Christian philosophy in John Deely's
Four ages of understanding

GREGORY B. SADLER

Abstract

The Four ages *contains a brief explicit discussion of the issue of Christian philosophy, referencing the Middle Ages and the 1930s French debates about Christian philosophy. Closer attention to the debates reveals a plurality of positions rather than unanimous agreement on Christian philosophy, indicating that the quite complex issues were not resolved. In this review article, I contest Deely's interpretation of Maritian's position, provide an exegesis of Maritain's position, argue that Deely's explicit position is identifiable as very close to Neo-Scholastic opponents of Christian philosophy during the debates, and briefly discuss Gilson's and Blondel's criticisms of such positions articulated during the 1930s debates. I also indicate that despite his opposition to Christian philosophy, Deely shares several key insights with its proponents, and I end by suggesting but not developing a few ways Deely's semiotic approach could bear additional fruit for postmodern Christian philosophy's ongoing projects of self-understanding.*

Keywords: Christian philosophy; Maritain; Gilson; Blondel; Medieval philosophy; 1930s debates.

1.   *Four ages* on Christian philosophy

In his recent book's preface, John Deely reveals a set of motivations for offering it, motivations including an intent to provoke: to provoke reconsideration and re-evaluation of long-traditional but reductive, even erroneous, historical classifications of philosophies and philosophers; to provoke renewed philosophical attention to the inescapable importance of the sign, not only in and to a postmodern age of culture and thought in which there is a "recovery and advance of the notion" (2001: xxx), but to the preceding history of the earlier three ages; and, to provoke further

research, for which *Four ages of understanding* is intended to be a guide-book, casting light on the terrain of the new age into which we are still moving, illuminating its most general features, but focusing selectively on particular points as well. Deely has produced a new history of philosophy, as he says, a 'rewriting' (2001: xxx) of the history of philosophy, one that is quite self-consciously and reflectively a reinterpretation of philosophy's own history.

1.1.   *Strong points of* Four ages

For brevity's sake, I restrict my praise of Deely's work to three points.

First, maintaining that we stand on the boundary of postmodernism, Deely does not mean, let alone lapse into, what many avowed postmodernists mean by the term, because he means more than they do. In placing a stress on the sign and semiotics, he reflectively articulates a richer, a denser, a more coherent and still to a considerable degree organized, valorized and hierarchized universe, than do typical postmodernists (or deconstructionists, cultural-theorists, critical theorists, etc.).

Second, in the texture of his history, Deely not only makes a clearly acknowledged set of selections, involving both what is included and what is excluded from the narrative, but he also provocatively takes very clear positions on the topics, figures, doctrines, movements, and intellectual relations he discusses and systematically connects positions, supported by reference to texts, by arguments — in short, by interpretative appeal to evidence. These are positions that are bound to be controversial, to be contested, to provoke responses. There are many gaps in Deely's history of philosophy, not only in what he does not write about, but even in what he does write about, gaps that depend on the reader, or the respondant, to fill them in.

The third point follows from the first and the second. When fault can be found with his inclusions, exclusions, and interpretations of particular issues, as I do here with Deely's discussion of Christian philosophy, the seemingly more adequate, accurate, and comprehensive picture one is provoked to hold up against Deely's sketch turns out, upon further reflection and reading, not to be so much opposed to it as complementary. To continue this artistic metaphor, one finds that if the details clash, the broad and fundamental lines do not. Moreover, there are gaps even in the more comprehensive picture, and keeping one's eyes open while making the work's full itinerary, passing through the main galleries, suggests not just new lines, but patterns, even full motifs for filling in those gaps.

Before registering my criticisms, a few words about complementarity of philosophical perspective are necessary. It is not Deely's goal to present the entire history of philosophy, and, like all histories of philosophy, his orients itself by selected central themes. Deely's view is that "the most unique theme within the Latin development" was "that of the being proper to signs, the one theme that the Latin world begins on its own and not by way of resuming themes received from Greek thought" (2001: 206–207). Before entering his historical discussions of the Latin Age, Deely writes: "even a beginning student deserves to have a synoptic view of philosophy's development, while any student who may decide to go on in philosophical or historical studies — the kind of student to whom this work is especially addressed — deserves to be made aware in advance of some of the major landmarks that can reliably be made use of in undertaking advanced investigations" (2001: 211). Deely provides precisely this in an unparalleled way with respect to signs.

