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A RESPONSE TO MUERS AND WOOD

JEFFREY DUDIAK

Thanks to Rachel Muers and Richard Wood for their generous responses to the papers Corey and I gave at QTDG, and for the provocation to further conversation. Each deserves a fuller response than space will allow here, but I hope for such occasions in the future.

Allow me to begin where Richard Wood “encounters a little difficulty” where I “speak of God setting the scene and being required to remove himself from that scene.” Wood’s preferred “language of attention gives us another modality,” he claims. “God doesn’t just set the ethical scene; God loves radically and completely,” and, “the cross is central to this view of radical love.” I should clarify that in my article I attempted to represent Levinas’s position rather than my own. True, his view has deeply influenced mine, and I am in deep accord with much of what he says, but he is a Jew who reads Talmud, and I am a Christian Quaker, so there are differences (which my article did not cover). Indeed, I want to affirm, with Wood, the radical love of God, and the centrality of the cross to this love.

But I wonder whether the cross might not function as the very symbol (for Christians) of God’s removing himself from the scene, in radical love, for our sake, and that this invites us to rethink our thinking of God, and of God’s love. No one can see God and (let him) live (i.e., let God be God). *Voilà*; the prohibition against idolatry! Christ’s kenotic gesture invokes the Spirit, neither seen nor not seen, neither immanent nor transcendent, but that which (as the breath of life) blows and flows in and through, *across* the seen, in (to borrow a phrase from Palamas) an *energeia* that is neither present nor absent, but “there/not there,” albeit perhaps less so for those with eyes to see than for those with ears to hear. The “other modality” that Wood associates with the language of attention is on the right track, I think, and an articulation of this other modality (the “modality of the other”—beyond the language of ontology, of being or not being) may well be what each of us (Levinas, Palamas, Beals, Muers, Wood, and me) are strugglingly seeking (across the limiting gifts of our respective languages). Perhaps we all suspect that God’s “*not being there*” is the very chance of God’s “*being*” God—even, especially, in a mode other than “being.”

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As Levinas insists, “to be or not to be” (and thus “to be seen or not to be seen”) is not the question. Might we “think” God other than as the kind of “thing” at which we could aim intentions (like “seeing,” or “thinking about”), and other than as a “thing” which aims intentions at us (like “loving”)? Might we “encounter” God, not as here among the seen, or in some too distant beyond to be seen, but “with us,” too close to allow for the distance an intentional “aiming at” requires, closer to us than we are to ourselves, as a Bishop once put it, so close as to be taken as “within,” as a preacher from Drayton-in-the-Clay averred—but where this “closer” has a spiritual rather than spatial sense, and so is no longer suggestive of the metaphors of sight that the latter invites? But a “God with us” brings us very much back into the neighborhood of Emmanuel.

And, it is in light of this that I would enthusiastically endorse Rachel Muers’s suggestion that plump fruit might be borne by further reflections on the notion of “testimony” (central to both Levinas and Quakers). Responding too quickly here to her prompt, I myself am not convinced that Quakers (at least traditionally) *begin* with ethics; our “ethics” rather testify to the God whose proximity finds expression in them, so that “the power of the Lord can be over all.” But how we frame (“understand,” “see,” *or refuse* to “understand,” “see”) that to which we ethically testify brings us very much back to the problematic that Corey wrestles with in his paper, one which Levinas himself faced in his reflections on “the God who comes to the idea,” and which we too, called to testimony without idolatry, face always anew.