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## **Dialogues between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought**

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***Dialogues Between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought.* By John H. Smith.** Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011. 328 pp. \$35. Softcover. ISBN: 978-0-8014-4927-7.

In *Dialogues between Faith and Reason: The Death and Return of God in Modern German Thought*, John H. Smith highlights the complex, dynamic and complementary relationship between philosophy and religion in over 500 years of predominantly German Protestant intellectual history. Smith's central thesis is that Western Christianity's identification of God with *logos* (as in the Prologue to the Gospel of John) inserted a requirement for critical rational reflection on the divine into the very structure of Christian discourse. The foundational role of *logos*—a term which has multiple valences, but which Smith uses most often as “rationality” or “discourse”—catalyzes, in an intrinsically dialectical manner, both the “death of God” and, simultaneously, repeated and varying forms of divine resurrection. Smith's narrative focuses on the “slippery slope” to atheism (70), or the unintentional undoing of God through *logos* by a cast of thinkers who sought to secure God's position by using the dominant, rationalist mode of the day. The irony, as Smith sees it, is “that this gradual corrosion of traditional religion occurred in large measure thanks to the influence of those who would have saved it” (19). At the same time, this historical narrative concerns the diverse attempts to (re)establish faith through reason.

Smith chooses thinkers who approach the discussion of God as *logos* from a great range of disciplinary perspectives, including, among other fields, philology, natural science, math, ethics, and dialectics. In ten chapters he begins with Luther and Erasmus; then moves to Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz and Pascal; Kant; Hegel; Idealism (Schleiermacher, Schelling, Schopenhauer, Feuerbach); Nietzsche and Heidegger. He ends with three 20<sup>th</sup>-century examples of religious revival: Protestant dialectical theology, Jewish dialogical theologians Franz Rosenzweig and Martin Buber, and Pope Benedict XVI. The author's analytical approach is to reveal the interdisciplinary and transhistorical nature of these philosophical-theological dialogues by bringing disparate figures into conversation. Thus, more contemporary thinkers such as Derrida, Habermas, Horkheimer, Adorno and Asad appear and reappear throughout the conversation.

The author positions his argument against the still widely held “secularization” thesis, whose origins the author ascribes to Weber and Durkheim. According to this view, the failure to fully secularize society can be blamed on a failed or incomplete process of modernization. Instead, Smith identifies his orientation as “postsecular” in nature, where the prefix “post” denotes not a radical rupture with the past, but an invitation to a dialectical approach that treats the categories of faith and reason not as mutually exclusive but as reciprocally related. He aims for an understanding that “sees both the rational core of faith” and the “unfathomable and self-transcending aspect to rationality and language” (19). Given this dialectical approach, Hegel functions as one of the key interlocutors of this story. Smith deems Hegelian philosophy “one of the greatest modern attempts to save (Christian) religion by grounding the identity of *logos* and God in a notion of absolute spirit (*Geist*)” (120). He emphasizes Hegel's approach to religion as one that unites previously entrenched oppositions.

One striking feature of this work is the clear and often conversational manner in which Smith analyzes and interweaves complex subjects. There are moments when his teacher's voice

is audible as when he succinctly distills complex subjects and animates them with analogy. In one such example he discusses how Kant disproved three major proofs for the existence of God leaving him with the moral law: “As in a game of musical chairs, all the places for God to sit firmly have been removed one by one until Kant left but a single remaining seat: ethic, the moral law we as rational and autonomous beings give to ourselves” (153). One occasional tendency of Smith’s dialogic approach is to overstretch to establish links, for instance the parallel he draws between Pope Benedict XVI and the “dialectic of Enlightenment.” It is intriguing to show how both approaches diagnose the problem as stemming from the limits of reason *within* Western modernity, and not the resistance of external entities to conform to our model. Smith explains that many use the latter argument to explain the phenomenon of fundamentalist Islam in contemporary society. Yet to call some of Benedict’s articulations “milder versions of the Frankfurt School” (263) flattens out important differences in orientation. Although specialists might desire more in-depth treatment of specific accounts, the book’s great scope and interdisciplinary ambition make it highly valuable to anyone seeking a global orientation within this difficult subject. Not for beginners, this book nevertheless provides a very useful survey and serves as an important contribution to scholarship in postsecularism. Perhaps most deserving of credit is Smith’s willingness to place faith in lively dialogue with reason, thereby countering the wish of some in German Studies to render religion a historical category whose time is past never to return.

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