Something similar, the systematic bringing to light of a submerged and overlooked history, with its own landmarks, its own cul-de-sacs (as modern philosophy, the third age, turns out to be for the doctrine of signs) could be accomplished, as has been done in part (for instance in Gilson 1936), for Christian philosophy. Doing so would inevitably indicate the inadequacy of Deely's treatment of Christian philosophy, for even the fragments of the history of Christian philosophy discussed here do so. But, that does not mean that one project of recovery and reconstruction of an overlooked and yet absolutely important dimension to the history and present of philosophy negates another. In many cases, they can be complementary, and that is the case here. In fact, those devoted to the study of Christian philosophy ought to take a cue from *Four ages*. The doctrine of signs and its hitherto submerged history has its John Deely and its *Four ages*. Christian philosophy needs analogues to both.

1.2.   *Weak points of* Four ages *on Christian philosophy*

The story Deely tells about Christian philosophy is on one detail clearly inaccurate, on many important points and connections completely silent, seemingly committed and indebted to only one of the many different positions on Christian philosophy, entirely ignoring the criticisms addressed to that position by the other positions. The issues involved in the notion, possibility, and nature of Christian philosophy are of considerable importance, both in the Latin and in the Modern Ages, including the times of

controversies over "Christian philosophy" transpiring over the last century, controversies (as many of their participants keenly felt and reflectively noted) taking place in the transition from one age to another. Quite a few of the participants have been, like Maritain, "standing at the far boundary of modernity and the frontier of postmodernity" (2001: 317). In fact, many of the issues of the Christian philosophy debates remained then and remain today unresolved, despite being brought to levels of sharpness, heat, and illumination never before and not since attained. And, they remain unresolved not because Christian philosophy is a dead end, a settled issue, but because after the debates there is such a rich range of cogent positions on problems that, because they are fundamental to philosophy, do not disappear or dissolve simply because they are ignored, overlooked, or presumed solved. Interestingly, Deely's semiotic approach, centered on sign, interpretation, and relation suggests several ways in which thinking about the issue(s) of Christian philosophy could be taken further along today. Study of one set of fundamental problems can illuminate another set.

1.2.1. *Breadth of the 1930s Christian philosophy debates.*   The detail on which Deely is inaccurate, even misleading, is not a minor one, since his position on Christian philosophy derives its content from his interpretation of Maritain's much later position, justifies itself by appeal to him, but leaves out his important earlier insights that conflict with Deely's interpretation "[Maritain's] witness is all the more valuable because, of all those propounding the cause of a 'Christian philosophy,' from 1931 onward … he was recognized on all hands as the most competent spokesman" (2001: 260). This is simply and clearly untrue. No such *unanimous* recognition existed, and there were quite a few scholars involved in the debate of equal stature to Maritain on the issue of Christian philosophy, some not only in the 1930s, but up to the present.[1] Closely allied with Maritain was Etienne Gilson. Opposed to and by both of them was Maurice Blondel.[2] Either one of these two could be, and have been by many scholars, regarded as the most competent spokesman. There were others of considerable importance.[3] Some of these were Christians arguing for Christian philosophy: Régis Jolivet, Gabriel Marcel, Antonin Sertillanges. Some of these were chief representatives of the then-dominant Rationalism arguing against Christian philosophy: Emile Bréhier and Léön Brunschvicg. Yet others arguing against Christian philosophy, like Fernand van Steenberghen and Léon Noël, were representatives of neo-Scholastic positions Gilson, Blondel and Maritain all criticized from different angles. Representatives of Augustinian positions, such as Michel

Souriou and (to a lesser extent) Blaise Romeyer, weighed in. Even representatives of what Gilson would term "pure theologism," e.g., Léon Chestov, had their say, as Karl Barth did prior to the debate.

