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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Bergson Meets God. His philosophy in light of his life and spiritual conversion

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ABSTRACT

This article examines Henri Bergson's gradual approach to Christianity and his moral adherence to Catholicism in light of his philosophical development. It will argue that Bergson's work and his spiritual evolution cannot be understood separately, but as advancing in parallel. The study adopts a hermeneutical methodology, drawing on Bergson's major works, correspondence and testimonies of his contemporaries. It analyses the principal ideas in Bergson's philosophy which enabled him to open himself to faith. Central to this process of conversion was Bergson's discovery of Catholic mysticism. The article also shows Bergson as being devout in the final moments of his life, how faith influenced his last work, why Bergson ultimately chose not to convert to Catholicism even though he left in his will an affirmation of his moral adherence to Catholicism. The article concludes that separating Bergson's spiritual journey from his philosophical work is an artificial divide that prevents a proper interpretation of his philosophy.

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1. Introduction

The French philosopher Henri Bergson was, during his lifetime, a thinker of world-wide renown. During the first third of the 20th century, his books sold successfully, and people would travel long distances to attend his classes. His philosophy represented a breath of fresh air at that time, when scientific positivism reduced the human being to a mere material aggregate, without spirit or connection to a transcendent vision of life, which positivism denied. Bergson, using the most recent data provided by contemporary science, fought positivism with its own weapons, defending a reality that transcends the material and demonstrating, through the knowledge provided by experience, the reality of freedom, spirit, and God in the human being.

Moreover, he had one of the most passionate confrontations with Einstein over the nature of time and even went on to win the Nobel Prize in Literature. For this reason, and for others, although his work is not extensive, he has influenced

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numerous thinkers and writers such as Antonio Machado, Marcel Proust, T. S. Eliot, and part of 20th-century philosophy, including Gilles Deleuze, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jacques Maritain, among others.

In recent years there has been a revival of philosophical interest in the figure of Bergson. The very nature of his work, as captivating and suggestive as it is open and unsystematic, has led many of his interpreters to disagree on key points of his thinking. These past decades have seen a proliferation of studies into his metaphysics, his philosophy of the mind, and his philosophy of science, invariably from the perspective of Bergson's notion of *duration*. However, the role played by religion and mysticism within Bergson's corpus has not aroused the same degree of interest. In my view, it is in these areas that the hermeneutic keys to interpreting his thought can be found, thus avoiding the problems of divergent interpretations of his work.

One of these keys is no doubt the place of God within his work. There are some (especially among the postmodern interpreters influenced by the French postmodern philosopher Gilles Deleuze) who minimise, downplay, or even disregard the figure of God as irrelevant to understanding his philosophy. In fact, it is not unusual to find that Bergson's work *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* is considered secondary or even dispensable in considering Bergson's corpus. One of the reasons for this frequent omission is the role of mysticism in this work. For some, looking to religion, and to Catholic mystics no less, as the key to interpreting reality is a problematic turn that seems to collide directly with Bergson's philosophical method.

Others, however, see no collision or contradiction but rather consider this work as entirely coherent with Bergson's philosophical writings (as well as his personal journey towards Catholicism), serving as a way of interpreting his earlier works. Thus, in *The Two Sources* one finds the metaphysical foundations of the biological approach proposed by Bergson in *Creative Evolution*, representing not an opposition but rather a deeper exploration of earlier themes. This is the position I will defend in this paper.

Bergson's path to his encounter with God was not always straightforward: in addition to certain criticism from his own disciples, Bergson was accused of monism and in 1914 his works were included in the Index of Oesterreicher by the Catholic Church. An example of these accusations can be found in the polemical words of the French Jesuit priest, philosopher, and theologian, Joseph de Tonquédec, which contributed to the monist interpretation of Bergson's thought:

If we correctly understand the meaning of these texts, Mr. Bergson adopts, while slightly modifying it to make it more flexible and adaptable, the monistic hypothesis. His monism is a dynamic and evolutionary one. It is also clearly a teleological form of monism. Although he avoids describing his system in those terms, Mr. Bergson himself acknowledges this orientation (De Tonquédec 1912, 7).

Despite these controversies, Bergson continued to evolve in his thinking until the end of his life, when he found himself before the figure of Christ himself.

A number of studies in recent years have focussed on Bergson's relation to mysticism, although none have examined in depth his personal journey of spiritual conversion and how this illuminates the unity of his philosophical project.

On one occasion, Bergson recounted to his great disciple and French Catholic philosopher, Jacques Chevalier, a few years before his death, how he found God,

or, as he put it, how he was found by Him: ‘The way I have found God, or perhaps the way God has found me’ (Chevalier 1952, 541). Bergson explained how his process of conversion was not a radical change but rather an evolution:

There has been no conversion in me in the sense of a sudden illumination. Little by little I have come to ideas that were probably never entirely absent from me, but of which I was not fully aware and had not concerned myself (543).

This article seeks to contribute to the debate by analysing Bergson’s gradual approach to Christianity and the way his work cannot be separated from his person. To this end, both primary sources and his personal testimony will be used, found in secondary sources and in works by friends and close acquaintances during his lifetime, together with personal correspondence. Thus, the article will include contemporary works from Bergson’s lifetime. This perspective aims to show the continuity between the development of Bergson’s philosophy and his personal path toward faith. The aim is to demonstrate that Bergson’s path to God was not a rupture but rather a continuous intellectual journey made possible by philosophical considerations already present in his early works. Thus, this article proposes a hermeneutic reinterpretation of Bergson’s work as compatible with transcendence.

