetic experience the only legitimate premise is apologia of the self, which has a dialectic structure. The heteronomy (Adorno calls it distinctive subjectivity) of the artwork becomes a counterforce to the autonomy of the viewer or listener. The aesthetic experience is one of confrontation with a world of artefacts that are formally heteronomous in that they encounter the subject as resistance to the tendency to acquiesce in the coercion of social and cultural systems. Referring to Steiner's concept of 'real presences', the Austrian theologian Larcher writes that confrontation with such an artefact can, because of its formal quality, evoke a new awareness of the world that leaves the possibility of transcendence open. Aesthetic experience offers an initial experience and affirmation of something that makes sense on the borders of sensation and language.¹⁵ A modern artwork, says Larcher, can open up the possibility of freedom in a way that summons the viewer or listener to recognise 'a trace of the other' and thus tolerate and endure the wounds of our culture. Confrontation with a modern artwork can become an experience of anticipatory presence.¹⁶

The study of aesthetic experience compels theology to broaden its concept of rationality. It has to search for an alternative to the transcendental aspect of reflection. It has to engage with the artistic mode in expressing this anticipatory presence. It needs to develop a justification of faith based on the question of how to instantiate the human subject. Vergauwen calls this a life world form of rationality,¹⁷ in the sense of forms of communicative reasoning that participants in a concrete life world use to give a communal, meaningful account of, and provide a foundation for, the shape imparted to that life world. The actual reciprocity between forms of profane meaning and forms of religious meaning is the criterion of the honesty of this form of theology.¹⁸ Anticipation of meaning within the framework of the contingency of all reality is the *horizon* in which research in a societal context can look for possible avenues for dialogue between profane and religious themes of

Rationalität und Öffentlichkeit, Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 99-124, here 101: "Der Ort der Gottesrede bzw. der Religion ist die ästhetische Erfahrung."

¹⁵ *eine anfängliche Bejahung, eine inchoative Erfahrbarkeit des definitiv Verheissenen, in sofern sie Sinnknoten, Sinnspeicher an der Grenze von Sprache und Sinnlichkeit bildet* in: Larcher, G. (1998), *Subjekt – Kunst – Geschichte. Chancen einer Annäherung von Fundamentaltheologie und Ästhetik*, in: K. Müller, *Fundamentaltheologie. Fluchtlinien und gegenwärtige Herausforderungen*, Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet Verlag, 299-321, here 311.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 311.

¹⁷ Cf. Vergauwen, *op. cit.*, 114.

¹⁸ This criterion of honesty can be traced back to the famous book by A.T. Robinson (1969), *Honest to God*, London: SCM.

finding meaning. The cardinal *research themes* of theology are, firstly, the question of sources that can instantiate the autonomy and freedom of the human subject, and secondly, whether these sources can be seen as a *locus theologicus*.

In his aforementioned article, *Zustimmung und Stimmigkeit. Die Rationalität theologischer Rede*, Vergauwen indicates that in our present cultural context theology needs a new mapping, a reformulation of its fundamental *topoi*, new parameters. What Vergauwen has in mind is not simply augmenting the list of research themes, but a radical revision of theology's embedment in everyday reality. He is not interested in modifying the list of research themes but in redefining the praxis of theological reflection (*Argumentationspraxis*). With reference to Max Seckler he points out that in Melchior Cano's work the concept '*locus theologicus*' indicates not only the classification of arguments in a series of problems but also the re-organisation of its manner of argumentation. The term '*locus theologicus*' connotes which institutions an argument should address in order to do full justice to its rationality.

Method of immanence in theology

A theologian who is interested in developing a life world form of rationality will find some interesting ideas in the oeuvre of the French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949). When constructing a theological theory of immanent mysticism one cannot disregard Blondel. His theory of the role of philosophical thought in theological apologetics has decisively changed apologetics, known nowadays as foundational theology. It is no longer a propaedeutics that uses arguments of convenience to substantiate a preconceived religious position retrospectively. It has become a research project, in which the religious position is defined as an out-and-out rational, philosophical problem, to be studied by means of out-and-out rational, philosophical analysis.