1.2.2. *Deely's Neo-Scholastic position on Christian philosophy.*   Maritain, Gilson, Blondel, and the others arguing for Christian philosophy during the 1930s debates would recognize Deely's position on Christian philosophy, but not as Maritain's position. Deely's position can be expressed in several theses. Christian philosophy prior to Thomas Aquinas is simply what the Augustinian tradition made it out to be. Christian philosophy after Thomas quite simply *is* not, since Thomas at last distinguishes between philosophy and theology based on the origins of their principles or starting points of reasoning, and thereby in the way they employ reasoning: "religious thinking within confessional confines is sharply distinguished from the philosophical use of reason which is not confessional" (2001: 262). Deely's position would be immediately recognized by the debates' participants as a version of what was at the time called "Neo-Thomism" or "Neo-Scholasticism." One of time's ironies is that Gilson, Maritain, and the many Thomists influenced by Blondel (who in his turn gets called an Augustinian), were not considered Neo-Thomists or Neo-Scholastics in their day (cf. Deely 2001: 342, note 200), but they are considered so now. Another irony is that, in Deely's interpretation, near the end of his life, Maritain adopted a position closer to the Neo-Scholastic one against Christian philosophy.[4]

2.   Criticism of Deely's position on Christian philosophy

In a review article, there can be no question of providing a full and systematic account of the Christian philosophy debates, the positions developed and taken, the main lines of divergence and agreement between the positions, let alone the entangled history of ideas leading up to the debates or the history of interpretations and appropriations of the main positions. Those are tasks for books yet to be written.[5] Instead, I will simply and briefly raise four important points about positions articulated in the course of the debates, filling in a few gaps in Deely's treatment of Christian philosophy. Afterwards, I will discuss several features of Deely's approach and perspective that could contribute greatly to current thinking both about the 1930s Christian philosophy debates and about Christian philosophy more generally.

2.1.   *Christian philosophy after Thomas*

While they did note and discuss distinctions Deely rightly attributes to Thomas Aquinas — as well as other of the achievements of Aquinas, such as clarification of the relation of the universe to its creative source in creation *ex nihilo* (2001: 256), formulation of a metaphysics of being (2001: 266–7) — neither Gilson nor Maritain thought that '[t]he idea of a "Christian philosophy", so strong in the Fathers of the Church and after them even down to present day, may yet be said to have formally died in the writings of Aquinas' (2001: 260). To the contrary, during the 1931 Société française de Philosophie session, where the long-fermenting issue of Christian philosophy finally exploded on the scene in France, Maritain baldly stated: "Christian philosophy is not a determinate system, yet in my opinion Saint Thomas' system is its most finished and pure expression" (1931: 67).[6] During that session and in works around that time, Gilson evinced a more pluralistic attitude, speaking of "Christian philosophies," but by his later *Elements of Christian philosophy* (1963), Thomism is in his mind definitively its best and fullest expression. Maritain very clearly aligned himself with Gilson's criticism of the Neo-Thomists opposed to Christian philosophy, saying "I do not recognize myself among the 'rationalist' neo-Thomists of whom he speaks" (1931: 59).

2.2.   *Gilson's typology*

This leads to the second point, or rather set of points. Gilson provided a very useful typology of what he regarded as inadequate positions on Christian philosophy, distinguishing what he labeled "pure theologism," "pure rationalism,"[7] the position of certain neo-Thomists or neo-Scholastics, and several different 'Augustinian' positions. Pure theologism, exemplified by Peter Damian, insists that there can be no Christian philosophy, because philosophy is simply incompatible with the Christian faith. As Gilson points out, "Medieval philosophy was the negation of this obscurantism, but still it did exist" (1931: 41). At the other extreme, but really an inversion of pure theologism, is pure rationalism. Reversing theologism's formula, pure rationalism's view is that "where philosophy is, it is dangerous that Christianity should be" (1931: 41). Any Christian philosophy would be a deviation from genuine philosophy, since it would vitiate the reason at work in it by subordinating it to something irrational, the Christian faith. This "make[s] the rational depend on the irrational, i.e., . . . suppresses its very rationality" (1931: 41).

Many neo-Scholastics essentially accepted the rationalist position, differing mainly in substituting appropriation of St. Thomas' doctrine in place of the rationalists' condemnation and near complete ignorance of medieval philosophy. For these neo-Scholastics, there can be no ultimate conflict between faith and reason, but there must not be any confusion of them either. Philosophy, "insofar as philosophy ... is the exclusive work of reason. Rational in its principles, it is also rational in its method and in its conclusions" (1931: 42). This generates a significant problem, to which Gilson and Blondel were keenly attuned, for these neo-Scholastics were trying to have their cake and eat it too. On the one hand, they wanted the reason employed by Thomas Aquinas or by one of his interpreters and followers to be exactly the same reason employed by the rationalists, or any philosopher whatsoever. "It is only due to its rationality that Thomism should be a philosophy and a true philosophy" (Gilson 1931: 38; cf. also 1936: 5–6). On the other hand, this conceals a fundamental difference between the neo-Scholastic and the rationalist.