2. Religious roots and early education

Bergson’s path to God began in his early childhood. At that time, we find a family environment in which religion was present in daily life:

His father had come to France from Poland, where his ancestors had been Hassidim, followers of Baal Shem Tov, the mystical Jew who sought a permanent union with God through ecstatic prayer and through pronounced joy and love in His service. Of his mother, Bergson said that she was ‘a woman of superior intelligence, a religious soul in the highest sense, whose goodness, devotion, serenity, one might almost say holiness, were the admiration of all who knew her’ (Oesterreicher 1961, 38).

Bergson was devoted to his mother, and he was not indifferent to the faith she lived: ‘He always felt great affection for his mother, whose profound religiosity continued to exert a decisive influence on her son’ (Chacón Fuertes 1988, 33).

Documents from these early years reveal Bergson’s inner life, shaped by his Jewish upbringing:

Bergson was educated from childhood in the traditions and observances of the Jewish religion. The exhibition organised in 1959 at the National Library displayed a letter he had written to his parents when he was very young: ‘I will ask God every day to keep you for a long time...’ (Barlow 1968, 14).

Despite this, the religious education he received did not make a significant impact (Chevalier 1952, 543). This isn’t to suggest that Bergson denied God but that the question of religion was marginal during this time:

The religious question was neglected for reasons of intellectual hygiene, out of distrust, and out of methodological caution; it was never despised, and even less denied. Bergson always maintained a profound reserve of respect and showed very little inclination toward negation (Guitton 1960, 146).

Thus, with this scant and limited religious instruction came indifference (Chevalier 1960a, 38). This indifference is revealed during his adolescent years at the École Normale Supérieure, when he became interested in *mechanism* and became concerned with scientific questions (Chacón Fuertes 1988, 44). This detachment from religion led some to consider him agnostic: ‘Bergson had placed metaphysical problems in a state of dormancy. And he was quite agnostic, at least in appearance’ (Guitton 1960, 62).

Already in his early years as a teacher, Bergson had to teach the proofs of God’s existence:

When I was young, I used to teach the proofs of God. They are not to be despised. I taught them not only out of respect for my students’ consciences, but also because I believed there are reasons to choose the affirmative rather than the negative. And I did not present these proofs, as many do, as proofs that have only historical value and are worth knowing merely as attributed to certain thinkers. Never was that my state of mind (For this reason one cannot say that at a given moment I ‘found’ God) (Chevalier 1952, 552).

One may conclude from his words that Bergson’s spiritual situation influenced the way he taught philosophy. But while his soul was open to transcendence, such proofs of God’s existence were not sufficient at the time to set him on a religious path:

It is not by delving into the classical proofs of the existence of God, the proofs of philosophers and scholars, that I have come to God. I now see how these proofs can confirm or clarify a conviction once it has been attained. But the conviction was not attained in that way (Chevalier 1952, 552).

3. First philosophical elements of Bergsonism open to a Christian vision: freedom and spirit

In 1889, Bergson published his first work, *Essay*, in which the defence of human freedom would constitute the first philosophical link in his chain of thought.

Failing in his efforts to improve upon Spencer’s mechanism, Bergson encountered what would become the cornerstone of his philosophy: the intuition of duration. Time, as presented by science, is in fact nothing more than space. The tradition of French spiritualism left its mark on Bergson and through its influence, he found the tools necessary to overcome the mechanistic view of time.

After demonstrating the impossibility of measuring states of consciousness, Bergson will affirm that, thanks to duration, our inner reality is qualitative rather than quantitative:

Pure duration might well be nothing but a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into and permeate one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalise themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity (Bergson 2001, 104).

Thus, ‘the French philosopher asserts the intuition of duration within us as a flow, a succession in which there is no room for simultaneity. No two moments in life are identical; consequently, they are not repeatable’ (Baiget Pons 2025, 189).

With this, Bergson can affirm the reality of freedom, whose intuition we experience in our own inner life; all problems arise when one attempts to translate succession into simultaneity, that is, time into space:

Freedom is therefore a fact, and among the facts which we observe there is none clearer. All the difficulties of the problem, and the problem itself, arise from the desire to endow duration with the same attributes as extensity, to interpret a succession by a simultaneity, and to express the idea of freedom in a language into which it is obviously untranslatable (Bergson 2001, 221).

This first work presents an anthropological, non-materialistic foundation, open to the existence of the spirit thanks to the affirmation of freedom. The next step would be to explore the relationship between body and spirit: 'I saw that the conclusions of the *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* would require special studies on the relationship between body and spirit, for they led to freedom, a spiritual fact that went against everything science seems to teach' (Chevalier 1952, 554).

In *Matter and Memory*, Bergson reinforces his vision that the spirit is not a product of matter. After analysing the phenomena of aphasia, Bergson explains how memories do not truly reside in the brain, and so a brain injury will not eliminate them but merely damage the motor mechanisms that allow memories to be present: 'There cannot be in the brain a region in which memories congeal and accumulate. The alleged destruction of memories by an injury to the brain is but a break in the continuous progress by which they actualise themselves' (Bergson 1911, 160). Where then does our past reside? For Bergson, our entire past life resides in memory, independent of the material: 'It follows that memory must be, in principle, a power absolutely independent of matter. If then, spirit is a reality, it is here, in the phenomenon of memory, that we may come into touch with it experimentally' (81). This memory is not psychological but spiritual, and it is in this ontological reality that our entire life resides.

The relevant conclusion for this work is that it reaffirms the pre-eminence of the spirit over the brain and the material, and that the spirit is not reduced to them but is independent of them.

