



*The Glasscock Center for Humanities Research Faculty Colloquium
at Texas A&M University
presents*

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"Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism"

In his 1973 essay translated as "Antihumanism and Education," Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) argues that the Jews are in a "crisis of humanism" for which a deepened Jewish education is ultimately the solution. Referring to the principles of 1789, he explains that Judaism and Jewish education were sanitized of the very element that might have allowed it to contribute to modern culture in a meaningful way. By tracing the roots of the problem back to 1789, Levinas links the problems of Jewish assimilation, Jewish humanism, and Jewish education to the development of the French republic. This essay, along with his other essays on Jewish education, implore the Jews to become more Jewish (i.e., particular). My claim, provocative as it is, is that, for Levinas, it is not enough that the Jews reclaim their spirituality and deepen their relationship to their religion; the world must also change. In Levinas's view, the humanism of modernity has its roots in ancient/biblical Judaism. In a sense, then, we are all—or, rather, we all have the potential to be—Jewish (i.e., universal). Levinas's philosophical project describes an ethical responsibility and a human subjectivity that is also essentially Jewish in its universal expression. In so doing, he pulls out the roots of a philosophical prejudice that reserves universality for a certain type of Christianity while relegating Judaism to the realm of the purely particular. Judaism maintains the tension between particularity and universality. If it is the case, then, that we are all to "become 'Jewish'," then we must also ask what this means and how this is to happen?" I argue that the answer to these questions lies in considering Levinas's writings on Jewish education in relationship to his philosophical project. The colloquium will include a discussion of the larger book project on which I am currently working and an essay on Levinas and Nietzsche which explores some of the themes that I take up in the book.

Wednesday, 23 September 2009
4:00 p.m.
311 Glasscock Center Library