

SANTIAGO ZABALA
ICREA Research Professor at the University of Barcelona

A review of Frederiek Depoortere, *The Death of God: An Investigation into the History of the Western Concept of God*. London/New York: T&T Clark Theology, 2008. 207 + xi pp. \$130. ISBN: 0567032728.

Frederick Depoortere presents *The Death of God* as an attempt to “follow Martin Heidegger and Alain Badiou in taking Friedrich Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God seriously” (5). His investigation does not venture into the consequences of this problem, as these thinkers did, but rather into its origin. This is certainly also a way to take seriously the concern of Heidegger, Badiou, and others over Nietzsche’s proclamation, but it does not suggest any “alternatives to the dilemma of empty transcendence or no transcendence at all” (viii), as the author seems to be looking for. This is something Depoortere has confronted in his previous studies (*Christ in Postmodern Philosophy* [2009] and *Badiou and Theology* [2010]), and this book seems to work as their historical survey or preamble.

Historical preambles are necessary today given the number of philosophers who respond to the “return of religion” in postmodernity because they invite students to recognize its historical significance and provide a reference for scholars. However, if Depoortere has circumscribed his study to “the question of when, why and how we have lost God” (vii), it is not simply to provide us with historical references but rather because contemporary philosophers only offer “unfruitful” solutions to the problem of transcendence “from a Christian-theological perspective” (vii). These philosophers are rapidly dividing into two separate groups, on the one hand, John Caputo, Richard Kearney, and Merold Westphal, and on the other, Gianni Vattimo and Slavoj Žižek. While investigations from the first group end up “with an empty transcendence, a formal structure without content,” the second group is left “with a complete denial of transcendence” (vii). Even though in the brief conclusion Depoortere seems to favor Badiou’s interpretation of the death of God over other philosophers, these philosophers together with many theologians of the death of God (as Thomas J. Altizer, Harvey Cox, and Gabriel Vahanian) are barely cited in the five chapters that constitute the core of the text. Depoortere has taken a risk in omitting these thinkers because his own guiding question (“of when, why and how we have lost God”) is actually a consequence of their contributions, which cannot be left aside. However, my greatest concern is not this omission but rather the explicit absence of hermeneutics throughout the book, that is, the philosophy of interpretation to the creation of which Martin Luther, Nietzsche, and Heidegger all contributed. The death of God could not have

taken place without the dissolution of truth in hermeneutics, which is the end of metaphysics. As an entrée to this text, in the remaining space of this brief review, I will suggest how these chapters could work as historical preambles to hermeneutics in relation to the death of God.

Chapters 4 and 5 (“Modern Science and the Disappearance of God from Western Culture” and “Luther, Hegel and the Death of God”) present a fundamental moment in the history of hermeneutic philosophy, that is, the vulnerability of truth. Such vulnerability took place through the Protestant reformers’ emphasis on the “literal meaning of Scripture” (149). It is this literalism, explains Depoortere, that made “the authority of the Bible vulnerable to criticism by historical and scientific research once it turned out that the Bible is neither historically accurate nor in harmony with the discoveries of modern science” (149). Although Luther’s “Ninety-Five Theses” (1517) and translation of the Bible into German (1534) were directed toward restoring Christianity’s original essence, such operations could not take place without challenging the hegemony of the Catholic Church’s magisterial establishment of the so-called rightful interpreters. Even though the “expression ‘God is dead’ does not occur in Luther’s published hymns”, his insistence that the literal meaning of the Bible contains its own proper spiritual message (which may be interpreted by each believer) inevitably also implies God’s death (156).

Chapter 1 (“Nietzsche’s Proclamation of the Death of God Revisited”) together with chapters 2 and 3 (“Elements from the History of the Western Concept of God from its Greek Origins Until the Fourteenth Century” and “Descartes, Divine Omnipotence, and the Theological Origins of Modernity”) could be read as preambles to Nietzsche and Heidegger’s ontological hermeneutics. Depoortere dismisses the distinction between the “God of the philosophers” and the “Christian God” in order to unify under the category of the “God of Western theism” the metaphysical nature of theology that Nietzsche and Heidegger pointed out in their writings. This is probably why the author, through an analysis of Plato, Descartes, and other classics, traces back the “God of Western theism” not only to the first Greek philosophers’ search “for the ultimate ground of all that is” (25) but also to the “relation between the death of God and modern science” (122). These are not only metaphysical determinations but also concepts through which Nietzsche and Heidegger shook and destroyed metaphysics.

Depoortere’s text, more than a simple investigation into the history of the Western concept of God, is an invitation to acknowledge how the “death of God” in the thought of Luther, Nietzsche, and others is a consequence of hermeneutics rather than simple interpretation.

©Santiago Zabala.

Zabala, Santiago. “A Review of Frederiek Depoortere’s *The Death of God: An Investigation into the History of the Western Concept of God*,” in *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 11 no. 2 (Spring 2011): 238-239.