

Chris L. Firestone and Nathan A. Jacobs, eds.
The Persistence of the Sacred in Modern Thought.
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The Persistence of the Sacred in Modern Thought is the second collection jointly edited by Chris L. Firestone and Nathan A. Jacobs. The first, the well-received *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Indiana University Press 2008), includes readings of Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* by scholars using a courtroom structure, wherein evidence is given for and against the coherence of Kant's philosophy of religion before the editors ultimately decide in favour of its cogency. This second volume is much broader in that it examines fifteen major European philosophers of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries, but it is similar in that it aims to demonstrate (1) that these specific thinkers did indeed maintain sincere affirmations of God or spiritual beliefs in their writings (though what these beliefs were and to what extent they were held varies) and (2) that most modern critics have wrongly characterized or wrongly assumed these thinkers to be secular, whereas they have actually been "secularized" by the dominant discourse. The contributors are John Cottingham writing on Descartes, A. P. Martinich on Hobbes, Philip Clayton on Spinoza, Richard A. Muller on Robert Boyle, Nicholas Wolterstorff on Locke, Stephen D. Snobelen on Newton, Hubert Bost on Pierre Bayle, Nathan A. Jacobs on Leibniz, Lee Hardy on Hume, Chris L. Firestone on Kant, Yolanda Estes on J. G. Fichte, Jacqueline Mariña on Schleiermacher, Nicholas Adams on Schelling, Peter C. Hodgson on Hegel, and Myron B. Penner on Kierkegaard.

The authors take different approaches to establishing the sincerity—or at least the existence—of these philosophers' theological beliefs. Some interact with the claims of one particular "secularizing" critic while others address cultural assumptions of secularism (and one, Penner, challenges the whole notion of secularism by drawing attention to the wide semantic field of the term "secular"). Some authors claim that mistaken critical assumptions arise out of misreadings of Enlightenment thought, language, or rhetoric while others identify an almost nefarious attempt of critics lacking theological depth to secularize earlier thinkers in order to redeem them from the taint of antiquated, anti-intellectual religious belief. Some insist that God is actually central to the thought of some of these philosophers while others identify them as simply mistaken for atheists if they maintained theologically unorthodox beliefs. As Firestone and Jacobs admit, although their goal is to look at "the role of God in the work of major thinkers in modernity", the "philosophers of this period are, by and large, not orthodox theists; they are freethinkers emancipated by an age no longer tethered to the authority of church and state" (1). Yet the essays insist that none of the fifteen philosophers examined are atheists and that the distorted assumption that they are arises from negative polemical characterizations from opponents, misunderstood labels from the past, agenda-driven revisionist histories, careless readings of primary texts, or the split between philosophy and theology encouraged by the compartmentalized thinking of contemporary academics, whose patterns of thought are different from those of the modern philosophers who could write philosophy without abandoning personal faith (12–13). Frankly, as is true in most edited collections, the chapters are not uniformly successful, but the collection as a whole is very effective in questioning the assumptions of

secularism that are typified in the works of Leo Strauss. Even if readers are not always fully persuaded of the sincere beliefs for which these authors argue, the argument made by this volume is a convincing corrective to unbalanced, secularizing representations of modern philosophers, and the collection will appeal to professional academics and students of philosophy, theological studies, and intellectual history.

