

BOOK REVIEW

The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History by Michael Rosen
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Michael Rosen's *The Shadow of God* is a bold retelling of secularization in the West. A work of philosophical history, the book retraces the potent ideological conflicts that brought about what Rosen calls the "passage from heaven to history." Across nine densely packed chapters, *The Shadow of God* explores modernity's theistic inheritance: beginning with a critical investigation into the powerful though self-undermining attempts, culminating in Kant, to reconcile religion with reason and ending with an examination of the lingering shadow that God, though presumably "dead," casts upon secular efforts, from Hegel onwards, to meet the needs to which religion once responded.

Though this fateful historical process was initiated, on Rosen's reading, by the German Idealists, the tectonic shifts that occurred during the period between Kant and Hegel would come to have far-reaching consequences for the history of Western culture. Thus, the story Rosen tells, which he admits reads like "a kind of mystery tour" through some of the densest philosophical material ever written, ultimately aims to illumine the profound extent to which our past and present have been shaped by religious forms of thought that live on.

In chapter 1, Rosen situates his approach to secularization amidst the rich body of scholarly literature on the topic. Secularization is, for him, neither an abrupt shift from one social world to another (à la Max Weber, Allan Bloom, and Steven Pinker) nor a simple continuation of religion in a translated form (à la Carl Becker and Carl Schmitt). Following Nietzsche, Rosen maintains that secularization is both continuous and discontinuous with what came before: while things have certainly changed ("God is dead"), a vestige of religion remains (God's "shadow"). Crucially, this shadow of God, which refers to ideas and practices that resemble traditional religion even if they are not recognized as religious, has been remarkably hard to vanquish. Even, perhaps especially, those who try most ardently to escape it are unwittingly engulfed by it.

In chapter 2, Rosen summarizes and defends his book's methodology and lays the groundwork for his religious reading of Kant. Methodologically, Rosen's approach to secularization presupposes a Hegelian-inspired idealist approach to the role of ideas in society and to philosophy in general. Ideologies, on his view, are not reducible to epiphenomena that simply mirror underlying economic processes, as Marx famously claimed, nor are they instruments by which ruling classes prop up social orders that would otherwise be unacceptable to a significant number of a society's members. Such "interests-based" accounts of ideas in society are unpersuasive, Rosen claims, because

they are hard-pressed to explain how it is that people come to accept ideas that (apparently) go against their own interests.

Instead, Rosen argues that ideologies, which can fruitfully be examined “from the inside,” offer people ways of legitimating the world and their place in it. They are, in short, ways of giving existence meaning, “forms of reconciliation” that, even when violent and destructive, cannot be abandoned without loss. Philosophies, then, are forms of life (*Lebensformen*) that sustain themselves by resolving the conflicts and inconsistencies that invariably arise between two or more of our passionately held commitments (*doxai*). Which *doxai* remain “live options,” and which do not, is ultimately decided by the outcome of such resolutions. Consequently, secularization, for Rosen, resulted from the ambitious attempts (given renewed force during the Enlightenment) to combine the *doxa* of faith with that of an increasingly corrosive reason—a venture that would, in time, cause monotheism enormous difficulties.

Next, Rosen devotes chapters 3 through 5 to constructing his religious reading of Kant and to challenging the widely held belief, propagated by Kant’s contemporary defenders and detractors alike, that Kant was at bottom a secular thinker. Taking his cue, once again, from Nietzsche, Rosen locates Kantian religion under the rubric of “Socratism.” In Nietzsche’s terminology, Socratism, which once displaced Apollonianism and Dionysianism as the two ideologies by which the Greeks came to terms with death and misery, responds to suffering not through the aesthetic contemplation of beauty or the intoxication of drugs, dance, and war, but rather by making the world intelligible—by giving suffering meaning. On Rosen’s view, Kant was a proponent of Socratism inasmuch as he sought to resolve, in Christianity’s favor, two longstanding problems on the borderline of philosophy and theology: the problem of theodicy and the Euthyphro dilemma. In his quest for a solution to both, Kant reached two conclusions: first, that the ultimate goodness of the world consists not in happiness but in human freedom and the possibility it creates for responsible human agency, and that even though humans frequently use their freedom to do evil, an uncompromising divine retributivism will ensure that the balance of justice is finally restored; and, second, that morality is neither a human creation nor a divine one, but something that connects God and humanity in a univocal order of justification. Thus, in stark contrast to Kantian ethicists like John Rawls, Onora O’Neill, and Christine Korsgaard, Rosen contends that various aspects of Kant’s ethical thinking—most notably, his preoccupation with the existence of a noumenal self that possesses transcendental freedom—make sense only in light of these two fundamental religious commitments.