> While the pure rationalist puts philosophy in the highest place, and identifies it with wisdom, the neo-scholastic subordinates it to theology which alone, as he holds, fully deserves that name; but why then do certain neo-Scholastics imagine that even when thus subordinated to theology, their philosophy remains precisely of the same nature as any other that recognizes no wisdom higher than itself? (Gilson 1936: 4)

This is a question with multiple answers. Van Steenberghen (1933), for instance, who was deeply engaged in the debate and who continued debating the issues (primarily with Gilson) long after the 1930s (Van Steenberghen 1951, 1988), takes a principled stand that genuinely attempts to understand and come to terms with the variety of positions for Christian philosophy. Other neo-Scholastics seem instead to have largely misunderstood both the issues in general and the other philosophers debating the issues. One can also find answers of a less philosophical nature. Joseph Owens, discussing the debate's historical context, sketches an unflattering picture of French Catholic philosophers 'profoundly anxious to avoid a ghetto', and interested in 'unimpeded access to employment' (9).

Gilson also discussed three different "Augustinian" positions. For Augustine, Christian philosophy means the true philosophy, "precisely insofar as Christian and particularly because it is inspired by the Bible and the Gospel" (1931: 44). For Augustinians, it means the philosophy of St. Augustine and the Augustinian tradition, as opposed to that of St. Thomas and his followers. For yet others, it means philosophy of the concrete. "Augustine's philosophy comprehends [*implique*] man in his concrete

state, i.e., by including in it his religious life. Philosophy that faithfully translates the Christian man's experience is necessarily Christian'' (1931: 38).

This last Augustinian position contains a deep truth, one which Gilson, Maritain, and Blondel each emphasize: ''the real unity of the elements of the concrete in the subject where they are realized'' (1931: 46). Before exploring that point, however, we should stop long enough to place Deely's explicit position within the framework of Gilson's distinctions. There is no exact fit, for on the one hand, he identifies Christian philosophy with the Augustinian tradition, but on the other, his argument that it comes to an end in St. Thomas' demarcation of philosophy and theology is very close to the neo-Scholastic positions that held there could be no such thing as Christian philosophy in any proper sense of the term.

2.3.   *Philosophy as concrete activity*

These key participants in the debates devoted and directed attention to the concrete condition of the philosophizing subject, and to the concrete conditions in which philosophizing and philosophy takes place, as opposed to an abstract conception of 'reason', 'rationality', and 'Philosophy' then opposed to an equally abstract 'irrationality', 'faith', 'dogma', 'theology'. As Maritain wrote: ''It is all too easy to materialize an abstraction, i.e., to clothe what is actually an ideal monster as if it were a concrete existence. That is what, in my view, both the rationalists and the neo-Thomists criticized by Mr. Gilson have done'' (1931: 62). We cannot entirely avoid speaking at a certain level of abstraction, even about ''concrete conditions,'' if we wish to communicate. But, it is a mistake of the first order to think that one ever deals directly with ''philosophy,'' ''rationality'' in its essence, or as Maritain preferred to say, in its nature, as opposed to in a determinately concrete state.[8] Practically all of the debates' participants agreed that philosophy *in its essence* was neither Christian nor non-Christian, but merely rational. Where one major fault line between those for and those against Christian philosophy ran was that the latter lapsed into this kind of abstraction, whereas the former continually resisted that temptation, grasping that this essence was realized only in concrete states or conditions.

In brevity's interest, Gilson's and Blondel's discussions must be passed over, and Maritain's rich distinctions must be crystallized in a few lines. Maritain's position distinguishes ''between the *nature* of philosophy, of what philosophy is in itself, and the *state* in which it is found factually,

historically, in the human subject, and which relates itself to its conditions of existence and exercise in the concrete" (1931: 59). Considered in terms of its nature, philosophy is determined solely by its object, derives from "strictly rational or natural intrinsic criteria" (1931: 62), so that "it is not dependent on Christian faith, in its object, its principles, or its methods" (1931: 62). This nature, however, is an abstraction, different from every real instance of philosophy. "Once it is a question no longer of philosophy taken in-itself, but of the manner in which the human subject philosophizes, and of the different philosophies brought to the light of day by history's concrete movement, consideration of philosophy's *essence* no longer suffices, and consideration of the *state* imposes itself" (1931: 63).

