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Knowledge of God in Jeanne-Marie Bouvier de la Motte Guyon (1648–1717)

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According to Madame Guyon, mystical experience yields a deeper knowledge of God than any philosophical proof or argument can provide. It is the mystical experience of unitive love that initiates the noetic agent into the knowledge of God as the eternal bridegroom of the human soul (the bride). “These religious truths are truly verified in souls, but only in souls who are dead to themselves and who live only in God. These souls are elevated beyond all human feelings and thoughts. They have happily arrived in the presence of the One who is infinitely above human intelligence” (1688: xxi), This knowledge of God as loving person should not be dismissed by philosophical critics, since there is an authentic interpersonal knowledge that is acquired by asceticism and mysticism rather than by rational analysis. “We ask those who have no experience in these ways of holy love not to judge this by the sole light of reason because one does not learn these truths by any type of study; rather, they are learned by a complete contemplative abandonment to the Holy Spirit and by the perfect renunciation of oneself” (1688: xix).

The mystical unitive experience grounding this experiential knowledge of God occurs in stages corresponding to the faculties of the human mind. Union with God in the understanding give rise to a purely intellectual concept of God. Union with God in the memory absorbs the soul into God and blocks attachment to creatures. Union with God in the will leads to ecstatic love, generated by the Holy Spirit. Transcending the particular faculties, the highest union is the mystical marriage, where God and the human soul are perfectly united with each other.

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