In 1896 Blondel wrote a number of articles in the *Annales de Philosophie chrétienne* on "requirements of current thought on apologetics and on philosophical method when studying the problem of religion".¹⁹ In these essays he sets out to free the philosophy of his day from what he calls '*une fausse philosophie*', which puts theology on a false track. He was speaking about a particular line of reasoning in the justification of faith that was very much in vogue in the neo-scholastic theological climate of his day. According to many, church dogma taught that divine revelation truly

¹⁹ Blondel, M. (1956), *Lettre sur les exigences de la pensée en matière d'apologétique et sur la méthode de la philosophie dans l'étude du problème religieux* (original 1896) in: *Les premiers écrits de Maurice Blondel*, edited by *Société des Amis de Maurice Blondel*, Paris: PUF (Our translation.)

happened and its truth could be proved philosophically; that the supernatural order was a historical fact belonging to the realm of apodictic knowledge; that the philosophical *possibility* of revelation can be assimilated into theology in a rationally substantiated way as a necessity.

Blondel has two fundamental objections to this line of reasoning. In the first place he points out that belief in God is always a gratuitous gift (*un don gratuit*) and can never be communicated or kindled in the human soul by any apologia. Philosophy cannot 'prove' this gratuitous gift in any way. In the second place one has to consistently distinguish between the two orders of issues studied in apologetics – the supernatural and the immanent order – in all their unique, inalienable reality, and consequently between the respective methodological competencies of theology and philosophy as well. Blondel adopts a philosophical stance, sees himself as a philosopher and holds that from such a point of view the question of the factuality (God's revelation in our world) that is confessed in religion should not be 'mingled' with that of reflection on such factuality. That is why he is so intent on explaining the philosophical method in the study of the religious problem. To this end he proposes a 'method of immanence'. His exposition reveals an explicitly mystical interpretation of faith – which is quite remarkable, considering the rationalist intellectual climate of his time. That is why it is worth going back to a text by Blondel in our attempt to explain the concept of immanent mysticism.

According to Blondel, then, the essence of Christianity, in light of revelation, cannot be grasped intellectually or substantiated conceptually. "From the moment that this Revelation looks us up at home and pursues us into our intimacy ... from that moment we face the encounter, trouble erupts, the problem is posed." [Our translation.]²⁰ Some of this powerlessness must be discernible in our original human autonomy (*dans l'homme purement l'homme*) and in the most autonomous philosophy. And that brings us to the task of a true philosophy of the religious problem. It should reflect on the traces of the supernatural in humans in their original autonomy and, if it is to be a truly autonomous philosophy, it will have to do so using the method of immanence. Although at bottom its object (the reality of belief in God) cannot be grasped intellectually or substantiated conceptually, its proper method need not be determined by this 'heteronomy'. Its proper task as philosophy is an integral study of all the phenomena that make up our inner life in their distinctness and interrelationship. Although observations about them concern the transcendent, the phenomena themselves are by definition immanent. And, just as the immanence of philosophical statements about the traces of transcendence in the human person does not acquire a transcendent

²⁰ *Lettre*, op. cit., 37. 'Mais du moment où cette Révélation vient, pour ainsi dire, nous chercher chez nous et nous pourchasser jusqu' 'en notre intimité ... alors la rencontre se fait, la difficulté éclate, le problème est pose.'

character from the specific object of study, so one should not jump to the conclusion that the transcendent reality of the supernatural is in doubt. Philosophical statements about traces of the transcendent in human beings *qua* human beings must stem from an integral²¹ study of human actions, thought and volition without any religious preoccupation. Such a preoccupation can be avoided by strictly observing the mutual independence of the two orders in reality (the supernatural and the immanent).