The state is not merely the subjective condition of the individual philosophizing human subject, for individual subjects philosophize (as well as do practically everything else) within institutional and cultural contexts. Philosophy within what Maritain calls a "Christian regime" is able to accomplish more, to develop differently and farther, attaining objects naturally within philosophy's domain that philosophers failed to recognize or grasp, sometimes adequately, sometimes at all, (1931: 63) objects "in some way implicit ... in humanity's philosophical treasury" (1931: 64). Christianity also provides otherwise lacking definitive solutions to problems philosophy raises; on these, Maritain points out, "one ought to speak not of revelation, but of confirmation" (1931: 65). Lastly, in a Christian regime, philosophy travels down new roads, particularly through its relationship to theology. "[H]ow would it not learn much in being led in this way along paths that are not its own?" (1931: 65).

Again, we should halt to examine Deely's position. What comes to light in reading the book is that, despite the position he explicitly takes on Christian philosophy, Deely is clearly aware that philosophy always exists and develops in concrete states. And, perhaps more than the 1930s debaters, he is attuned to institutional and cultural dimensions. He writes, echoing the 1930s debaters, of 'another side to the story, ways in which religion has expanded the range of human inquiry' (Deely 2001: 492). The example he focuses on is the University: "more than any single institution, [it] has transformed civilization by giving the development of inquiry an institutional framework" (2001: 492). He continues:

[T]here has also been, on the face of it, something quite positive in the contribution the religious faith gave to at least some thinkers by temperament inquirers; for it enabled them to move 'scientific intelligence' beyond isolated, individual genius into a framework of a developing community. Yet not even this fascinating tale is the road I want to follow now. (Deely 2001: 492)

Deely reveals himself aware not only that philosophy exists only in determinate concrete states, but also that religion, Christianity, in fact, plays a certain role in certain states that philosophy has taken in the history of philosophy. His last sentence says it all, for were that the story that he had wanted to tell, he likely would have written a postmodern successor to Gilson's *Spirit of Medieval philosophy*.

2.4.   *Maritain's position*

In contrast to other Maritain scholars writing about Christian philosophy, Deely prefers what seems to be a very late retrospective position of Maritain's to the position he developed at length and in depth in the 1930s. On this, two points need to be made. The first is that arguably the remarks Deely cites do not actually signal a new position opposed to the previous one. The second is that if there were a real shift of position, from "Christian philosophy" to "philosophy as fully such" (*la philosophie comme plenièrement telle*; 2001: 260) this actually brings Maritain closer to the position his intellectual rival Blondel articulated during the debate, preferring the term "Catholic philosophy."

2.4.1.   *Compatability of positions.*   Examination of a few passages from the late text Deely cites reveals that his picture of opposed early and late Maritainian positions on Christian philosophy is questionable. In the postscript to chapter 12 of *Untrammeled approaches*, Maritain writes explicitly about Christian philosophy, and although he speaks with "lack of tenderness" towards the term, he still uses it, and he says things that on the one hand seem consonant with his earlier writings, and on the other hand provide additional clarification. Three passages must suffice here, and they hardly need comment.

Such an expression [Christian philosophy] runs the risk of being completely misunderstood, as if the philosophy in question were more or less reined in by confessional proprieties. The reality is quite different. (Maritain 1997: 206)

[W]hat we call "Christian philosophy" is a philosophy set free, and ought to be called philosophy *understood fully* as such. This is no guarantee of course against any possibility of error, but it does permit this philosophy to move forward indefinitely and to maintain the integrity of the philosophical understanding as it advances from century to century ... (Maritain 1997: 206)

[W]hat appears to me most significant with regard to my present proposal is that fact that ... there could be no Christian philosophy that is not led eventually to

raise its eyes toward theology, and to propose *tentatively* its own views on matters whose *knowledge* (Christian philosophy knows this) depends, not on philosophy, but on a superior wisdom to which the *opus theologium* is dedicated. (Maritain 1997: 269)

2.4.2. *Blondel and Maritain.* During the debate, Blondel on one side, and Gilson and Maritain on another, severely and on most points unfairly criticized each other, seemingly not realizing the compatibility, even complementarity, of their positions, as many commentators pointed out. What is particularly relevant here in the complex Blondelian position, what bears on Deely's work, are three points.

