

BOOK REVIEW

Gregory B. Sadler (editor and translator), *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation: The 1930s Christian Philosophy Debates in France* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 318 pp.

Gregory Sadler has set out to render a service to English-speaking students of philosophy. Professor Sadler has chosen, assembled, and translated a body of philosophical pronouncements by leading French Catholic thinkers in the first half of the twentieth century. The service he seeks to provide is to introduce to Anglophone readers the exchange of ideas amongst these thinkers with regard to the relationship between the Christian Faith and modern philosophy. His position as the associate editor of the *Journal of Philosophy: A Cross-Disciplinary Inquiry* has undoubtedly helped prepare him for the task at hand.

He has chosen selections which heretofore have not been available to English language readers. In this sense he is offering his readers an expedition into some unexplored corners of philosophy. Not only are his choices items that non-French speaking readers would not have seen, but he also undertakes to introduce them to an area of modern philosophy largely ignored by general works on twentieth century thought in France. He is also interested in dispelling the notion that it is not worth making these previously untranslated pieces more widely available. It is his contention, well taken, that these debates were a major event in the history of twentieth century French philosophy and, more broadly, in the history of ideas.

Like all collections, *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation* is by no means exhaustive. Sadler is quick to acknowledge as much, emphasizing his goal of presenting a representative selection of unfamiliar material to his readers. He expresses this in a capacious introduction to the volume. Given his target audience—those who cannot read French—the introduction is valuable. Sadler makes clear that there was a robust and intelligent output of philosophical work connected to Christianity during this period; that the history of ideas in France in that era is often dominated by the more jarring creeds of Kantianism, Marxism, and existentialism makes his point all the more apposite. If nothing else, Sadler's efforts show us a group of first-class thinkers engaged in an attempt to reconcile two major traditions in western culture: Christianity and systematic reasoning.

Initially his choice of writers may seem idiosyncratic. Those represented include: Emile Bréhier, Etienne Gilson, Maurice Blondel, Gabriel Marcel, Etienne Borne, Antonin Sertillages, and lesser known figures such as Bruno de Solages, Fernand Van Steenberghe, and Léon Noël. Noticeably missing are Jacques Maritain and Henri Bergson. However, Sadler points out that Maritain's work is probably the best known of any Catholic philosopher to English readers. As for Bergson, the editor maintains, not without justification, that while he provided inspiration for a younger generation of philosophers, he had very little to say regarding the debate over Christian philosophy during the thirties. Moreover, Sadler explains that he is trying to demonstrate the breadth of thinking which made up the debate over the nature of Christian philosophy. As he expresses it, he wishes to go beyond the "unduly truncated" account of

competing ideas within the Catholic philosophical community; his aim is to advance beyond the “Gilson-Bréhier debate.”

Fair enough, though this reviewer was struck by the limited exposure granted to Gabriel Marcel. The editor declined to include Marcel’s paper “Position du mystère ontologique et ses approches concrètes” presented in 1933 during a meeting of the *Société française de Philosophie*, explaining that it has already been translated in Marcel’s *Being and Having: An Existential Diary* (1949). Even so, the essay might have been instructive to focus Marcel’s position on metaphysics as well as helping to clarify his place in the debate with Maurice Blondel. Sadler assigns the greater portion of his selections to Blondel. As he makes clear, Blondel played a central role in the debate, and points to the number of references made by other Catholic philosophers to Blondel’s statements. Also, Blondel has not enjoyed extensive translation of his work, unlike some of his contemporaries in Catholic circles.

By way of historical framework, the editor gives a brief account of the “Catholic Renaissance” which took place at the beginning of the *belle epoch* from around 1880 to the First World War. Pope Leo XIII issued the encyclicals *Aeterni Patris* (1879) and *De Rerum Novarum* (1891) that set in motion a new interest in Catholic thought. Among other things, this led to a revival of Thomistic philosophy. A new generation of thinkers in France began to articulate the Catholic social movement with respect to dominant philosophical movements largely inspired by the work of Immanuel Kant. The advent of Marxist political and social theories further obscured Christian consideration, especially during the interwar years. Yet, there remained a hunger for some sort of pondering of the supernatural even in the most radical expanses of thought. A case in point would be that of certain members of the surrealist movement who insisted on “a philosophical revolution at ease with the use of the word ‘God.’” Clearly, the association of Christianity and philosophy was, at the very least, latent in French thinking during the early part of the twentieth century.