Blondel sees this distinction as dialectical. “The concept of immanence can only arise in our minds through the effective presence of the concept of transcendence.” [Our translation.]²² The precondition for true intellectual and moral autonomy is acknowledgment of true heteronomy. Blondel holds out strongly for this dialectics, and not because of a pedagogical approach as if the reality of the supernatural implied in proclamation and confession has to correspond to an observable need for salvation in human beings or to a demonstrable question that can find no answer in the immanent reality of human life and therefore opens people up to encounter with a transcendent reality ‘from beyond’. The dialectics of the concepts of immanence and transcendence only emerges sharply if the dimensions of ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ are not contrasted as separate lines of thought, nor interrelated by way of arguments of convenience, for that, too, violates the formal heterogeneity of the two orders of reality. To Blondel truly philosophical reflection on the religious problem can have only one legitimate point of departure that recognises both the autonomy of philosophy and the irreducible originality of what theists conceive of as revelation. That point of departure is the acknowledgment of both real continuity and an affirmed, formal incompatibility between the order of the supernatural and the immanent order.²³

How do we develop our concepts of transcendence and immanence on the basis of a premise that recognises a dialectics between these two orders of reality? That is where the *méthode d'immanence* comes in.

²¹ Blondel’s use of the word ‘integral’ should be carefully distinguished from the use of the word in J. Maritain (1937) *Humanisme integral. Problèmes temporels et spirituels d’une nouvelle chrétienté* (Paris: Aubier). Maritain’s humanism conceives of human autonomy and creaturely and salvation-historical involvement as dimensions of a (practical) perspective on the whole of reality. That is why his concept of integral humanism is so dear to many theologians. It is part of a Thomist tradition of self-renewal via re-sourcing. To Blondel, whose position in the philosophical and theological debate of his day is best defined as ‘anti-scholastic’ (Virgoulay), it is an epistemological problem that seeks to account for faith and relates more closely to questions arising from Kantian analysis of human reason. Theologically one hears occasional echoes of a tradition dating back to Augustine. In the text under discussion ‘integral’ means ‘relating to the totality of human actions, knowledge and volition’.

²² *Lettre*, op. cit., 40. “La notion même de l’immanence ne se réalise dans notre conscience que par la présence effective de la notion du transcendant.”

²³ Cf. *Lettre*, op. cit., 45.

To Blondel²⁴ immanence implies that to humans everything that has truth as its criterion – hence ever historical fact, every ‘doctrine’, every obligation that is considered true (even if the ideas about the things that are deemed true have evolved historically) – necessarily emanates from human beings. All truth claims are made by and addressed to human beings and in that sense are necessarily autonomous and autochthonous. The autonomy of truth claims implies three methodological rules.²⁵ The first is the rule of integral experience, which is negative and indirect. That is to say, whatever truth claims people make about their experience can be refuted, except on one point: truth presents itself. The second is the rule of invariance. It says that free will is a precondition for everything that people seek to accomplish and for every means they may choose for this purpose. The third is the rule of the minimum. It says that in our pursuit of a goal we must acknowledge that its truth is refutable, which is the only way to satisfy the precondition of free will. The only way to pursue a goal is the one with the least refutable claims (way of least resistance).

Hence we need to use the method of immanence to develop our concepts of transcendence and immanence if we are to do justice to the dialectical interrelationship between the two orders of reality. It means that people can only conceive of this dialectics in terms of human existence and their autonomy in that existence.

In a commentary on Blondel’s philosophical position Jean-Luc Marion observes that Blondel’s thinking in his main work, *L’action* (1893), is characterised by ‘active nihilism’, which should be seen as a form of metaphysical thought.²⁶ That explains Blondel’s point that the dialectical relationship between transcendence and immanence can only be conceived of in terms of human autonomy in that relationship. To Blondel the will is the primary way of affirming life. Hence ‘not willing’ is also an affirmation of life. According to his own definition²⁷ Blondel’s thought is a second-order metaphysics. The only way to exist is the way of volition, hence it is the only way we can transcend our humanity *in action*. Action is not an object (*volonté voulue*) of the will. It is a way of willing the objects of the will (*volonté voulante*). Human beings exist by way of a will that can never be finally fulfilled. “There is infinity in our willed actions, and we cannot pin that infinity down in our reflection nor reproduce it through our exertions.” [Our translation.]²⁸

²⁴ Cf. *Lettre*, op. cit., 34.

