

H-France Review Vol. 11 (October 2011), No. 233

Gregory B. Sadler, ed. and tr., *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France*. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011. x + 317 pp. Bibliography and index. \$64.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-13: 978-0813217-215 & ISBN-10: 0-81321-721-0.

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This book is a collection of twelve pieces (journal articles, book excerpts, and published conference proceedings), originally published in French during a four-year period (1931-1934), here edited and translated into English. All were contributions to philosophical debates, largely concentrated in France and Belgium between the years 1931 and 1936, concerning the question: “*Y-a-t’il une philosophie chrétienne?*”

The collection is primarily intended for Anglophones who are interested in present-day debates over whether a specifically “Christian philosophy” exists (and if so, what constitutes it); who might benefit from studying similar terms of engagement in 1930s Francophone exchanges; and who need assistance reading original French texts. Sadler is himself a philosopher and participant in these present-day debates. To further the discussion, he has included a ninety-six-page introductory chapter offering a brief survey of the concept of “Christian philosophy” since antiquity, its more recent genesis around 1830, and a detailed analysis of its intricacies in 1930s Francophone circles.

Unexpectedly, then, the volume’s appeal ranges beyond its intended audience and will interest French-reading philosophers, theologians, and historians of ideas and religion. Along with many references provided in the introduction’s footnotes, Sadler has also assembled a select bibliography of the debates and their issues, spanning the years 1927-2010, and arranged them chronologically by date of publication. These combined resources make the volume both an introduction to the subject and a useful guide to future research, especially for those capable of reading the numerous French-language entries here cited but as yet unavailable in translation.

Sadler organizes the 1930s narrative into three phases. The first (“The Debates Begin:1931”) opens with a March meeting of the Société française de philosophie. Three initial broad positions emerge. First, individuals Sadler terms “rationalists” argue that a *philosophie chrétienne* is not possible insofar as the free exercise of reason would be compromised by data not subject to rational verification. A second position is represented by the period’s two main Catholic philosophical figures, Étienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain. As Maritain noted, the two differed in their respective approaches as historian and philosopher: “while Gilson deliberately sets himself in the historical point of view, I [Maritain] would like to bring together the elements of a solution of a doctrinal order” (pp. 64-65). Yet, their positions were unified insofar as both consider themselves to be “Thomistic” thinkers. A third position is taken by Maurice Blondel (the subject of Sadler’s doctoral dissertation). As early as his doctoral thesis (*L’Action* [1893]), Blondel had been dedicated to integrating pragmatism and idealism, situating a modernist’s emphasis on action within a traditionalist’s yearning for transcendence and contemplation. [1] His fin-de-siècle quest for a modern Catholicism independent of the official neo-medievalist strains (mandated by a papal encyclical in 1879) led to him to be associated with the Roman Catholic Modernists (most definitively condemned by the papacy in 1907). Blondel himself had avoided explicit censure, and over the coming decades he continued his quest for a Catholicism independent of neo-medievalist inspiration-

-an integral synthesis of Catholicism and modernity.

During the second phase (“The Debates Expand: 1932-33”), the “rationalists” exit the discussions. From now on, the debates are largely between differing Catholic positions. They also begin to attract attention abroad as well, in Argentina, Italy, Ireland, and Germany. During the third and final phase (“Further Development of the Debates: 1933-1936”), opposition is voiced by those descended from neo-medievalist strains. Neo-scholastics at Louvain, who had a long history of “open Thomism,” argue against a separate *philosophie chrétienne*. Some Reformed Protestant and Jewish philosophers also begin to engage in the controversy. By 1936, the Francophone debates, having seemingly exhausted the terms, come to a close even as interest in the topic grows abroad, including several presentations at that year’s meeting of the American Catholic Philosophical Association.

The present volume’s twelve translated pieces begin with an essay by Émile Bréhier, one of the two rationalists discussed here (the other being Léon Brunschvicg). Bréhier argues that, since philosophy consists in the free and self-critical exercise of reason, any system “subjected to an authority outside itself” cannot be genuine philosophy (p. 48). After unfolding a long historical survey including the seventeenth-century metaphysician Malebranche, Bréhier concludes that there has never been a system respecting both terms (i.e., *philosophie* and *chrétienne*). Chapter two is a presentation delivered by Gilson, an ideal respondent to Bréhier, having been both a Thomist and a historian with particular expertise in Malebranche. [2] As for Brunschvicg, Gilson’s former Sorbonne teacher, the two could only agree that “Malebranche is a Christian philosopher and a link in the chain in the history of Christian philosophy” (p. 61). Blondel is the author of chapters three and four, rounding out the three positions of this initial phase.