Rosen also makes the case in these chapters that Kant was a “moral unanimist” who believed that moral knowledge—which is accessible to every single human being by means of “common human reason” (*die gemeine Menschenvernunft*)—consists not in the application of a distinctive kind of moral reasoning (the so-called “decision procedure for ethics”) but in the intuition of a distinctive kind of transcendent moral value (i.e., respect for humanity in our persons). In short, Kant emerges, on Rosen’s reading, as a profoundly religious thinker who shares a host of assumptions not with his secular descendants but with his premodern predecessors.

Chapter 6 begins to narrate how a world more approximate to our own—a world identifiably secular, though still conditioned by religion—started to dawn. According to Rosen, one feature of traditional religion has cast the longest shadow upon our secular present and is centrally important for appreciating our proximity to, but also

our distance from, the religious past: namely, the belief in immortality. While, as we have seen, Kant's conception of retributive justice led him to believe in a Last Judgment and afterlife, it was also Kant's conviction that humans ought to create within history a universal republic based on the laws of morality (*Moralität*). Initially, this Kantian political ideal, wherein a cosmopolitan humanity collectively strives to bring about a just world, served as a complement to the traditional doctrine of personal immortality. However, German thinkers of the period (notably Herder, Schiller, Fichte, and Hegel)—inspired by Kant, but also in opposition to him—developed a modern conception of “historical immortality” that soon replaced belief in personal immortality altogether. Above all, it was Hegel, Rosen claims, who made a decisive break with heaven by confining himself exclusively to a historical conception of immortality, in which the nation and its ethical order (*Sittlichkeit*) become the collective entity in relation to which humans transcend their individuality through absorption into the collective identity, culminating in the intoxication of military self-sacrifice to the state.

In chapters 7 and 8, Rosen uses his interpretation of Kant to explore why a sense of existential loneliness, so eloquently described by Iris Murdoch, haunts the modern world. Murdoch and others attribute our modern malaise to effects deriving from Kant's “godless voluntarism.” But if Rosen's reading of Kant is correct, this attribution is erroneous: Kant was neither a godless thinker nor did he believe that values were the creation of the human will. Our modern sense of loss is traceable, Rosen contends, not to Kant's god-denying voluntarism, but rather to his Socratic Christianity, which, in its uncompromising campaign against the “alienation of arbitrariness,” ultimately succumbed to the “alienation of impersonality.” By excising, in the name of autonomy, everything capricious from God and by making all contingent characteristics ancillary to the human moral agent, Kant turned God into little more than an impersonal executor of justice and the human into a mere nodal point essentially devoid of empirical qualities. In Kant, then, the disenchanting force of Socratic reason produced knowledge that has left us with the sense that our world is fundamentally devoid of love. Subsequent modern thinkers who carried out their own projects of reconciliation (particularly Hegel and his three great nineteenth-century successors, Kierkegaard, Marx, and Nietzsche) found themselves caught between these two forms of alienation—a predicament that is still very much with us.