²⁵ Cf. Virgoulay, R. (1992), *L’action de Maurice Blondel – 1893 –. Relecture pour un centenaire*, Paris:Beauchesne, 13 ff.

²⁶ Marion, J-L. (1987), La conversion de la volonté selon “L’action”, in: *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Etranger*, 112e Année, Tome CLXXVII, 33-46.

²⁷ Blondel, M. (1950), *L’action* (1893), Paris: Quadrige/PUF, 464 (“une sorte de Métaphysique à la seconde puissance”).

²⁸ Blondel, *L’action*, op. cit., 418.

Marion shows that Blondel's thinking harbours an idiosyncratic form of nihilism. Blondel opposes the ascetic ideal because, like Nietzsche, he understands that life can only be affirmed by willing Nothing, not by not willing anything. The will can will Nothing, but Nothingness cannot annihilate the will. All objects of volition exist only in the will. There are no values outside it. But to Blondel the will is not a solitary adventure. It functions in an infinity of volitive actions that appeals to a mystery which eludes us.²⁹

Thus the dialectics between transcendence and immanence can only be conceived of philosophically in terms of human autonomy. Marion sums it up as follows. The will never stops keeping finitude in check through the power of the infinite and this engenders a surplus of finitude.³⁰ To Blondel this benefit is a reality that is immanent in volition, hence can and should be conceived of philosophically. It does not sidestep the philosophical distinction between 'willing to will' (*volonté voulante*) and 'willing what is willed' (*volonté voulue*). Hence the benefit is not a dimension of human existence beyond our personal realisation of that existence, nor – as Virgoulay explains³¹ – is it an instinctive fatality. It is willing that makes people rational, human persons. Through willing they establish themselves in an autonomous relationship with themselves.

Blondel sees such autonomy as the possibility of always having a choice not to will the willed value, the object of volition. Willing to will is only fully acknowledged when we can will every possible willed value as a *possible* option of volition, hence a finite value. Willing can never be conceived of as an all-powerful capacity to will, for that would annihilate it. Hence the surplus that eludes us in willing to will leads Blondel to define a philosophical concept of God. If willing to will does not culminate – on pain of self-annihilation – in an all-powerful capacity to will, then ultimately it must be seen as powerless. Infinite willing can only be conceived of as love, Blondel writes. He cites William of Thierry: "*Nihil aliud est amor quam vehemens in bono voluntas.*"³² According to Marion the surplus can only be conceived of as God's love for our human willing. Hence Marion concludes that Blondel's idea poses an original question for all forms of spirituality, and above all for Christian spirituality.

Against this background, how should we study mysticism? Blondel devoted several works to this question. I first discuss his *Le problème de la mystique chrétienne* (1925),³³ then turn to his *Carnets intimes* (1883-1894).³⁴

²⁹ Op. cit., 328 ("en sorte qu'à la source de nos actes un mystérieux inconnu nous échappe").

³⁰ Marion, op. cit., 39.

³¹ Virgoulay, R. (1987), "L'action" de Maurice Blondel. Une philosophie de la volonté. In: *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger*, 112e Année, Tome CLXXVII, 55-70.

³² Marion, op. cit., 46.

³³ Blondel, M. (1929), *Le problème de la mystique chrétienne*, in: *Qu'est-ce que la Mystique? Cahiers de la Nouvelle Journée* 3, 1-198.

³⁴ Blondel, M. (1961), *Carnets intimes (1883-1994)*, Paris: Éd. Du Cerf.

