

KIERKEGAARD AS NEGATIVE THEOLOGIAN by David R. Law.
Clarendon Press, Oxford 1993. 231 pp.

David Law's book is an excellent investigation of Søren Kierkegaard as a negative (apophatic) theologian who stresses the incapacity of humans to grasp the reality of God directly. In an attempt to investigate Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works in apophatic terms, Law examines first the nature of negative theology and how far Kierkegaard was familiar with it. This is followed by an analysis of the methodological foundations of Kierkegaard's thought which shows negative theology to be implicit in Kierkegaard's writings. Law then goes on to deal with Kierkegaard's anthropology in terms of hindrances to the God-relationship before finally investigating the theological basis of Kierkegaard's apophaticism, his view of God and Christ. The book ends with a comparison of apophatic motifs in Kierkegaard's writings with the thought of traditional negative theologians. Law concludes that there is "an apophatic undercurrent running through Kierkegaard's thought" (160, cf. 206).

In the final chapter (206ff.), Law draws together the threads of his substantial work to establish that although the negative theologians (along with Hegel) stand in a different tradition from Kierkegaard, Kierkegaard closely resembles the negative theologians on a number of major points: emphasis on God's transcendence, on the breakdown of human conceptual tools (as the highest form of knowledge), on the non-epistemological basis of the God-concept and on the unknowableness of God through a comparison with other objects. The theme of paradox is seen as another important similarity. Finally, Law finds parallels between Kierkegaard and the negative theologians concerning Christology and indirect communication and can thus firmly conclude that Kierkegaard is a negative theologian (210).

Law, however, further argues that Kierkegaard's epistemology and view of truth seem inspired by negative theology and that he outdoes the negative theologians in negativity (211ff.). For Kierkegaard, there is a breach between essence and existence. God's transcendence excludes any continuity with humankind and disrelationship constitutes the God-relationship. In Kierkegaard there is no progression to the path of mystic union, an idea Law sees him as rejecting (214). Kierkegaard is totally pessimistic about the individual's subjective development (215); Christ furthers the movement of humans away from God (217). Thus, while Kierkegaard is not a negative theologian if we limit this description to those in the Neoplatonic tradition, he is "in the first rank" if we apply the term to thinkers stressing God's hiddenness, and is more apophatic than the negative theologians in his failure to make the transition to the *via mystica*.

This book can be highly recommended as a solid attempt to present Kierkegaard as a negative theologian. It also serves as a good introduction to the problems of interpreting Kierkegaard. In each section Law argues his points clearly and carefully with summaries of the key points, giving details about methodology and scholarly disagreement (3ff., 35ff., 90ff.).

This alone must make the book essential reading, though it must also commend itself to the reader because it deals so well with an important Kierkegaardian topic about which too little has been written.

Yet while Law is careful to make clear that he does not consider that he has exhausted the issue (2), this study presents problematic aspects. First, despite his first-class sections on methodology and the problems of interpreting Kierkegaard (3-8), the reason for Law's choice of methodology does not emerge clearly (4). He also rightly tells us that Kierkegaard's interpreter at the outset needs to resolve the problem of the relation between the pseudonymous works as well as the relation between Kierkegaard's pseudonymous and non-pseudonymous authorship, yet (ft. p. 4), he tells us that he is not discussing the latter problem because he is limiting his discussion to Kierkegaard's pseudonymous authorship.

He does not tell us why he is not going to tackle the former. He does give a brief treatment of the relationship between Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms (5), but this leaves open the question why Law chose to concentrate on the pseudonymous authorship (with heavy emphasis on the Climacus writings, particularly *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) and scarcely to touch the enormous possibilities offered by the works in Kierkegaard's own name. This question is not without relevance to the conclusions Law finally draws with regard to Kierkegaard as super-apophatic in his anti-mysticism (212, 214, 217), since such a one-sided concentration on part of Kierkegaard's authorship causes the reader to stop with a Barthian God, while Judge William's negative comment about mysticism in *Either/Or* (ft. p. 33) then too easily becomes a red herring that prevents a proper evaluation of the subject. It thus becomes a question whether and how far Kierkegaard's position "differs fundamentally from that of the negative theologians" (215), when the spiritually optimistic part of his authorship is unintentionally suppressed through the methodology chosen. It must also be asked whether too much place is not given to the surveys of the literature on Kierkegaard's view of dialectics and truth (33-39, 90-99), for Law then has insufficient space for saying more about his choice of negative theologians (8), dying to the world (e.g. ft. p. 132), eternity and eternal happiness (ft. 100-101) and "transparency" (69, 82). More might be said to clarify use of the terms "belief" and "faith" (for *Tro*) and "knowledge" (86-88, 153, 214). Finally, one must regret the omission of material relevant to these topics, e.g. only one article by Marie Thulstrup is mentioned (30, 33).

The above comments must not, however, be allowed to detract from the great merits of this book. Law's work is most definitely a fine contribution to his field and to Kierkegaard research generally, a book one ought to have on one's Kierkegaard shelf.

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