This independence of the spirit from matter may be considered a religious outlook, but that is not the appropriate perspective for interpretation. At that time, Bergson himself believed such a conclusion to be perfectly valid from a philosophical standpoint, without necessarily taking transcendence into account:

At first, the survival of the soul appeared to me as independent of any religion. I was well aware that religion could invoke the facts that I invoke. But survival did not appear to me as something exclusively religious. Religion, I believed at the time, entails belief in the afterlife, but not the other way around (Chevalier 1952, 554).

Nevertheless, these works lay the early and essential foundations for Bergson's later approach to God, that is: freedom and the independence of the spirit from matter. We see how Bergson's philosophical development cannot be separated from his spiritual development as themes such as reflections on morality are yet to appear. The author still remains far from God. As Bergson draws nearer to the divine on a spiritual level, his philosophical concerns will shift toward these subjects.

This impossibility of separating spiritual and philosophical development also reveals Bergson's philosophy as an evolution rather than a rupture: although moral or religious themes are absent in his earliest writings, the seeds of what was to come can already be discerned. Thus, Bergson's earliest works reach their full development and meaning in *The Two Sources*:

Although moral and religious themes had not been explicitly and extensively addressed beforehand, Bergsonism was always, to some extent, a moral and religious philosophy. (...) *The Two Sources* does not originate in mere changes experienced by Bergson in his old age; a reading of his work soon convinces us that it reprises each and every one of the fundamental theses of his earlier books (Chacón Fuertes 1988, 182).

4. The discovery of mysticism

In these early stages, Bergson's philosophy embarked on the path toward God by affirming the existence of human freedom and the independence of the spirit with respect to the body. However, reading the mystics was a decisive step: 'I came to them little by little. And yet there was a decisive moment: the reading of the mystics' (Chevalier 1952, 543). At what point does he encounter them? William James and Henri Delacroix were important influences in this encounter: 'W. James, and later Henri Delacroix, by defining mystical experience as a psychological experience, clearly influenced Bergson's later study of it' (Sitbon-Peillon 2009, 56).

In 1902 James, later a friend of Bergson, sent a copy of his book *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. Thanks to this, the French philosopher began to develop an interest in the mystics. In early 1903 Bergson replied to James:

I have just finished reading the book you were kind enough to send me, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, and I wish to tell you of the profound impression this reading has made upon me. I began it about ten days ago, and since then I have been unable to think of anything else, so captivating is the book and, allow me to say, so fascinating from beginning to end. It seems to me that you have succeeded in extracting the very quintessence of religious emotion. We had already sensed, no doubt, that this emotion is at once a *sui generis* joy and the awareness of a union with a higher power (Bergson 1972, 579–580).

This reading seems to have influenced Bergson to the point that it offered vistas of the possible extensions of his theory that would eventually lead him into the mystical domain: 'Bergson, like W. James, who assigns a primary value to the subjective element of consciousness, presupposes the existence of the divine through its action upon the "subconscious," and thus infers from it the validity of mystical belief' (Sitbon-Peillon 2009, 58).

In turn, another article by James, *A Suggestion about Mysticism*, produced the same impression on Bergson, as he told the writer in a letter in 1910: 'As for your article on mysticism, I am sure it will serve as the starting point for many new observations and lines of research' (Bergson 1972, 817).

Thus, William James greatly influenced the way Bergson understood mysticism. Bergson himself would acknowledge this in an introduction to the French translation of one of James's works: 'In the introduction to the French translation of *Pragmatism*,

Bergson reiterates the importance of *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, following the path opened by the author in his study of mystical experience' (Sitbon-Peillon 2009, 44–45).

Another work that had an impact on Bergson was Delacroix's *Études d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme*, in which he discovered major mystical figures who would later prove influential, such as Madame Guyon or, more crucially, Saint Teresa. In 1911, Bergson told Lotte that he was studying the Catholic mystics, a field that was still unfamiliar to him at the time.

This first approach to mysticism would lead Bergson to enter into the Catholic mystics, key figures in his final philosophical work and serving as an avenue towards the creative impulse of the universe, the love of God. However, this transcendent reading of the *élan vital* was not yet present in *Creative Evolution*, which led to accusations of monism.

5. The question of God in *Creative Evolution* and accusations of monism

In 1907 Bergson published his great work, *Creative Evolution*. By then he was already an established thinker, and in this book Bergson further expanded his idea of duration to reality itself; that is, the extension of the psychological domain into the metaphysical domain. It is not merely the *I* that endures but duration is present in things as well. One of the aims of the book was to explain why the duration we experience within ourselves is also found in nature, and, further, to explain its origin. In this work Bergson confronts the problem of creation itself.

However, the question will be approached from a strongly biologicist perspective. The reason is that Bergson must engage with the scientific advances of his time. He begins from the latest scientific discoveries in biology, using the most recent data provided by science and thus exploring the origin of creation through the intuition of duration. This leads Bergson to conclude that God is the source of the creative impulse of the universe, in a constant process of becoming:

Now, if the same kind of action is going on everywhere, whether it is that which is unmaking itself or whether it is that which is striving to remake itself, I simply express this probable similitude when I speak of a centre from which worlds shoot out like rockets in a fire-works display, provided, however, that I do not present this centre as a *thing*, but as a continuity of shooting out. God, thus defined, has nothing of the already made; He is unceasing life, action, freedom (Bergson 1922, 262).

Thus, the question of the origin of creation will be Bergson's next philosophical step, one that brings him ever closer to his spiritual conversion. According to Chevalier, Bergson revealed to him that the journey initiated in *Creative Evolution* was leading him, unconsciously, toward God:

This book, more clearly than anything I had read before, put me on the true path, making me understand that life is the great mystery. However, I did not fully realise the point to which this discovery was meant to lead me (Chevalier 1960a, 38).