The next three chapters were published in 1932. The first is an essay written by Gabriel Marcel reflecting on Gilson’s Gifford Lectures (“The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy”) delivered in Aberdeen between May 1931 and June 1932. Marcel’s entry is somewhat unexpected. After having published his *Journal métaphysique* (1927), Marcel had converted to Catholicism in 1929 (in the words of H. Stuart Hughes) with “quiet effortlessness.” [3] His insistence that “there is Christian philosophy only there where this paradox [of the Incarnation], this scandal is not only admitted or even accepted, but *embraced* with a passionate and unrestricted gratitude” (p. 79) suggests a recent convert’s desire to mark difference and rupture. Since at least the thirteenth century, one of philosophy’s perennial assets in Catholic tradition had been the assumption that it can bridge between believers of different faiths as well as between believers and non-believers, providing a mode of argument on which all reasoning persons might agree. [4] Marcel’s underscoring the chasm rather than the bridge marks his difference from this tradition. Chapter six comes from an article published by Étienne Borne in *Esprit*, founded the previous year (1931) as the mouthpiece of Emmanuel Mounier’s “personalism” on the Catholic left. (Later, under the Fourth Republic, Borne would become a founder of the postwar French Christian Democratic Party [Mouvement Républicain Populaire].) Analogous to Blondel’s integralism, Borne’s “reflexive philosophy” endorses “comparing the scientific, moral, aesthetic, religious universes” and perceiving “analogies and correspondences between them” (p. 181). This “second phase” of the debates’ expansion concludes with chapter seven, a redaction of Blondel’s presentation in late 1932, others’ responses, and his replies to them.

The next three chapters come from 1933 and mark the emergence of internal divisions between Thomists themselves. Chapter eight is from Fr. Antonin-Gilbert Sertillanges, a Saulchoir Dominican whose popular writings had played a preeminent role in the *renouveau catholique* throughout the 1920s. His religious order’s resources (including *La Revue des jeunes*, published by the Dominicans’ Éditions du Cerf) aimed at youth who, seared by the Great War, self-identified as “a realist generation,” one that wanted “to see the world in its reality, pushing back all the prisms of outmoded ideologies.” [5] (In 1917, one such youth wrote in the *Revue*: “The mystic generation is realist in religion....It will be realist in the action determined by its religious vision.”[6]) Not surprisingly then, Sertillanges’ essay

underscores the need for a “philosophy of the *real* and, by that fact, the real philosophy” (p. 87). In chapter nine, Msgr. (Bishop) Bruno de Solages, rector of the Institut Catholique of Toulouse, also offers a Thomist’s endorsement of *philosophie chrétienne*, attempting to reconcile the positions of Gilson-Maritain and Blondel. This piece illustrates de Solages’ reliable position as a mediator of Catholic factions, both before and after the Second World War. Indeed, three years later, as Catholics continued to fracture even before the July outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, de Solages would publish an article entitled “*L’Union entre les catholiques.*” [7] In chapter ten, Fernand van Steenberghe, a professor in the Institut supérieur de philosophie at the Université catholique de Louvain, represents Neo-Scholastic Thomists opposed to the notion of *philosophie chrétienne* as being a confusion of philosophy and theology (p. 82). In his strongly optimistic belief in the autonomy of reason and science, van Steenberghe embodied the Institut’s founding tradition of an “open Thomism” (contrasting with the “closed Thomism” practiced in Rome). Louvain’s slogan: “St. Thomas must be for us a beacon not a barrier.” [8]

Two representative opposing summary positions, both published in 1934 in the *Revue néo-scholastique de philosophie*, serve as the volume’s conclusion. On the one hand, Blondel once again argues in customary fashion for a synthesizing “integral philosophy.” On the other, Abbé Léon Noël, another Louvain representative, opposes a particularist *philosophie chrétienne*. As early as 1910, Noël had distinguished himself by publishing the first French-written review of Husserl’s *Logical Investigations*, “a study favorable to the Husserlian criticism of psychologism and to what the author considered to be an epistemological realism akin to his own neo-Thomistic position.” [9] Not surprisingly, like van Steenberghe, Noël expresses Louvain’s strongly optimistic emphasis on the autonomy of science and reason, insisting that a philosophy must “rest only on evidence” and remain “purely philosophical, communicable to any other mind, even if it be an unbelieving one, and able to be discussed on the common ground of certainties which all grant” (p. 84). This final chapter brings the volume full circle since Noël’s Louvain position agrees in its fundamentals with Bréhier’s rationalist one laid out in the first chapter.