First, Christian philosophy will be philosophy "recognizing how it is normally incomplete, how it opens in itself and before itself an empty space prepared not only for its own ulterior discoveries and on its own ground, but for illuminations and contributions whose real origin it is not and cannot become" (1931: 88). It will be what Blondel called a "philosophy of insufficiency," and this insufficiency will be something realizable within philosophy's own practice and scope, not requiring any theological or faith-commitment.

Second, a "philosophy of insufficiency" is one that is thereby open to the supernatural, the empty space has "contours to discern, a reason for being to meditate on and to render rationally admissible" (1931: 90); further, Christian teachings can then be "philosophically admissible in the organism of rational thought" (1931: 91).

Third, philosophy can (and in Blondel's works does) then discover within itself a normativity, a requirement for its own fuller development, requiring it to be brought into full and integral communication with Christianity. Blondel in fact maps out an itinerary towards Maritain's "philosophy understood fully as such," and despite both Blondel's and Maritain's discomfort with the term, it is not unfitting to call this (as De Lubac 1992, for instance) does, one kind of Christian philosophy.

3. Deelyian contributions to make to the debate

After these criticisms of Deely's discussion of Christian philosophy, a discussion which *would* be inadequate *if Four ages of understanding* had been intended to discuss the issues of Christian philosophy thematically and in depth, another related topic remains to be discussed, one allowing a laudatory ending.

As pointed out earlier, the 1930s debates about Christian philosophy were never fully resolved, and the issues involved and positions articulated remain open for further research. One extremely fertile suggestion for further research is that these issues and positions should be re-examined from an explicitly and reflectively postmodern vantage point, one more attentive to the role of signs, to the ontological status of relations, to intersubjectivity, to the inevitable and indispensable role of interpretants, and to the community of inquiry.

3.1.   *Christian philosophy in postmodernity*

That Christian philosophy should be thought through from a postmodern perspective is not a radically new suggestion. But, one must ask: which postmodern perspective? For, there are very different ways of understanding our postmodern condition, and Christian philosophy, even Christianity, must be greatly deformed, perhaps even distorted so much as to be cut off at their roots, by some of these understandings. This is where Deely's approach is most fruitful.

Postmodernism, as Deely presents it, does not require a radical rupture with or rejection of the past, but rather its attentive and conscious reinterpretation. This is precisely what he does in his book with the doctrine of signs. The postmodern world, as we glimpse it through *Four ages of understanding*, is not a dazzling but illusory play of signifiers, nor a rejection of grand narratives (and thereby any coherent narrative in the process), nor disintegration of communication into the narcissism of identity politics and the discourses of violence and victimization. Rather than a rejection of the modern that merely replicates and remains bound within the fundamental structures of modern thought, Deely's postmodernism is a recovery and reconstruction of sense and meaning, reflection and history. Two specific examples of issues of the Christian philosophy debates that could be thought out further from the postmodern perspective Deely articulates are the relationship between reason and faith, and the role of interpretation in philosophy in a Christian (or any other) state.

3.1.1.   *Reason and faith.*   During a discussion of the autonomy of rational thought and faith, in the course of contrasting the West with the Islamic world of thought (2001: 188–191), Deely discusses cases where (as in modern rationalism, in the broad sense in which it was used in the Christian philosophy debates, including idealism, positivism, naturalistic pragmatism, etc.) human reason is accorded an absolute autonomy,

which then requires a subordination of faith. He also discusses the opposite situation, when according absolute autonomy to faith generates "a religious belief articulated in propositions incapable of being proved ... but asserted as necessarily accepted by anyone who is 'saved' and as criterial for deciding whatever issues in whatever sphere of life to which the religious authority cares to extend itself, even through civil and police means" (2001: 190). Of course, authoritarianism resting on unverifiable and unquestionable assumptions can just as well take place on the side of the secular, the putatively purely natural, even in the name of reason and rationalism.

