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Smith, THE ARGUMENT TO THE OTHER

Erratum

bookreview

attempted to set out a philosophically clear statement of the relation between relativism and truth. That, of course, was really Troeltsch's task and one which occupied him and the *religionsgeschichtliche Schule* for some time and without notable success. But it would have been interesting to see Rubanowice wrestle more thoroughly with the matter.

Troeltsch's *religionsgeschichtliche* method and his notion of polymorphous truth carry over into his philosophy of history. There is, he claimed, "not merely *one logic* of human thinking, but *various logics*." Again, this is an interesting claim but one which needs careful philosophic analysis.

The final chapter of this work traces Troeltsch's life in politics from 1914 to 1923. It shows an intellectual torn by his complicated view of history and religion and by his Germanness.

A final epilogue rejects the conventional judgment that Troeltsch failed to resolve the crisis of values he had uncovered. Rubanowice believes that the answer is ambiguous. That Troeltsch was an important thinker Rubanowice quite rightly leaves in no doubt. I would quarrel with ranking Troeltsch beside Hegel, but that he belongs with Ritschl and Schleiermacher seems quite right.

The book has a superb selected bibliography. Some might argue that 820 footnotes in a 138-page volume are a bit much. However, intellectual historians, while often not given to much philosophic analysis, are known for their meticulousness. This book is a fine and meticulous intellectual history of a complicated theologian who profoundly displayed the nature of the crises we live with yet.

The Argument To The Other: Reason Beyond Reason in the Thought of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas, by **Steven G. Smith**. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983. Pp. 307. \$20.95.

Reviewed by EUGENE THOMAS LONG, University of South Carolina.

This comparative study of Karl Barth and Emmanuel Levinas was the author's dissertation directed by William Poteat at Duke University. Although there is no evidence that either Barth or Levinas was influenced by the other, and although Barth appeals primarily to the Christian faith and Levinas to phenomenology and the Jewish faith, Smith argues that they share in common a preoccupation with transcendence or the Other which changes the ground rules for thinking and speaking of God, and hence for philosophy and theology. For Karl Barth the Other is the transcendent God of Biblical Christian faith whose infinite qualitative difference from man and the world makes impossible any analogy in human experience. For Levinas the Other is the other person, ultimately the other person in his nearness to God, but this Other is also said to be beyond the

reach of efforts to think conceptually. Although the Other is not identified in the same way by Barth and Levinas, each is said to employ what Smith calls an argument to the Other. In this argument it is the Other who justifies, not we. From this point of view our way of thinking and speaking about ultimate reality is radically transformed.

Smith traces Barth's development of this argument between 1909-1961 and 1961-1975. Impressed by Kierkegaard's assertion of the infinite qualitative difference between God and man, Barth from *First Romans* forward begins to overthrow the tradition of his teacher, Wilhelm Hermann. True knowledge of God, Barth argued on New Testament grounds, is beyond experience and conceptualization. God can be spoken of only as wholly other and the only warrant for doing so is his revelation in Jesus Christ. This concept of the wholly other, however, is not a doctrine of God. It is a statement of the proper relation of theology to God. Theology exists in total dependence on the grace of God; all religious givens are rejected. If, however, the possibility of thinking of God from within human experience and thinking is rejected and if God stands in judgment on all human speech calling it into question, one needs to ask whether or not it makes sense to speak of God at all. To this question Barth answers that revelation has to create the contact point in man. *Analogia entis* is replaced by *analogia fidei*. God preserves his otherness through the incommensurability of his Word with all human words and systems of thought. In Barth's later work it is man's witness to the revelation of God's Word in the Bible as preached which leads him from a merely negative to a more positive statement of the otherness of God.

Levinas, early influenced by Husserl and Heidegger, found in *Being and Time* a new appreciation for the Biblical view of man as historical and creaturely. Becoming convinced, however, of the failure of modern society as a community of free and rational wills, he began to develop a philosophy of transcendence which takes him beyond experience and subjectivity in the western tradition, as he understands them. He accepted Heidegger's critique of rationalist views of the freedom of reason and consciousness from history but turned Heidegger's question of the Being of human existence upside down. Instead of asking about the Being of human existence, Levinas focuses on what it means to say that there are beings in Being. This question was motivated by ethical considerations and by what he considered to be the breakdown of western morality. The otherness of the other person becomes central for Levinas' thought and religion comes to be understood as a relation with a person as an end in himself. Since the Other is held to be prior to freedom and thought the foundation of morality cannot be found in the theoretical, practical or ethical dimensions of consciousness. The moral demand of the Other is prior to all conscious meaning. Thought and action presuppose the Other. In his later work the absoluteness of the Other becomes

more and more the focus of Levinas' thought, and its connection with God becomes a central issue. Descartes' idea of the infinite becomes important in this development, for Descartes had himself called the ego into question by the priority assigned to the infinite. Descartes does not arrive at the infinite, argues Levinas, by negating the imperfections of existence. Rather the idea of the Other makes its claim on the one who has it, calling into question his efforts to think it from within the limits of his own subjectivity. This approach comes to full expression in *Otherwise than Being* published in 1974. God is now understood to confer otherness on the other person. The other person and his neighbor now stand before me designated by God as making a moral claim on my way of being. The human agent is transformed from the thinking subject to one who is subject to the moral claims placed upon him. To speak of god is to speak of human relations. Outside the ethical, it seems, God remains beyond all comprehension.

In comparing Barth and Levinas, Smith argues that Barth's idea of God and Levinas' idea of the Other both exclude the possibility of talking about God as Subject, Being or History. The transcendent Other takes the initiative and in our thinking and speaking we are bound to it. Language becomes the vehicle of this address where language is understood as obedience to, listening to the Other. Language in this sense is not conceptualization. It appears to be some kind of performance or witnessing through which the Other speaks. Since the referent of this language remains beyond knowledge, language of the Other appears to invite the hearer to stand open to the Other's revelation. There is nothing in human experience, however, to which we may appeal to thematize and justify our Talk of God. Smith's discussion of the language issue is not detailed enough for me to understand exactly what is being said here. It appears, however, that in some sense the Other speaks in language to which we can only witness in obedience and through our speaking invite others to do the same.

Smith is not of course arguing that Barth and Levinas are proceeding in the same way. Barth's conception of the Other is tied to the Church, the Bible and first century man whereas Levinas' Other is removed from all fixed reference points. Levinas writes as a phenomenologist and presents us with something other than a natural or revealed theology in the usual sense of those terms. Barth writes as a Christian theologian where the otherness of God is made concrete in the revelation in Jesus Christ. For Levinas the relation between man and man is the only basis for conversation of God. What they do share, according to Smith, is the idea of the Other which calls the thinker into question, demands obedience and stands apart from efforts to construe its content.

Smith has provided his readers with a detailed study of the texts showing Barth's and Levinas' development towards their mature ideas of the Other and its implications for thinking and speaking of God. Just because he has remained

so close to the texts and does little to place the discussion in the context of other efforts to deal with thinking and speaking of God, this is a difficult volume for persons who have not studied Barth and Levinas in detail. For persons, however, who are students of these two men the tracing of their development and the placing of their texts in historical context should be an important contribution. Although Smith is obviously a sympathetic interpreter of what he calls the argument to the Other, in this volume he does not respond critically to the argument. For myself, while I can understand why in the context of World War II and the holocaust and the apparent failure of human moral systems one would want to identify with the position represented by Barth and Levinas, I believe that much is lost if this position is taken as a model for responding to issues relating to knowledge and talk of God. But for now I must leave this merely as an assertion.