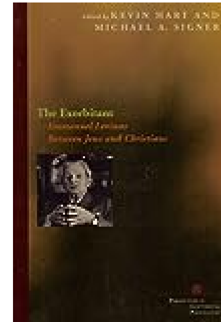

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Thinking Otherwise

This volume of fifteen essays grew out of a conference of the same name held at the University of Notre Dame in April of 2005. The text includes contributions from such Levinasian luminaries such as Robert Gibbs, Richard A. Cohen, Edith Wyschogrod, and Jean-Luc Marion (to name but a few), and represents a compelling addition to the extant mountain of secondary literature now examining the work of the late French-Jewish philosopher, Emmanuel Levinas. The idea of âthe exorbitantâ evokes at least two meanings. On the one hand, the term denotes the excessive qualities of Levinasâs philosophy as a whole, with special emphasis upon his comprehension of responsibility. Here oneâs obligation to the other human being in need precedes the exercise of individual freedom. Or as Jeffrey Kosky neatly phrases the issue (in ââLove Strong as Deathâ: Levinas and Heideggerâ), âbefore I am I, the other summons me to appear as myself in responsibilityâ (p. 111). On the other hand, the exorbitant also arouses the sense of an impending breach or interruption, one that constrains us to âstray from our circle of actionâ (Kevin Hart, âLevinas the Exhorbitant,â p. 1), taking up the strange and the unfamiliar as our own. The exorbitant, then, alludes to the challenge of Levinas: the challenge of âthinking otherwise,â to borrow a phrase from Michel Foucault.

In general terms, the individual essays in this volume are most engaging and well balanced, advancing provocative readings of Levinas as a philosopher; as a philosopher of religion; as a Jewish philosopher; and as a contemporary thinker highly relevant to discussions about modern and postmodern Christian thought. There is much to learn from these essays, and much to think through. In more specific terms, however, many of the authors featured in *The Exorbitant* are concerned to examine the challenges attending a Christian appropriation of Levinasâs philosophy. Judging by the variety of assessment that one meets, it is by no means certain whether Levinas provides the conditions of possibility or impossibility for a future Christian thought. As Gibbs starkly–but rightly–frames the matter (in âThe Disincarnating of the Word: The Trace of God in Reading Scriptureâ): âThe costs for Christian theology are exorbitant:

a focus on disincarnation, a trace replacing full presence, a recognition that Christianity is singular and not the totality ... an infinite that is social and not held in the mind, and a radical ethics of responsibility for others. How Christian theologians will hear this,â remarks Gibbs, âis a great concern–not just in the present context but for the Churchâ (p. 51). At the risk of sounding one-sided, it is this particular inspection of things that mostly shapes the material uniqueness of this volume.

It is for this reason that Robyn Hornerâs essay âOn Levinasâs Gifts to Christian Theologyâ looms large. The author begins her analysis by asking âto what extent is it possible for [Christian] theologians to adopt Levinas as a dialogical partner?â (p. 130). In response, Horner provides a structural overview of the âTheological Uses of Levinasâs Workâ in three types. First, as benign dialogue with key twentieth-century theologians (e.g., the work of Michael Purcell, including his own essay in this volume, âThe Prevenience and Phenomenality of Grace; or, The Anteriority of the Posteriorâ). Second, as shielded incorporation of Levinasian themes (e.g., the work of Roger Burgraeve). Third, as the more adventurous reconstruction of theology (e.g., the work of Jean-Luc Marion, including his contribution here, âThe Case of the Other and Substitutionâ). It is in view of these and other developments that Horner concludes that the theological effort to interface with Levinas comes to naught. âTo the extent that Christian theology is articulated within a horizon of being,â writes Horner, âit would fall under Levinasâs critique of being as totalizationâ (p. 139). As a result, the Christian engagement of Levinasâs ideas for the advance of contemporary theology actually throws its validity into doubt. Thus, âLevinas would indeed make an unlikely dialogue partner for Christian theologyâ (p. 147).