In his commentary on *Le problème de la mystique* Yves de Montcheuil points out that to Blondel *connaissance religieuse* is a form of knowledge that surpasses our imagination, being an extension of the knowledge of faith.³⁵ Yet Blondel does not see it as ab-normal. For, says Blondel, mystical knowledge requires human powers of discrimination, which do not evade rationality. Besides, the mystic cannot evade the faith of all members of the religious community, even if he knows supernatural reality in a different way. Prayer and contemplation are human activities, even though the mystic knows that he has been raised to God. Even though he knows himself to share the radiance of divine life in human beings – and thus to differ from ‘ordinary believers’ – the study of mystical texts requires critical, rational appraisal, for the mystic’s sensibility and perception, according to John of the Cross, are the most rational of all human faculties.

In *Le problème de la mystique chrétienne* Blondel examines the religio-philosophical implications of his epistemology. In *Carnets intimes* he concentrates on the way his personal position as a believer relates to his role as a researcher. Guy Bernard wrote an essay on this relationship³⁶ and, citing Blondel, describes it as the restlessness of the researcher combined with the serenity of the believer. One can only see oneself, says Blondel, by seeing God, seeing oneself as united with God. The believer experiences herself in infinite proximity to God, who, as the Word of love (*Agapè*), is the presence that encounters her as the Other. As humans we experience an inner poverty in the details of everyday life, in which we discover and experience the possibility of the transcendent Other’s kenosis. Hence as a researcher Blondel feels he has a clear mission (*mission philosophique et apostolique*) to make the manifestation of this presence plausible to the limits of human understanding.

Here we see most clearly what Blondel’s immanent mysticism entails. “It means descending into the realities that reveal human beings and continuing that movement to the end, ‘the end of cognition and the curiosity of the mind ... , the end of sincere and wounded passion, of suffering and revulsion, of joy and recognition.’” [Our translation.]³⁷ In this way Blondel seeks continually to maintain the dialectics between immanence and transcendence. Philosophically he sticks to human autonomy on this road. Willing is the only way people can transcend themselves as humans *in action*. This notion of

³⁵ Montcheuil, Y de SJ (1941), *Maurice Blondel. Pages religieuses. Extraits reliés par un commentaire et précédés d’une introduction*, Paris: Aubier, 174.

³⁶ Bernard, G. (1987), “L’inquiétude du chercheur sous la sérénité du croyant”. *Les carnets intimes* de Blondel, in: *Revue Philosophique de la France et de l’Étranger* 112e Année, Tome CLXXVII, 21-32.

³⁷ Op.cit., 30. “Il s’agit de descendre dans les réalités qui manifestent l’homme et d’aller jusqu’au bout du mouvement qui les porte ‘au bou de la science et de la curiosité de l’esprit..., au bout de la passion sincère et meurtrie, au bout de la souffrance et du dégoût, au bout de la joie et de la reconnaissance’” (*Carnets* 1/333).

Blondel's reveals a surplus immanence in volition that makes a human being an autonomous person. In it the transcendent other encounters humans as love. The immanence of volition, according to Blondel, can only be conceived of in transcendent terms. The conception of the immanence of action in its autonomy can only be maintained in terms of the heteronomy of the transcendent.

Conclusion

The first paper raised the question of what concept of transcendence theology can develop now that it is challenged – at any rate in West European society – by a culture of immanent mysticism. The second paper pursues the question further by inquiring what concept of theological rationality this would require. Following Maurice Blondel's thought on *l'Action* we see that human autonomy of action implies an affirmation of life that cannot be pinned down to any metaphysical grounds, which makes it the most original dimension of human existence. Secondly, we see that this original dimension of human existence has its counterpart in the affirmation of a transcendent reality that is an infinite presence in this affirmation of life. The theological rationality that is challenged by a culture of immanent mysticism can be described as a life world rationality. It is characterised by a form of dialectical thought in which the elusive affirmation of life and an awareness of infinite love for that life evoke and reinforce each other.