Here again we see the link between Bergson's philosophical evolution and his spiritual development. However, in *Creative Evolution* there is still no clear engagement with the transcendent.

Firstly, God is mentioned only once, and as yet nothing is said about religion. This drew criticism from those who sought in Bergson a philosophy open to transcendence. For example, in 1912, the Christian philosopher Édouard Le Roy, a disciple of Bergson, noted that Bergson had not yet written the word 'religion' even once in his entire work (Le Roy 1932, 111).

Furthermore, although Bergson presents God as the source of creation, the metaphysical interpretation of his approach seems grounded in an immanentist monism, as De Tonquédec accused him. Leszek Kolakowski, the Polish philosopher, would share the same view:

It seems that Bergson's God, precisely because his nature is creativity, cannot, by even the greatest effort of abstraction, be conceived of apart from the world; it simply makes no sense to talk about a self-sufficient being who subsists whether or not he 'objectifies' himself in his creatures. There is no way that the producer could be conceptually grasped as being alone, without relation to his products (2001, 62–63).

This lack of clarity in these themes drew criticism from Catholic quarters:

His philosophy was considered a threat to the orthodoxy of the Christian religion: in the works published up to that point, a rational access of man to the transcendent was not guaranteed, and his theory of evolution seemed to contradict dogmas concerning divine creation (Chacón Fuertes 1988, 159).

Furthermore, an interpreter and commentator of Bergson's philosophy, Jules Grivet, warned of the dangers posed by modernists:

It cannot be a matter of receiving and embracing the Bergsonian system as a whole, and it is all too true that, in more or less modernist hands, the system became a dangerous instrument, quickly adapted to deplorable ends, opposed to reason and faith (Bergson 1972, 875).

Regarding this, a disciple of Bergson, such as the French thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain, went further:

It must be said that it is impossible to adhere to the fundamental principles of Bergsonism without thereby opening the doors of one's soul to the modernist errors denounced by Pius X. Bergsonian metaphysics would gradually and infallibly lead one to view faith as essentially an 'internal' and sensible experience, rather than as the assent of the intellect, under the influence of the will and the prompting of grace, to revealed truth (1948, 166–167).

All of these controversies culminated in the inclusion of Bergson's work on the Church's Index of Oesterreicher. This came as a surprise to Bergson, as he did not believe his books contradicted the truth of a transcendent reality nor did they touch on metaphysical topics: 'In that book, however, I had not tackled the great metaphysical problems (namely, the nature and the principle of the vital impulse)' (Chevalier 1952, 546).

According to Chevalier, the reason was less dogmatic condemnation than precaution, considering the role Bergson assigns to intelligence in relation to God (Chevalier 1960a, 49). Oesterreicher holds a similar view:

It seems that the danger of a misinterpretation, above all, was what led the Church – primarily concerned with the effect of a work rather than the author's intention – to place three of his works – *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, *Matter and Memory*, and *Creative Evolution* – on the Index of Oesterreicher (1961, 33).

The philosopher, theologian, and French Dominican priest, Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges, would later attribute this inclusion on the Index to the incompleteness of Bergson's philosophy at the time. Lacking the transcendent grounding that his final work provided would have dispelled a number of erroneous interpretations:

One might ask why, under these conditions, three of Henri Bergson's principal works were placed on the Index. I shall refrain here from making any assertion that might rightly appear presumptuous; yet it is perhaps not going too far to say that, at present, those same books, as they stand, would not be condemned. Was there an error? Not at all. Have the religious authorities altered their judgment? Not in the least. But such works, the product of a method of inquiry that is by nature progressive, could only be definitively interpreted at a later stage. It was like reading the beginning of an inscription on the frieze of a monument still under construction, whose meaning would only be determined later (1941, 7–8).

At the time, Bergson sought to defend himself against De Tonquédec's accusations of monism: 'Those letters presented such a false interpretation of my ideas that I wanted to stop it immediately' (Chevalier 1952, 547). In response to De Tonquédec, on February 20, 1912, Bergson affirmed the idea of a free and creative God from his earliest works:

The considerations set forth in my *Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* ultimately illuminate the fact of freedom; those in *Matter and Memory*, I hope, make palpable the reality of the spirit; those in *Creative Evolution* present creation as a fact: from all this there clearly emerges the idea of a God who is both creator and free, the generator of both matter and life, whose creative effort continues in the realm of life (Bergson 1972, 964).

Significantly, Bergson's correspondence with De Tonquédec confronted him with the problem of transcendence, a theme Bergson had not yet addressed due to his particular philosophical method, keenly dependent on experience. As he explained to De Tonquédec:

I was clarifying the meaning of two or three sentences in *Creative Evolution* relating to the nature of God... You are kind enough to ask whether I have anything to add. I see nothing to add at the moment, as a philosopher, because the philosophical method, as I understand it, is rigorously based on experience (inner and outer), and does not allow for any conclusion that in any way transcends the empirical considerations on which it is founded (Bergson 1972, 964).

From then on, Bergson would feel almost obligated to respond to the question. To do so, he would have to delve into the moral realm, as he explained to the Swedish philosopher Hugo Höffding on March 15, 1915:

This problem I have not really addressed in my works; I believe it to be inseparable from the moral problems in the study of which I have been absorbed for several years;

and the few lines in *Creative Evolution* to which you allude were placed there only as a foundation stone in anticipation (Bergson 1972, 1147).

The nature of Bergson's philosophical method required an empirical basis, thus bringing him into contact with the Catholic mystics and marking a turning point in his spiritual development.