The presupposition behind the secularization charge is that scholars who perpetrate it do so because of reading practices that privilege the contemporary secular mindset, treat sincere theological belief as tainted, and believe an accurate reading of these texts must be against the grain to identify the philosophers' hidden secular opinions that could not be openly announced in the dark days of a censoring Christian society. The main debate offered by these essays is thus one of how to read, for the authors of this volume attribute the incorrect critical assumptions and inadequate classroom instruction surrounding these philosophers to the rough caricatures offered by poor scholarship. Martinich points out how divergent such assumptions are from reality: "Because Hobbes's actual views are so different from the views attributed to him, we need to distinguish between Hobbes's actual views and Hobbism, the distorted set of doctrines that were attributed to him from at least the Restoration onwards" (43). Snobelen insists that "The myth of Newton's clockwork universe is one of the most persistent and pervasive myths in the history of science" (149). Hodgson reiterates that these widespread reading practices do violence to the work of these philosophers in the service of making it palatable to fashionable secular thought: "Theology is identified with metaphysics, or, more precisely, precritical metaphysics. It is simply passé. There is no need to bother with Hegel's philosophy of religion, which would be like beating a dead horse... In this way, Hegel can be made intelligible to a secularist mentality" (352). As Clayton argues in his persuasive account of Spinoza, part of the remedy is for critics to widen their points of comparison before labelling a thinker as secular. This comparison may well be true if Spinoza or others are measured against the Christian creeds or Jewish orthodoxy, but the traditions that feed the philosophy of religion establish a much broader frame of reference that includes the "sophisticated philosophical reflection on the nature of God" from "the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic *philosophers*—those influenced by Aristotle, by Neoplatonism, and by the Kabbalistic tradition, just to name a few examples" that offer "lines of continuity and influence [that] emerge rather more vividly" (81).

Another remedy is to tackle head on the question of how to read the primary texts of these philosophers correctly, and, certainly, one of the most crucial common threads traced by the essays is that of language and hermeneutics. In his essay, Penner in part treats Kierkegaard's critics who "see him as a sort of literary ironist whose goal is to defer endlessly the advancement of any positive philosophical position" (372–373), a claim that Penner downplays in his discussion of the rhetoric of "indirect communication" used by Kierkegaard (377–379). Hardy is even more explicit when he outlines his methodology: "Throughout this reading of Hume on religion, I will keep to Hume's professed position, taking him at his written word... I will not apply the magic wand of irony to Hume's positive statements about religion in order to make apparent conflicts in the text simply disappear... I have thereby increased the burden of proof for those who propose to read Hume as a dissimulator in religious matters" (253–254). One of the most compelling essays is by Wolterstorff, who treats the role of God in Locke's philosophy by directly disagreeing with the claim made by Thomas L. Pangle in his *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism: The Moral Vision of the American Founders and the Philosophy of Locke* (1988)

that Locke was an esoteric writer. Wolterstorff challenges Pangle by effectively disputing his characterization of Locke's hermeneutic strategy. Pangle's idea is that "Locke overtly espoused what we now know as liberal Christianity" but really believed in "a new and *very* liberal, un-Christian and even un-deist outlook" that could be decoded only by those who could understand "the clues that he scattered about and arrive at his true view, a view probably best described as atheistic libertarianism" hidden in his "covert, esoteric teaching" (115). Wolterstorff, however, convincingly argues the opposite by reading Locke's metaphoric cluster of "daylight", "darkness", and "twilight" to show the role of reason and divine revelation in Locke's thought.

Several of the authors further claim that the contemporary mindset has such difficulty in understanding the place of God for these earlier philosophers because the work of the Enlightenment was so revolutionary that even the philosophers themselves struggled to think in new ways and to write in new terms. For example, Estes's excellent essay on the still underestimated J. G. Fichte traces his work on morality, transcendentalism, and *Dasein*. She explains that "Finding the proper label for Fichte's religious views is problematic, for the most common titles (*atheist*, *theist*, or even *deist*) all carry connotations contrary to his position" (312). Similarly, a crucial point made by Adams is that some of these thinkers were attempting "to repair a philosophy that has inadequate accounts of God and inadequate accounts of nature, and which thus fails to give persuasive or sufficiently rich accounts of human freedom", meaning that the task of the Enlightenment-era philosopher was "the attempt to develop a new genre of philosophical writing" (345). Certainly, as these arguments about hermeneutics show, the authors of *The Persistence of the Sacred in Modern Thought* make a useful and original contribution by correcting wilful or innocent misunderstandings of the role of God in modern philosophy and by pointing to the need for contemporary scholars to be more aware of their own historical and cultural presuppositions in approaching texts from the past.

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