Much the same conclusion seems to hold for the discussion revolving about the doctrine of the incarnation. While we meet differing assessments of this theme in the volume, many of the authors still gravitate toward it as if it were the deciding issue. For example, the lead essay by Leora Batnitzky entitled âLevinas between German Metaphysics and Christian Theologyâ asserts that christological terms like âincarnationâ remain central to Levinasâs philosophy. According to the author, incarnation transpires within the ethical relation with the other where the trace of the living God is equally disclosed. This dynamic bond between the divine and the human inevitably evokes the idea of incarnation, that is, âthe fusing of divine and human natureâ (p. 29). Of course, nothing could be more wrong if we follow the lead of Gibbs. Advancing Levinas as a decidedly Jewish thinker, Gibbs contends that Levinas is rather anxious to separate himself from the doctrine of the incarnation. âIndeed, despite what you may find in some of the secondary literature,â intones Gibbs, âLevinas does not view the other person ... as an incarnation of God or of the infiniteâ (p. 33). Rather, what we witness is the âdisincarnationâ of the subject whereby the other person âbecomes something other than the dwelling of God within human formâ (p. 36). To be sure, more mitigated positions are offered by Elliot Wolfson (âSecrecy, Modesty, and the Feminine: Kabbalistic Traces in the Thought of Levinasâ), Purcell, and Jeffrey Bloechl (âExcess and Desire: A Commentary on *Totality and Infinity*, Section Iâ). For the moment it is important to note the limitations that attend the focus on the incarnation. As Paul Franks reminds (in âShould Jews and Christians Fear the Gifts of the Greeks? Reflections on Levinas, Translation, and Atheistic Theology,â p. 212), the doctrine of the incarnation hardly exhausts the meaning and significance of Christianity. Thus, the Christian dialogue with Levinas may be more expansive, more pluralistic, and more inventive than any concentration on the incarnation may allow or suggest. Indeed, I would argue that *The Exorbitant* encourages the contemporary Christian thinker to pursue alternatives. I am not sure if what follows here constitutes an effort to âkeep one eye on Levinas and another on the possibilities of the Jewish-Christian dialogue,â as the editor admonishes (p. 16). I think it is more along the lines of a debt owed that can never be repaid.

Gibbs articulates an essential point when he writes: âBut if our task is to ... imagine ... how a Jewish philosophy can contribute to Christian theology, we must see that Levinas cannot view the discourse about God in the way that the Christian theologians doâ (pp. 32-33). In effect, the Christian appropriation of Levinasâs philosophy (if it is to be consistently carried through) asks for a radical change of key. Or to echo a question raised by Kosky: to what degree does Christianity âadmit alteration by confrontation with Levinas?â (p. 109). For example, Bloechl suggests that within the contemporary epoch (which we may designate as post-Holocaust or post-Christian), the establishment of goodness does not fall upon a God who intervenes (p.188); there is no supernatural intervention (Batnitzky, p. 29); we are rather left to ourselves (Bloechl, p. 200). What this means for Christian thought is that âGod does not become human, and neither my neighbor nor Jesus can be God incarnateâ (Gibbs, p. 36). Instead, God is met within the ethical relation (Cohen, âAgainst Theology, or âThe Devo-

tion of a Theology Without Theodicyâ: Levinas on Religion,â p. 83). Says Levinas, âThe love of God is the love of oneâs neighbor.â[1] Thus, âour desire for greater intimacy with the infinite, with God,â writes Bloechl, â*must* be expressed in acts that put the other person before oneselfâ (p. 196). It is for this reason that meaning and work of justice is foundational for Levinas and many of his interpreters. Thus Gibbs: âAccess to the spiritual is through the work of justice: not a private intimacy with God and not an ascent to the highest mode of being, but spirit at work in the world. God will be found through doing justiceâ (p. 35). What matters, then, is not doctrinal belief (âThe sentence in which God comes to get involved in words is not âI believeââ[2]), but rather works of love. Hence Levinasâs affirmation of Matthew 25:40: ââTruly I say to you, to the extent that you did [acts of compassion] to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, did you do it to Me.ââ

As I come to the close of this review it is perhaps obvious that the task at hand is not so much âto think otherwiseâ with Levinas (a Christian preoccupation?), but rather to act otherwise. To be sure, this emphasis on praxis is hardly new to Christian life and thought as the social gospel movement and liberation and political theologies attest. Still, I cannot help but think there is something unique about the encounter with Levinas, something exorbitant, something not quite tried and that waits to be fully articulated. Toward that end, the present volume of essays should prove especially helpful.

Notes

[1]. Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, trans. Michael B. Smith (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 171.

[2]. Emmanuel Levinas, âGod and Philosophy,â in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, trans. Bettina Bergo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 75.

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