6. The long journey to *The Two Sources*

From the publication of *Creative Evolution* to that of *The Two Sources* there was a long span of 25 years, a period during which Bergson's thought would undergo a slow but progressive evolution.

Without a doubt, De Tonquédec's accusations, and the other criticisms he received, did not leave Bergson indifferent. However, it seemed that Bergson's method of referring to lived experience as proving his theories made it difficult to attribute to creation a metaphysical value beyond what could be found in a metaphysical immanence. How could one attain transcendence and establish God as the foundation of all creation if doing so required a verifiable empirical experience that confirmed such a step as valid?

However, Bergson had gradually found the gateway which provided the link between the conscious experience of duration and the creative *élan vital* of the universe, along with a transcendent Christian vision of creation. This gateway, as has been noted, would be the experience of the mystics.

Just as with duration, the inner path would again be of fundamental importance. Bergson would find this path in the testimony of the saints and thus assert that the path to God was inward:

In ourselves, says Saint Teresa, is where we must seek God. Saint Augustine assures us that after having sought Him in public squares and amid pleasures, he had found Him nowhere as within himself. Evidently, there is no better method. It is not necessary to ascend to heaven: let us enter into ourselves; this is enough (Chevalier 1952, 543–544).

This would lead Bergson to focus on morality. In the second half of the 1920s, Bergson immersed himself in moral and religious subjects, ultimately leading him to write *The Two Sources*. During this period Bergson began reflecting on how essential morality is for life, as revealed in a letter in 1925: 'When one has spent one's life seeking the truth, one realises that it would have been better spent in doing good' (Bergson 1972, 1477).

In *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, published nine years before his death, Bergson's closeness to Catholicism was clearly evident, revealed in passages such as: 'The morality of the Gospels is essentially that of the open soul' (Bergson 1977, 59).

Bergson would speak about the role of morality and religion in shaping societies, analysing mythical religions to find that belief in something higher already existed in primitive tribes. Bergson would also show how dynamic religion, involving an inner, personal experience with God, is compatible with what he proposed in *Creative Evolution*, as this follows the creative drive of the *élan vital*. The link between the

creative *élan vital* of the universe and the creator God would be provided by the experience of mysticism:

In our eyes, the ultimate end of mysticism 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 (220–221).

Bergson finds full mysticism in Christianity. Saint Teresa of Ávila and Saint John of the Cross were the mystics who revealed God to him (Chevalier 1960a, 41). Bergson observed that: ‘What has most surprised and caught my attention in Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa is that from down here they seem transported to another plane of existence’ (Chevalier 1952, 555).

From the experience of Christian mysticism, we are offered the secret of creation: an act of God’s love: ‘God is love, and the object of love: herein lies the whole contribution of mysticism. About this twofold love the mystic will never have done talking. His description is interminable, because what he wants to describe is ineffable’ (Bergson 1977, 252). Bergson would come to see in them not only extraordinary beings who should serve as a moral compass for others, but also as guides for humanity, since in them, more than in anyone else, the creative *élan vital* of the universe is found:

For Bergson, the Christian mystic, at an even higher degree than the artist or the inventive scientist, represents the privileged human being in whom the upward drive of life continues, the culminating point of evolution (...) the profound original impulse of the universe would become visible in the figure of the mystic (Chacón Fuertes 1988, 185–186).

Years later Bergson would comment on the Catholic mystics:

History made me see that the Gospel had created a rupture in the development of Humanity. The mystics gave me its meaning. They had set me on the path. My choice was decided, and the proof found. That is exactly how things happened. I then understood that the great Catholic mystics have, to a certain extent, revived the life of Christ, not by reliving it directly, but by imitating it (Chevalier 1952, 549–550).

From this, it is clear that the spiritual influence of the mystics had a significant impact on Bergson’s philosophy, to the point that he considered the mystical experience an empirically verifiable fact at a philosophical level. Without this engagement with Saint Teresa or Saint John, Bergson would never have philosophically established that the foundation of all, the creative impulse, is the love of God.

Therefore, in my view, there is no room for errors of interpretation regarding Bergson’s metaphysics: ‘Bergson’s early writings may lend themselves to misinterpretation, but not his final book, nor, in this regard, his early work in the light of the last’ (Oesterreicher 1961, 32–33).

Bergson’s life and intentions are not independent of his work. Thus, it is essential to consider Bergson’s final period and his testimony in order to shed light on those passages that have caused misunderstanding and confusion.

7. Conversion and legacy

In *The Two Sources*, Bergson positioned himself at the heart of Christian mysticism. This gave his earlier work a metaphysical foundation that would allow it to be understood from a transcendent perspective. For Bergson, the fact that the accounts of the mystics coincide, despite their being unknown to each other and living in different eras, constitutes empirical proof of the truth of what they express. We will not engage on this point, although I would like to note, as mentioned earlier, that certain critics argue that by equating mystical experience with an empirically verifiable experience, Bergson abandoned his earlier philosophical rigor and method in an attempt to validate ideas that seem incompatible with his former approach. As Kolakowski asserts, for example: ‘As for Bergson’s subsequent interpretations of mysticism as a manifestation of the primordial divine energy, it results from a philosophical or religious choice and cannot be derived conclusively from historical inquiry’ (2001, 87). For some, this would be due to Bergson’s personal conversion; for instance, the special attention given to Christian mystics to the detriment of other forms of mysticism:

But let us leave aside this aspect, certainly dated and undoubtedly related to Bergson’s personal journey toward Christianity – without realising it, Bergson may have deviated from the rule he had absolutely imposed upon himself not to allow what he thought as an individual judging the various things of life to interfere with what he thought as a philosopher who, through the use of a rigorous method, sought to attain all possible certainty on certain meticulously studied questions (Waterlot 2008, 30).