A historian of ideas might ask why this series of debates about *philosophie chrétienne* seems to have erupted around 1931. Certainly, the debates were a sub-plot in the larger story of Catholic Revivalism, not only in its post-Great War phase, but also in the longer nineteenth-century haul beginning with other romantic reactions around 1830. And the terms of the debates, including implicit anxieties over whether “anti-intellectual” Catholics could be “rational,” locate them as a sub-plot in the “birth of the *intellectuel catholique*,” a seeming oxymoron since the Dreyfus Affair’s “birth of the intellectual.” [10] However, it is significant that the debates did not erupt until the 1920s had ended—that is, only *after* the postwar *renouveau catholique* had largely succeeded (again taking Marcel’s “quiet conversion” in 1929 as marking a cultural sea-change). At the other end, the same question of rupture might be posed about the debates’ apparent 1936 twilight. But in this case, that year’s deepening political and cultural crises offer a sharper dividing line: the short-lived Popular Front government’s collapse, the Spanish Civil War’s outbreak, and intensifying French Catholic fragmentation. Larger questions loomed. Sadler’s volume never addresses these questions of historical causality, but it does, however, provide a valuable primer and research guide for future investigation.

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#### NOTES

[1] See Michael J. Kerlin, "Blondel and Pragmatism: Truth as the Real Adequation of Mind and Life," in David G. Schultenover, S.J. ed., *The Reception of Pragmatism in France & the Rise of Roman Catholic Modernism, 1890-1914* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), pp. 122-142; and Kerlin, "Maurice Blondel: Philosophy, Prayer, and the Mystical," in C.J.T. Talar ed., *Modernists & Mystics* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 2009), pp. 62-81. For Blondel's "integrating" impulse, see Peter J. Bernardi, *Maurice Blondel, Social Catholicism, & Action Française: The Clash over the Church's Role in Society during the Modernist Era* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009). See also Gregory B. Sadler, "Catholicism, Modernism, and Modernity: The Concrete Logic, the Philosophy of Insufficiency, and the Option in Maurice Blondel, *La Pensée* and *L'Être et les êtres*" (Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, 2002).

[2] For background see my review of *The Malebranche Moment: Selections from the Letters of Étienne Gilson & Henri Gouhier (1920-1936)*, translated and edited by Richard J. Fafara (Milwaukee, Wis.: Marquette University Press, 2007); in H-France Review 10/28(February 2010): 135-143. <http://www.h-france.net/vol10reviews/vol10no28schloesser.pdf>

[3] Hughes added that Marcel's conversion was "a sign that by the end of the 1920s the enrollment of a leading thinker in the ranks of Catholicism no longer gave cause for public scandal or jubilation; the new position of religious faith among France's intellectual elite had become accepted as a normal feature of literary life in the interwar years." Quoted in Stephen Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism: Mystic Modernism in Postwar Paris, 1919-1933* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), p. 4.

[4] For illustration, see Richard E. Rubenstein, *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims, and Jews Rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Dark Ages* (Orlando, Fl.: Harcourt, 2003).

[5] Jean-Jacques Becker and Serge Berstein, *Victoire et frustrations: 1914-1929* (Paris: Seuil, 1990), p. 394.

[6] Pierre de Lescure, "Mysticisme et Réalisme," *La Revue des jeunes* (10 January 1917), 26 as cited in Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, p. 118.

[7] Msgr. (Bishop) Bruno de Solages, "L'Union entre les catholiques," *Semaine Religieuse de Rennes* (18 April 1936): 406, 408 as cited in Oscar L. Arnal, *Ambivalent Alliance: The Catholic Church and the Action Française* (Pittsburgh, Penn.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 214n19. See also Henri de Lubac, *Theology in History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), pp. 14, 15, 347, 390, 495, 506, 517, 559, 623; and Jürgen Mettepenningen, *Nouvelle théologie-New Theology: Inheritor of Modernism, Precursor of Vatican II* (London and New York: T&T Clark, 2010), pp. 105, 108, 178, 205, 206, 208, 216.

[8] Louvain had been French Catholicism's intellectual home abroad during periods of exile by radical governments. The German destruction of its library in August 1914 was particularly symbolic and painful. See Schloesser, *Jazz Age Catholicism*, pp. 33-35, 84-86, 125-126, 131-134; 170-172. See also Theodore Wesley Koch, *The University of Louvain and its Library* (Norwood, Mass.: The Plimpton Press, 1919), pp. 21, 23, quoting Abbé Léon Noël, *Louvain, 891-1914* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1915).

[9] Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Phenomenology World-wide: Foundations, Expanding Dynamisms, Life-engagements: A Guide for Research and Study* (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), p. 266.

[10] See Hervé Serry, *Naissance de l'intellectuel catholique* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004); Frédéric Gugelot, *La conversion des intellectuels au catholicisme en France (1885-1935)* (Paris: CNRS Ed., 1998); Ruth Harris, *The Man on Devil's Island: Alfred Dreyfus and the Affair that Divided France* (London: Allen Lane, 2010), pp. xvi, 6, 8-9, citing Michel Winock, *Le Siècle des intellectuels* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1997); Venita Datta, *The Birth of a National Icon: The Literary Avant-Garde and the Origins of the Intellectual in France* (Albany: State University of New York, 1999); and Sudhir Hazareesingh, *Intellectuals and the French Communist Party: Disillusion and Decline* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

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ISSN 1553-9172