

*Faith Beyond Reason*, by C. Stephen Evans

reviewed by [William Greenway](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

The mall food court tables are close together. You can't help but overhear the two teens at the next table. She says gently but firmly, "Thanks, but I don't think so, I'm just not interested in you that way." His face melts. You're sure he's watched quietly from afar and has been dreaming of this moment for months. The poor girl is sympathetic: "Jeff, I think you're a really neat guy, but . . ." He interrupts, desperate, and to your horror begins to argue: "Jennifer, if only you got to know me I think maybe you would like me that way. I'm really fun to . . ." It's unbearable. You quietly gather your bags and walk away.

Sometimes a good argument can clear away barriers that keep love from blooming. But argue someone into love? That's a painful category mistake. It's just not how love works.

It's not how faith works either. The problem with arguments for the existence of God is not that they are unsuccessful, but that they are confused. Precisely understood, for instance, Descartes did not believe in God. God was not the subject of his faith. God was a conclusion of his arguments, an object of Descartes's knowledge. Descartes articulated a relation to God not in faith through grace, but in knowledge through reason--a profound spiritual confusion.

Reason can remove barriers, enhance understanding, even help convince us to open ourselves to the witness of scripture, Christian proclamation and the leading of the Spirit. But the result of arguments for the existence of God can never be faith. Christian faith results not from our reasoning, but from our encounter with the living God. This is not because reason falls short, but because faith is a species of love, not of knowledge. As Kierkegaard insisted, faith is a passion.

C. Stephen Evans, professor of philosophy at Calvin College and accomplished Kierkegaard scholar, affirms Kierkegaard's postmodern insight that faith is a passion. But he dedicates his book not to this insight, but to defending "responsible fideism." Through analyses of William James, Alvin Plantinga, Aquinas, Kant and Kierkegaard, Evans argues that responsible fideists employ reason to conclude that reason is

limited. In this way, they reasonably establish space for faith beyond reason. In short, Evans's responsible fideist is never irrational where faith falls within the bounds of reason; is against reason which pridefully denies that any truths might lie beyond its grasp; and affirms truths (e.g., the Word became flesh, God is triune) that extend beyond reason.

*Faith Beyond Reason* very nicely presents a modern understanding of the relation of faith and reason. What the book does not do--though one suspects that Evans's deepest instincts lure him in this direction--is conduct a robust investigation into the full radicality of Kierkegaard's postmodern insight that faith is a passion. This insight definitively distinguishes Kierkegaard from Aquinas, Kant, James and Plantinga, but Evans's un-Kierkegaardian interest in defending fideism (a quintessentially modern epistemological category) keeps him from so distinguishing Kierkegaard's understanding. This short-circuits even the chapters on Kierkegaard--though they percolate with unrealized potential (and Evans begins to realize this potential in his highly suggestive concluding chapters on evil and revelation).

The subtle difficulty permeating Evans's promising analysis is most obvious in his failure to reject outright attempts to argue for the existence of God. Here he joins most modern Christian philosophers in failing squarely to face the fact that the most profound threat to Christian faith since the Enlightenment has not been the ridicule of the philosophes or the scepticism of Hume, but theistic proofs and Christians who know God exists.

Modern Christian philosophers, insofar as they hope that we can build a rational tower toward God, foster a return to Babel. As Kierkegaard realized, to mitigate that ambition by acknowledging that reason cannot quite reach the triune God is insufficient. The devastating category mistake endures. God once derailed human hubris by scattering language into multiple tongues. In our age, the hubris has been our trust in reason. The scattering is called incommensurability. Furious tower-builders shriek "relativism," but the faithful rejoice. For the destruction of reason and onto-theology leaves Christian faith and theology unscathed; it only tears down a tower which tempts us away from faith.

Muted passion courses through Evans's book. Indeed, it is precisely this passion--and the resulting frequent flashes of creative insight--that makes the work frustrating, for his lingering modern attachments keep Evans from realizing the full promise of a Kierkegaardian account. Once one recognizes that faith is a species not of knowledge but of love, one will engage the formidable task of describing not a faith

which extends beyond reason along the same continuum, but a faith which lies beside reason along another order of understanding.