Although Bergson’s conclusions in *The Two Sources* represented a great step forward, there still remained a final stretch to traverse. The Bergson of *The Two Sources* cannot be called a Catholic, as he still could not accept certain unquestionable realities of Catholicism:

For Bergson, Jesus’s mission is certainly divine. He would probably even say that Jesus is unique. But would Bergson go so far as to believe that Jesus is the One? And that the Catholic Church is of divine origin? On these two points, it is doubtful that he ever answered in the affirmative. This is why we maintain our judgment. Bergson was never Catholic, except in the Bergsonian sense of the word, of course (Hude 2009, 156).

There were aspects of Catholicism that Bergson had difficulties in understanding. One key moment in this regard was a conversation between Bergson and the French Catholic theologian and priest, Father Joseph Pouget, in which several of his doubts were happily resolved. As Bergson himself expressed: ‘I happily realise that, by the natural light of reason, I have arrived at the conclusions that faith teaches’ (Chevalier 1960a, 81).

Nevertheless, for Bergson there is a certain distance between philosophy and theology, greater than what is usual in Catholic orthodoxy. This is undoubtedly due to his philosophical method: as noted earlier, for Bergson experience is what validates an assertion. Thus, truth is a vital intuition grasped through experience. Thus, access to God is through mysticism, which presents itself as an ascertainable fact whose validity depends upon, and rests in, the mystical emotion, rather than in

rational deduction. For this reason, as Bergson acknowledged to Chevalier, his own philosophical method clashes with the acceptance of a dogma:

I am trying to introduce mysticism into philosophy as a procedure of philosophical investigation. I have sought to show that there is no necessary connection between accepting this method of investigation and believing in a dogma, whatever it may be. And the only way to demonstrate this is to suppose for a moment that the dogma is abolished, and to verify that the method retains all its value, all its force. This is all that I have said, and I truly believe it was impossible for me not to say it (Chevalier 1960b, 206–207).

This distance generated a certain reticence at the time. Accepting certain Christian dogmas would clash with Bergson's own method, as he stated at the end of 1933:

I had intended to become a Catholic. But now I am already too old. I would have scruples about accepting everything the Church teaches and commands us to believe, and I do not feel absolutely prepared to do so. But these reasons – and the ones I have told you – are entirely personal to me and could not apply to anyone else. I therefore ask you to reply to Cattani that, if his only reason for not becoming a Catholic is the fact that I myself have not taken this step, that reason carries no weight and should not hold him back (Chevalier 1960b, 266).

This methodological limitation on the part of Bergson in accepting Christian dogmas was one of the reasons why figures within Catholicism, such as Maritain, rejected Bergsonism as incompatible with Catholicism. But personally he seemed to believe in the truths of Christianity; nevertheless, there were points that lay beyond his philosophy: 'I have nothing to object to in this theology; it is in exact continuity with what I have said; but I have no method for rising so high' (Sertillanges 1941a, 21–22).

In fact, after the publication of *The Two Sources*, some have questioned (Feneuil 2011, 158) what reality Christ truly held for Bergson and what role He plays in Bergson's philosophy. This view is based on the following passage of *The Two Sources*:

At the origin of Christianity there is Christ. From our standpoint, which shows us the divinity of all men, it matters little whether or no Christ be called a man. It does not even matter that he be called Christ. Those who have gone so far as to deny the existence of Jesus cannot prevent the Sermon on the Mount from being in the Gospels, with other divine sayings (Bergson 1977, 239).

How is one to interpret the reality of Christ for Bergson? Reading this passage out of context might suggest that the transcendent reality of Christ has been reduced to a heroic and admirable human morality, yet ultimately a morality of human origin, with Christ's divinity appearing to be a secondary matter. However, the Bergson of 1932 is not the Bergson of 1939; moreover, the expression of Bergson's philosophical work is limited by his method, while his personal and spiritual position exceeds his philosophical method. In short, as Oesterreicher notes, this must be understood hermeneutically and situated within the context of its publication:

These statements, which at first sight seem to undo Bergson's apology, can be rightly understood only if one takes into account that *The Two Sources*, although it is the final written expression of his thought, does not represent his thought in every detail; that

his writings do not necessarily manifest all his personal convictions, even at the time, but only those he believed permissible within his philosophical method; and, lastly, that his regard for those who might not have followed him throughout his entire journey suggested to him a certain reserve (1961, 72).

The hypothesis of Christ's non-divinity has no basis, as Bergson himself denied it. In the book, Bergson's intention is not to deny the reality of Christ; but rather to affirm the influence of His message as a significant fact, independent of its cause. This does not in any way imply the negation of the historical reality of Jesus, nor of His origin:

Bergson told me that in writing those lines in *The Two Sources*, he had been thinking of Couchoud and had wished to show that, even in that extreme hypothesis of the historical nonexistence of Jesus, his thesis on Christianity would remain unaffected. And he added, with a touch of irony: '(...) And you may guess that I would be satisfied if, some distant day, one could maintain that Henri Bergson had not existed... In *The Two Sources*, I was expressly thinking of Couchoud when I said that, even if Jesus had not existed (a hypothesis that has never been mine, which indeed seems to me quite absurd, unthinkable), there would still have been the Gospel, the mutation of Christianity, the transformation of souls (Guitton 1960, 162–163).