However, as this book makes clear, the term “Christian philosophy” was a loaded one and a matter of dispute amongst Catholic intellectuals and writers. That much is made clear in part I of Sadler’s book, “The Debate Begins, 1931.” The first selection is from Emile Bréhier, entitled “Is There a Christian Philosophy?” Playing the devil’s advocate, Bréhier insists that the terms “Christian” and “philosophy” do not belong in the same sentence. Using Etienne Gilson’s *The Christian Philosophy of Saint Augustine* as a take off point, he reminds us that Saint Augustine rejected the Hellenic philosophy of his time, especially the work of Plato. What is more, Bréhier points out the difficulties with Greek philosophy and Christian dogma in Saint Thomas Aquinas. He calls into question Saint Thomas’s reconciliation of faith and reason pointing out that the Angelic Doctor’s creed of *philosophia ancilla theologiae* is, in point of fact, a paradox. A convergence of faith and reason is possible only if each has its own initiative. Bréhier maintains that reason can no longer lay claim to any initiative if its exertions are judged by a standard alien to it: faith.

Etienne Gilson entertained much the same criticism. Writing in the March, 1931 edition of *La Société française de Philosophie*, he stated that philosophy is, by its nature, rational; Christianity, based on faith, is irrational, or at least above the rational dimension. Thus the two seem immiscible. Gilson, however, is willing to approve of the concept of Christian philosophy, but only as it applies to metaphysics, anthropology, and morals. These, he says, are its only areas of “fertility.” It is interesting to survey the way in which these thinkers articulate the complementarity of faith and reason, exploring various sides of the view that reason challenges faith to be rationally accountable, while faith pushes reason toward the transcendent.

In this book, Gabriel Marcel arises as a defender of Christian philosophy, using Gilson's *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* against him. Citing Gilson's work, Marcel praises Saint Thomas and Saint Bonaventure for their use of Aristotelianism to articulate their Christian (Catholic) faith in a philosophical manner. He adds that their philosophical stance made it possible to refute the false doctrines of (Cornelius) Jansen and "the absurd legends accredited for so long by (Jules) Michelet and his disciples." Marcel ends his defense of Christian philosophy with a quote from Blondel's *Le Problème de la Philosophie catholique*, "Let us consider then the animating idea of Christian thought . . . moving in its real and malleable continuity . . . it is a life, and it is a life agreeing *in concreto* . . . with a Dogma that can be called 'dramatic,' in God, in the universe, in humanity, down to each consciousness, in order to render everything intelligible . . ."

By virtue of the space given him in Sadler's book, Maurice Blondel is the star attraction. The editor presents his star with a fair amount of grace, avoiding a dry recitation of the Frenchman's remarks by adding a section devoted to letters by various scholars commenting on his proposals and positions regarding Catholic philosophy, along with Blondel's responses. Commentators include Enrico Castelli, Jean Delvolvé, and Joseph Maréchal, S.J. The inclusion of such commentary adds dimension and substance to this section of the book.

The concluding segment of *Reason Fulfilled by Revelation* is an essay by the politician and diplomat, Léon Noël. Written in 1934, Noël's remarks stand as a sort of compromise in the Christian philosophy debates as he articulates a neo-Thomist appreciation for the importance of both Christian doctrine and rational philosophy in enriching the human spirit and intellect. The two are complimentary, but never interlaced. Included in the book is a serviceable bibliography of works dealing with the debates and the issues of this period, along with an index. Overall, Sadler has indeed provided a valuable service for the considerable number of scholars and readers interested in this period of thought, and in the work of this group of influential and profound Catholic thinkers.

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