In any of these cases, the problem with any such accordance is that "there is no longer any room for an interpretative scheme grounded elsewhere than in the cultural exegesis of the sacred text" (2001: 190). What Deely contrasts against both of these is "a relative autonomy of faith and reason such as Aquinas would later promulgate" (2001: 189), and what he attributes to western culture is that "the philosophy the Latin West developed has alone provided the intellectual framework justifying the relative spheres of faith and reason and the relative autonomy of the hermeneutic (or interpretive procedures) proper to each" (2001: 191). This was one of the central issues discussed in the Christian philosophy debates, for if faith and reason are relatively autonomous, and have relatively autonomous hermeneutic or interpretative procedures, they cannot be adequately conceived, or put into practice, in complete separation from each other, as if both of them had absolute independence and absolute autonomy, a stance that inevitably degenerates into according one of them that absolute status, and ignoring, rejecting, or subjecting the other. Yves Simon's assessment of the debates illustrates this realization of the relativity and relation of faith and reason:

between the main Catholic philosophers of our country, agreement tends to be established on the following points: rejection of any confusion between rational knowledge and the knowledge of faith; rejection of any system of impermeable compartmentalization or of double truth; rejection of any separation between the exercise of theological virtues and virtues of philosophical thought, and this last rejection implies the admission of benefices contributed by revelation to rational speculation. (Simon 1934: 107)

Blondel explains the reason why philosophy, on the side of reason, and religion (specifically Christianity), on the side of faith, cannot avoid being brought into relation:

Differing from the sciences aiming at phenomena, i.e., abstract things and fragmentary interests, philosophy and religion bear on the whole, on the meaning of

the universe, on the mystery of our being and the solution of our destiny, with the result that these two *totaliter* cannot be juxtaposed or ignore each other. There is collision if there is not compenetration and asymptotic convergence in the very heterogeneity of a double autonomy. (Blondel 1932: 136)

3.1.2.   *The Christian state and the interpretant.*   Concrete states of philosophy, philosophy as it actually takes place in determinate times, places, institutions, conditioned by particular projects, discourses, sets of assumptions, and, even more importantly, philosophy and reason as they are for and in actual human subjects can be productively rethought in terms of two connected achievements of thought Deely focuses on in his work: an adequate understanding of the mode of being of relations, including transcendental relations; and the function of the Peircian interpretant in the doctrine of signs. In short, to close, a fertile avenue for further study would be examining the notions of Christian philosophy, particularly Maritain's notion of Christian philosophy as a philosophy in a Christian state, from the vantage point of semiotics, regarding the partially overlapping communities of philosophers and Christians as communities of inquiry, and according to Christianity the status of interpretant(s).

Notes

1. In the last thirty or so years, one could point to Ralph McInerny (1988), the late Joseph Owens (1990), and Yves Floucat (1981), who articulate positions indebted to Maritain and Gilson.
2. It is unfortunate that Deely does not discuss Blondel at all in the work. Many of the insights that Deely rightly attributes to Thomas Aquinas, Hegel and Peirce find their matches in Blondel's work. And, Deely's own work meets the desiderata for Blondel's interpretation of Christian philosophy.
3. I count roughly sixty authors, several of whom published numerous works (mostly in French, but also in Italian, Spanish, and German) on the topic during the period, engaged in discussion about "Christian philosophy" just in the period from 1928 to 1935.
4. In finding the expression "Christian philosophy" less than satisfactory in certain respects, Maritain was in a good and very large company. One essential moment of the Neo-Scholastic criticism was that the term lacked definite meaning, and was in certain respects ambiguous or misleading. In the *Letter on apologetics* more than thirty years before the debates began, Blondel expressed his problems with the expression (1964), and in the course of the debate, suggested "Catholic philosophy" in place of "Christian philosophy," calling the latter "a highly equivocal term in the use that has been made of it and which, *stricto sensu*, remains inevitably hybrid" (1934: 49).
5. There is at present nothing that one could call a proper history of the debate. Even a full bibliography is lacking, the most comprehensive one at present being in Bogliolo (1986).

There are excellent studies of the positions on Christian philosophy articulated during the debate, but almost all marked by predilections for one figure or another that lead to either ignoring or misrepresenting other philosophers and theologians involved.

6. All translations are those of the author. For similar translations of nearly the same material cited here, cf. Edward H. Flannery's translation of Maritian's *An essay on christian philosophy* (New York: Philosophical Library. 1955), a reworking of a paper delivered at the Université de Louvain in December 1931, that paper itself a reworking of Maritain's contribution to the March 1931 S.f.P meeting.

7. Ramon Fernandez provided an interesting characterization of the ''rationalism'' under discussion ''This is what is happening: Catholic rationalism is waging a lively offensive at the moment when skeptical, or naturalist, rationalism is transforming itself in its depths, so that what the former retains of reason and values corresponds to what the latter reduces to the rank of purely verbal dialectic'' (1932: 903). Two points are important: 1) secular modes of thought that conceive of rationality as necessarily secular have no monopoly on rationalism, or more precisely on rationality and the philosophical effort to maintain, develop and apply it; 2) secular forms of rationalism have, in the course of modernity, given up and lost familiarity with a significant portion of reason's heritage. Skeptical or naturalist rationalism is really a deficient, and in certain respects irrational, type of rationalism.