Similar words testifying to this position are found in a conversation between Bergson and Sertillanges:

Christ is superhuman, that is evident. He arose within humanity as an entirely new fact, although, I believe, this fact and the fact of Christianity were possible only thanks to the Palestinian historical antecedents. – Christ himself said so. Christianity is the religion of Israel evolved. Christianity is to ancient Judaism what man is to his embryo or to his germ. – That is how I understand it, and when I ask myself whence Christ came, what is the source of this superhuman fact, I say to myself that obviously he comes from above (Sertillanges 1941a, 21).

Apart from the criticisms regarding the figure of Jesus, Bergson did not engage in a profound exploration of the questions of moral evil (Rideau 1932, 112–119) and sin, something for which several critics have reproached him (Sertillanges 1943, 31). However, although this is true in the case of *The Two Sources*, there are explicit references in one of his final texts, written on January 25, 1939, in memory of Péguy:

A great and admirable figure! He had been cut from the fabric that God uses to make heroes and saints. Heroes, for from his earliest youth Péguy had no other source than to live heroically. Saints as well, if only because he shared with them the conviction that there is no insignificant act, that every human action is weighty and resounds throughout the entire moral world. Sooner or later he was bound to come to Him who took upon Himself the sins and sufferings of all humankind (Bergson 1972, 1585).

The pain of sin is so grave, affirms Bergson, that Christ Himself assumed it for us in order to redeem us. It is impossible not to see in this letter, written in 1939, the reality of Christ as the great Savior and, thus, His divine character.

Following this text, Wahl recounts how he asked Bergson why he had referred to Christ with a capital letter (Celui) in the letter, to which Bergson replied:

At the moment [of the coming of Christ], something occurred in humanity that came from outside and above it. I realised this by reading the great mystics. So beautiful a

movement, the most sublime in humanity, cannot originate from anything other than a divine principle (Oesterreicher 1961, 75).

Reducing Christ to a mere man is an attempt to understand Bergson's spiritual position from an aseptically philosophical perspective. However, the metaphysical depth of Bergson's approach can only be accounted for if one understands the author's spiritual evolution. An example may be these words from 1938 regarding the Gospel:

There came a moment when I realised that with the Gospel there had been a sharp break, the beginning of a new world; that Christianity was its result, and that from its spread in the civilised world there had arisen a renewal of the human soul (Chevalier 1952, 549–550).

For this reason, the notion that the problem of God in *The Two Sources* is a moral problem is not convincing:

For Bergson the problem of God is a 'moral problem' in the broad sense that is to say it touches on the question of the moral energy of human beings. His conception of religion leads to the problem of God without owing anything to theology (Viellard-Baron 2001, 510).

Although Bergson did not start from theology to reach God, this does not mean the scope of the God in *The Two Sources* is not transcendent. Bergson had already raised the question of transcendence and metaphysics in his letters to De Tonquédec as something he wished to address. Those who fail to recognise the metaphysical and transcendent reality of *The Two Sources*, or who simply dismiss it to focus on Bergson's other works (especially those taking a Deleuzian approach), neglect an essential aspect of Bergson's philosophy.

Bergson's gradual conversion progressed to the point when his spirituality harmonised with Catholicism: 'I have often tried to present to Bergson the true tradition of the great Catholic doctors: if Catholicism is that, he replied to me, then we will all be Catholics, and I first' (Chevalier 1960a, 49). Thus, he confided to Sertillanges: 'Moreover I always return to the Gospel; it is my true spiritual homeland, and nothing that Christ says of himself in it surprises or disappoints me' (Sertillanges 1941a, 24).

As for the reality of the Church, for Bergson it is the very continuation of the truths of the mystics and the word of Christ: 'He came to see that the doctrine of the Church is the word of Christ made manifest, the seed transformed into a tree; the bud, into a fully open flower; all its power and glory hidden at first and now unfolded' (Oesterreicher 1961, 76). Although it did not appear explicitly in *The Two Sources*, Bergson promised Sertillanges that for a new edition he would add words showing the Church as a continuation of mysticism:

In this last respect, I had the joy of obtaining from Bergson, at the conclusion of discussions that had occupied many hours over the course of three days, a formal promise to add a paragraph to *The Two Sources*, a paragraph in which he would acknowledge the rootedness of Christian mystics in the Church, and, consequently, the extension to the Church itself of what is affirmed in that work both of the mystics and of the saints. This beautiful promise, however, could not be fulfilled (Sertillanges 1941b, 101).

Nevertheless, Bergson made the following affirmation: ‘The Church is the continuation of Christ. It is, in essence, one and the same’ (Sertillanges 1941a, 22).

If Bergson truly thought of the Church as the continuation of Christ, why did he not say so publicly? For two reasons: first, for fear of being criticised as a Catholic and of his method being seen merely as a stratagem to defend his own convictions; and second, so as not to discourage those who, even outside the Church, strive for moral values:

I would not wish to go too far, for fear of being told: he was a Catholic from the start; his so-called method is but a detour to reach the desired point. Furthermore, I would not wish, at a time when we so greatly need all spiritual forces, to risk discouraging, by insisting on the necessity of the Church, those who outside of it display a high moral character and work for the advancement of moral values (Sertillanges 1941a, 22).

We therefore see that Bergson’s view of the Church at the end of his life had changed since he wrote *The Two Sources*: demonstrated by his intention to include in new editions of his work a passage showing the Church as the continuation of Christ. Thus, it is doubtful that, had Bergson’s method led him to this conclusion before, he would not have included it in the work at the time. This omission should be attributed less to caution and consideration for others than to Bergson’s own spiritual situation:

At the time when *The Two Sources* was written, it was not caution that led Bergson to ignore the need for the Church in the life of mystics; it rather seems that he was not fully aware of it. It must have cost him years of prayer, meditation, and inner struggle (Oesterreicher 1961, 78).