The book's final chapter explores how the idea of historical immortality has embedded itself as a background assumption (*doxa*) in large parts of Western culture, surfacing in a variety of disparate figures and movements: for instance, in Denis Diderot's reflections on Posterity; in the anti-revolutionary politics of Edmund Burke; amongst the atheist revolutionaries of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marxism; in the anti-colonial thought of Frantz Fanon; and within Nazism, which centers on an exclusionary and violent ideology of race as the target of supra-individual identification. All such iterations of historical immortality are, for Rosen, specters of God's shadow that fill the void left by traditional religion—a reminder that the project of reconciliation will neither simply “wither away” with a decline in religious faith nor progressively improve with the passage of time.

To be sure, Rosen interjects, traditional religion has certainly not faded away, but rather lives on in a variety of forms: in a Socratic form, for instance, through Christian apologetics; in a post-Socratic form, since Schleiermacher, through the conviction that

religious experience is located beyond the sphere of objective reasoning entirely; and even in an anti-Socratic form, through religious fundamentalisms that are deeply mistrustful of, and even demonize, outsiders.

In the end, Rosen concludes, we must all find our way to a set of *doxai*, be they religious or secular, that we can inhabit with some degree of comfort—a venture as tenuous as it is unavoidable. Only let us not delude ourselves, he cautions, into thinking that our particular set of *doxai* are the only right ones or that they rest on the firm foundation of objective moral truth allied to developing human reason.

Having examined at great length the structure and content of Rosen's argument, let me briefly speak to its merits before ending with a lingering question that the book prompts theologians to ask but does not help us answer.

By any reasonable standard of evaluation, Rosen's book is simply exceptional. It is, for one, meticulously well-researched and demonstrates a breathtaking facility in the literature it takes up. Rosen's prose, moreover, is something to behold—as rigorous as it is humorous. Not to mention the book's brilliant and much-needed reinterpretation of Kant, arguably its greatest strength, which overturns a number of reigning orthodoxies within Kant scholarship and opens up an entirely new set of questions about the nature and scope of secularization in the West. Methodologically speaking, Rosen's book also sheds light on the limitations of sociological approaches to history and makes a strong case for the importance of intellectual history. Closely related, his dialectical conception of philosophy as critical reflection on our *doxai* illumines not only the motivations that must have lain behind the ambitious critical projects of a Kant or a Hegel, but also enables us to see with fresh eyes the broader conflicts embedded in our contemporary culture. Finally, theologians—especially political theologians—will no doubt feel vindicated by Rosen's conviction that everything, even and especially secularization, should be seen from a religious point of view.

That being said, theologians who reckon with Rosen's arguments are confronted, it seems to me, with the following unanswered question. Granting that secularization consists in the proliferation of various shadows of a no-longer-believed-in deity, how are those who *do* believe, or who at least try to believe, in this deity to go about deciphering which shadows are genuine “secular parables” (to use Barth's phrase) and which are idolatrous counterfeits?

For Rosen, it would appear, each iteration of historical immortality—everything from Hegel's nationalist militarism, to George Eliot's progressive humanitarianism, to Nazism's ideology of Aryan racial supremacy—can justly call itself a shadow of God inasmuch as it fills the void left by traditional religion. Yet I suspect that theologians will want a great deal more evaluative criteria for discerning the secular spirits, so to speak, than Rosen is willing to give us. Compare Rosen's book, in this respect, to another magisterial treatment of secularization, Eugene McCarraher's *Enchantments of Mammon* (2019), which argues that capitalism is the reigning religion of modernity (another “shadow of God,” to use Rosen's phrase). While McCarraher's and Rosen's arguments are deceptively similar, McCarraher goes further than Rosen by arguing that mammon is not merely enchanted (i.e., a stand-in for religion) but also fundamentally *misenchanted* (i.e., a perversion or parody of our longing for a sacramental way of being in the world). Rosen, by contrast, makes no such strong evaluative judgments—not even upon *doxai* that he finds “morally repulsive” (307).

While Rosen demonstrates with breathtaking perspicuity that the world is still full of gods and shadows of gods that beckon to be worshipped, he has left us to our own devices when choosing this day whom we will serve. To the extent that theologians will want to engage in idolatry critique—a reflection, no doubt, of our own unique set of *doxa*—we will have to go further.

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