

CHRISTOPHER D. RODKEY
Drew University

APPROACHES TO AUSCHWITZ

A profile of Richard L. Rubenstein and John K. Roth, *Approaches to Auschwitz: The Holocaust and Its Legacy*. Revised edition. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2003. 510pp. \$29.29 (paper).

IN ITS NEW, EXPANDED, AND UPDATED EDITION, Richard Rubenstein and John Roth's *Approaches to Auschwitz* remains the unparalleled standard resource for the important (though curious) discipline of holocaust studies. In the preface, the authors claim that the book "is designed especially for undergraduate teaching" in length and scope (x). Pedagogically, the text is less a historical representation of the Nazi *Shoah* than a presentation of the idea of the Holocaust in theological, historical, critical, and communal terms. The new edition of *Approaches to Auschwitz* is an impressive achievement on every account. It deserves to be used widely in undergraduate and seminary classrooms.

What readers of the *Journal of Cultural and Religious Theory* will find most compelling is the penultimate chapter, titled "God and History: Philosophical and Religious Responses to the Holocaust." Here the authors spend a fair amount of time analyzing several "approaches to Auschwitz," including a terrific discussion of two overlooked figures, Paul van Buren and Ignaz Maybaum, a discussion which sets the reader up to consider Rubenstein's own theology as a balanced "third way."

At first this methodology seems to be a bit self-serving or strangely coincidental; but in this reading of the new edition, I personally hoped to gain insight into Rubenstein's current thinking on the subject. And the authors deliver this with detail, committing approximately twenty pages of Rubenstein, where Rubenstein either speaks in the third person about himself or else Roth speaks for Rubenstein.

Describing himself as a "conservative," Rubenstein describes the personal and academic experiences he went through as a young scholar and rabbi which led

him to conclude that the Jewish “God of History” must be denied for its perceived involvement in the Holocaust and that Judaism must therefore be challenged to *think God* in new ways today. Biblical theologies of covenant and election, Rubenstein says, are destructive theologies that lead only to a dead-end or holocaust-as-sacrifice mentality (353). The ‘death of God,’ however, is a more enduring symbol. Although God is not dead for Rubenstein, he says that today’s society “lives in the death of God,” which is to say “that the thread uniting God and man, heaven and earth, has been broken.” Maintaining that he is by no means an atheist, his description of God is part Thomas J. J. Altizer and part Sri Aurobindo Ghose: he writes, “the Divine Life is the Absolute and ... never static.” (343). Such *God-thinking*, the authors contend, can lead one to a non-violent fundamental practical theology.

In judging whether *Approaches to Auschwitz* does what it set out to do—namely, to be a primary resource for an undergraduate classroom—my response is heavily favorable, with a few reservations. First, Rubenstein’s own positions, which are posited near the end of the text, may be misread by students, who are not offered the balanced criticism that is given to other theorists. For example, the authors address Zachary Braiterman’s criticism of Rubenstein in a disappointing two-sentence critique. Beyond this, Rubenstein is given a bit of an unfair advantage in the debate by co-writing the book where he presents himself as the prioritized voice.

Second, while Rubenstein and Roth do discuss Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s response to the Holocaust, I was disappointed that an opportunity to discuss the life, death, and ecclesial afterlife of Edith Stein (*aka* St. Theresa Benedicta of the Cross) was entirely missed. The politics of Stein’s Roman Catholic reputation and philosophical influence would surely invite undergraduate interest and debate. The excellent film, *The Seventh Chamber of Edith Stein*, was also not mentioned in the textbook’s chapter on film responses to the holocaust.

Third, in the text’s discussion of popular culture, the authors offer a nod to so-called “low” culture by mentioning Art Spiegelman’s comic book/sequential art masterpiece, *Maus*, but other ‘low’ forms of culture are not discussed. One cannot read, for example, Will Eisner’s graphic novel, *A Contract With God*, or Marvel Comics’ *God Loves, Man Kills* (the basis for the Holocaust-influenced blockbuster film, *The X-Men*) without noticing the textual complexity that comic books bring to the discussion of genocide and holocaust studies. Further fruitful discussions which undergraduates would connect with well could be obtained from even a brief discussion of popular music and video games.

Finally, given where the text ends (with Rubenstein’s theology), I question the

usefulness of this textbook in some religion departments with a commitment to a so-called 'scientific' study of religion in their curricula. Ending with a very pastoral *and* philosophical theology, *Approaches to Auschwitz* seems to make a case that given the facts and theological history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and given their shared context in the Western world, one has no choice but to think theologically through any notion of 'history' or 'community' when confronted with the reality of *the Holocaust* (especially among other holocausts) (348). So, would the discipline of "Holocaust Studies" be viewed as a subversive invitation to think theologically in certain educational institutions? And when would such thinking be allowed beyond Yom HaShoah? As an undergraduate textbook, *Approaches to Auschwitz* challenges the contemporary religion department by pushing the boundaries of the discipline of the study of religion—which, in the end, will either enlighten or confuse undergraduate students.

Despite these grumblings, I am not aware of a textbook for the field of holocaust studies which covers nearly as much ground and is nearly as balanced as Rubenstein and Roth's new edition.

CHRISTOPHER D. RODKEY is a Ph.D. candidate in Theology at Drew University and teaches at County College of Morris (Randolph, NJ) and New Jersey City University (New Jersey, NJ). His areas of interest include pastoral and philosophical theology.

© 2004 Christopher D. Rodkey.. All rights reserved.

Rodkey, Christopher D. "Book Profile: *Approaches to Auschwitz*." *Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory* vol. 5 no. 3 (August 2004): 86-88. PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/05.3/rodkey.pdf>