Thus, it is once again necessary to keep Bergson’s spiritual development in mind as the hermeneutical key to his philosophy. The author himself confessed to Chevalier that his conversion was due to faith rather than philosophy:

I have reached the conviction in which I now stand through a series of preparatory efforts. Metaphysics, in the ancient sense of the word, has had little influence on this. If someone were to ask me, ‘Was it through philosophy or through religion that you came to this?’, I would answer that in my case there was more of religion than of philosophy, though taking religion in a broader sense: at first a vague mysticism, later more precise, leading me to a religion initially vague, which later gave rise to a more precise religion (Chevalier 1952, 551).

It is therefore important to understand Bergson’s thought in light of his spiritual evolution.

This long journey ultimately led Bergson to Catholicism, as he affirmed on April 4, 1938: ‘Today I can very well say that nothing separates me from Catholicism’ (Chevalier 1960b, 366). His student Maritain shared the same view: ‘Christianity reserves men worthy of the name; indeed, Henri Bergson, the master of my youth, who did not profess the Christian religion, yet passed through the threshold of faith before dying’ (1967, 94). But why did Bergson not formally convert?

For Bergson, there were at least two obstacles to conversion, as he explained to Chevalier:

The first is the difficulty I experience in transforming an act of assent into an act of obedience, something completely new to me. You showed me that this obstacle does not

exist, and that I can obey the authority of the Church insofar as I adhere to its faith. I acknowledge that Catholicism is the culmination of Judaism. But here the second obstacle arises, one I have not yet been able to overcome. I wonder whether I can abandon this Judaism in which I was raised, to which my parents adhered, people eminently worthy of respect. Is it not more religious, more truly religious, to remain within it? Especially at a moment when, as I clearly see, a formidable wave of antisemitism is taking shape, one that will strike my fellow Jews (Chevalier 1960b, 366–367).

In his will of February 8, 1937, Bergson would present this second reason as the one that had prevented him from taking the final step:

My reflections have led me ever closer to Catholicism, where I see the complete fulfilment of Judaism. I would have converted, had I not seen for years... the formidable wave of antisemitism that is about to sweep across the world. I wanted to remain with those who will tomorrow be the persecuted (Mossé-Bastide 1955, 352).

Bergson would also confess to Sertillanges that this was due to his attempt to preserve the integrity of his philosophical method and to avoid being accused of using the conclusions of his philosophy selectively to validate his faith:

I have made it a rule to affirm only what clearly results from my method of inquiry, and moreover, I have my reasons for not venturing too far along this path. I would fear diminishing the scope of my results, which have value, if they have any, only through their independence from faith and through the way in which, nevertheless, they move towards it... I would not wish it to be said: That is what he meant to reach. In all truth, I meant to reach nothing, and it is not my fault if the right paths lead to the Gospel (Sertillanges 1941a, 20).

Although he did not have time, Bergson had asked to be baptised, as Maritain recounts:

Bergson expressed the desire for baptism and indicated the minister. But he declared that he wished to wait, out of delicacy, due to the circumstances. This has been told to me by the very priest he had chosen, who was called by the family, according to the deceased's wishes, to pray over his remains, without this implying that he had Christian funeral rites (Sertillanges 1941a, 65).

However, according to his wife, Bergson was baptised in secret: 'Raissa Maritain, wife of Jacques Maritain, stated, however, that he had received baptism secretly, even though she was unable to give the date of this event' (Kolakowski 2001, 86).

Nevertheless, the following lines from his will are revealing:

I hope that a Catholic priest will be willing, if the Cardinal Archbishop of Paris authorises it, to come and say prayers at my funeral. In the event that such authorisation is not granted, a rabbi should be approached, but without concealing from him, or from anyone, my moral adherence to Catholicism, as well as the desire I have expressed to have, first, the prayers of a Catholic priest (Mossé-Bastide 1955, 355).

Some wished to see in Bergsonian morality, drawn from the mystics, a mere ethical code with no further implications. Clearly, this is not consistent with someone who asks a Catholic priest to pray for him at his funeral.

We can therefore see how Bergson's spiritual development progressed in parallel with his philosophical development. In his final stage it was the truths of the faith

Bergson had embraced that set the course of his philosophical inquiries. However, it was Bergson's method that kept his thought trailing behind his faith:

By admitting experience as the sole source of knowledge, Bergson mutilated his philosophy, being obliged, for example, to discard the rational proofs for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul. There were many things he held with conviction but left unsaid because he had not reached them by way of his method (Oesterreicher 1961, 36–37).

8. Conclusion

As has been shown, Bergson's work, like his life, was not a systematic development of any preexisting ideas that need explanation over time, but rather an ongoing search for truth. Bergson began with the intuition of duration and gradually applied his insights to other aspects of reality. Similarly, on a spiritual level and given his limited religious background, Bergson slowly made his way through a positivist and materialist world with the guidance of mystics and figures such as Maritain, Sertillanges, and Father Pouget, among others. Without the discovery of mysticism and his personal religious experience, Bergson would never have written *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*. Thus, as has been shown, Bergson's process of conversion went hand in hand with his philosophical development and his own personal life. It is essential to take this into account for a complete and full understanding of Bergson's work.

Although Bergson himself wished to separate the author from his work, in line with his own philosophy, such a separation would be nothing more than an artificial division of a life that progresses as a whole, in which the philosophical and the religious are merged within the same spirit.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Jesús Baiget**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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