8. Van Steenberghen, writing about the meeting of the Société Thomiste that addressed issue of Christian philosophy, represents the Neo-Scholastic failure to grasp this point:

> When Mr. Forest speaks of ''using faith in the very constitution of philosophy'' or when he thinks that ''reason and faith can be reconciled solely in the attitude of a Christian philosophy,'' does he not confuse the personal attitude of the Christian philosopher and the method of philosophy? And when Father Motte assures that a philosophy can be Christian in its *fieri*, does he not confuse the psychological becoming of a science and its logical becoming? Christianity can exercise a direct influence on the mind of a philosopher and, from that point on, modify the psychological conditions of its labor; but in the working-out of philosophy itself, everything is reduced to the putting to use of the object, that is, the immediate datum, by means of strictly rational methods. (Van Steenberghen 1934: 551)

References

Blondel, Maurice. 1931. La philosophie chrétienne existe-t-elle comme philososophie? *Bulletin de la Societé française de Philosophie* 31. 86–92.

Blondel, Maurice. 1932. *Le problème de la philosophie catholique*. Paris: Bloud & Gay.

Blondel, Maurice. 1934. Pour la philosophie integrale. *Revue néoscholastique de Philosophie* 37. 49–64.

Blondel, Maurice. 1964. *The letter on apologetics and history and dogma*, Alexander Dru & Illtyd Trethowan (trans.). Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

Bogliolo, Luigi. 1986. *La Filosofia Christiana: Il problema, la storia, la struttura*. Vatican City: Libreria Editrce Vaticana.

De Lubac, Henri. 1992. Retrieving the tradition: On Christian philosophy, Sharon Mollerus & Susan Clements (trans.). *Communio* 19. 478–506.

Deely, John. 2001. *Four ages of understanding: The first postmodern survey of philosophy from ancient times to the turn of the twenty-first century*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Fernandez, Ramon. 1932. Religion et philosophie. *Nouvelle Revue Française* 38. 901–909.

Floucat Yves. 1981. *Pour une philosophie chrétienne: éléments d'un débat fondamental*. Paris: Téqui.

Gilson, Etienne. 1931. La notion de la philosophie chrétienne. *Bulletin de la Societé française de Philosophie* 31. 39–49.

Gilson, Etienne. 1936. *The spirit of medieval philosophy*, A. C. H. Downes (trans.). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Gilson, Etienne. 1963. *The elements of Christian philosophy*. New York: New American Library.

Maritain, Jacques. 1931. Presentation. *Bulletin de la Societé française de Philosophie* 31. 59–72.

Maritain, Jacques. 1997. *Untrammeled approaches*, Bernard Doering (trans.). Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

McInerny, Ralph. 1988. *Art and prudence: Studies in the thought of Jacques Maritain*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.

Owens, Joseph C. Ss. R. 1990. *Towards a Christian philosophy*. Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press.

Simon, Yves. 1934. Philosophie chrétienne: Notes complémentaires. *Études Carmélitaines* (April). 107–119.

Van Steenberghen, Fernand. 1933. La IIe journée d'études de la Société Thomiste et la notion de philosophie chrétienne. *Revue néoscholastique de Philosophie* 35. 539–554.

Van Steenberghen, Fernand. 1951. L'interpretation de la pensée médievale au cours du siècle écoulé. *Revue Philosophique de Louvain* 49. 108–119.

Van Steenberghen, Fernand. 1988. *Etudes philosophiques*. Paris: F.X de Guibert.

Gregory B. Sadler (b. 1970) is a professor at Fayetteville State University ⟨gsadler@uncfsu. edu⟩. His research interests include St. Anselm, Maurice Blondel, Christian philosophy, and 1930s Christian philosophy debates. His recent publications include ''The laws of nature as moral norms in Hobbes' Leviathan'' (2006); ''Situating Lacan's mirror stage in the symbolic order'' (2006); ''St. Anselm's *Fides Quaerens Intellectum* as a model for Christian philosophy'' (2006); and ''Rethinking Christian philosophy: Adriaan Peperzak's contributions'' (2009).