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Response to James K. A. Smith, Lois Malcolm and Gerard Loughlin

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Abstract

This article possesses no continuous argument of its own, but consists in a series of replies to observations made by J. K. A. Smith, L. Malcolm, and G. Loughlin regarding my book *The Beauty of the Infinite*. Thus it addresses a great number of topics, often only tenuously related to one another, and in an order dictated by the pieces to which it responds. Certain themes, however, can be identified as dominant: the capacity of natural reason to discover spiritual truths, the proper rhetoric of evangelical persuasion, the ontological premises that inform (and perhaps justify) that rhetoric, the place of aesthetics within theological reasoning, the role of divine law within Christian ethics, the need for Christian rhetoric adequately to encompass the reality of suffering and loss, the Christian metaphysics of being, the nature of Christian hope, the value of 'tragic theology' and the Christian metaphysics of evil.

Keywords

Christian rhetoric, ontology, tragedy, moral law, analogy, Emmanuel Lévinas, Nicholas Lash.

Before attempting to reply to my three readers, I should first thank all of them for taking such evident care in their observations on my book, for approaching it so seriously, and for doing so with such intelligence and generosity. These are scholars whom I admire sincerely, and I am quite flattered that they have found it worthwhile to ponder and respond to my arguments. Each of them has made me aware of things I might have done better, and each has helped me see the book from a new angle. I hope, therefore, that I will not seem too unimaginative in replying to them seriatim, and more or less point by point, while avoiding anything on the order of a fuller, more systematic statement of the central claims of my book. I shall also reply to them in the order in which I read them, which may or may not correspond to the order in which they appear above.

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James K. A. Smith has offered a reading of what I suppose I should call my rhetorical method, or perhaps my evangelical method. I am grateful for, and fascinated by, how very *strong* a reading it is—by which I mean, how very powerfully he draws my work into the orbit of his own, distinctly Reformed, and somewhat Yale-School-flavored theological sympathies. His is a perspective I would be foolish not to take very seriously. However, I cannot help but note that it is also the case that occasionally he seems to wish to locate me in a stream of theological reflection where I find it hard to swim. I do not at all object to my arguments being conscripted into a project different from my own; but I should make a frank confession of my own presuppositions, so as to avoid misunderstanding.

Any such misunderstanding, incidentally, is entirely my fault. I realize now that, in the introductory portion of *The Beauty of the Infinite,* I was too quick to assume that my readers would understand distinctions that I took for granted, but did not make a sufficient effort to explain. I did mention my dissatisfaction with the tendencies of the Yale School, at least in the somewhat simplified form in which the ideas of Frei, Lindbeck, and others are usually presented (and I am probably guilty of many oversimplifications on that score myself); but I did not then adequately distinguish my own insistence upon the need for theology to evangelize out of the inner coherence of its own tradition from the perspective of the Yale School. Similarly, in my haste to dismiss the Enlightenment myth of a "pure reason," neutrally available to every reflective mind, undetermined by the particularities of language or culture, I seem not to have made it sufficiently clear that I was by no means calling into question the power of natural reason to discern many truths, to clarify its understanding of those truths, and to inform and receive nourishment from reasoned debate and reflection. It is one thing to say that reasoning is always carried out within a tradition of discourse, according to certain prior intentions and prejudices; it is another thing altogether to suggest that reason is impotent to find truths—even ultimate truths—that are objectively real. The former view I hold; the latter I reject.

So, to make my views clear: I believe theology must indeed think and speak out of its own tradition, starting from an ever more perspicuous inner articulation of what that tradition is—but not because theology describes a distinct world of scripture, set over against other worlds, and not because it has no outer frame of reference by which to judge its "saga" or "narrative." Theology should never surrender worldly reality to philosophies that deny the theocentric frame of the universe, or retreat from the work of metaphysical logic, rational

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argument, historical interpretation, and so on, into a world where the *kerygma* simply ceaselessly thunders overhead. I believe one must start from Christian tradition, but do so with the understanding that it is an interpretation of all of reality, directly engaged with a real world of human discourse and experience. Moreover, as one proceeds one should find that one's articulations of one's tradition require modification, and that one should be hospitable to the insights and experiences of those outside the tradition, and that the word of God does not disrupt the world of natural reason, but illuminates and redeems it. This, for instance, is why I think it perfectly legitimate (for example) to consider Heidegger's ontology in terms of its logical coherence, or to argue for the philosophical necessity of elevating the actual over the potential, and so on.

Thus I would never—as Smith clearly would have me do—reject talk of natural law, or even of natural religion. To be perfectly honest, I have not got a "dialectical" bone in my body. I admit that I am skeptical as to how far natural law reasoning can actually go, especially when it is pursued under modern conditions, in which one cannot presume any sort of *religio naturalis* or habitual *pietas* of the sort one could presume in reverent pagans. And, certainly, much of the natural law writing done today, by earnest young Thomists especially, is often worse than naive, and ridiculously ambitious in its claims. Still, I believe that God as Creator reveals himself—to use a word to which I am inordinately attached—*prodigally*. He reveals himself in nature, in human reason, in human culture, in human religions: always now through a veil of sin and death, perhaps, but never unavailingly. When he reveals himself fully in Christ, then, he comes as the light that lighteneth all men, and comes to gather up into himself all the scattered lights—all the primordial intuitions of reason, all of the innate longing for truth, all of the joys and sorrows and true pieties, all of the beauty and grandeur of the world—that the fallen order still comprises. And I take Romans 1 or Wisdom 13 as an adequate (though certainly not the sole) scriptural warrant for such a view.

Thus, I must distance myself also from Smith's rejection of "demonstration" and "persuasion." As to the former, a survey of my text will show that it is a word I nowhere use opprobriously; wherever I speak of demonstration—the very last sentence of the book, for instance—I do so positively. And as to the latter: While I heartily concur that the attempt to use the modern rhetoric of "universal rationality" to coerce assent to anything, especially to a particular political or social agenda, is in some sense "violent," I do not believe that this applies to many very honorable traditions of theological apologetics. The actual argument I make in my book on this issue, in fact, is *not* that universal claims are inherently violent; rather it is that such claims are not *necessarily* violent, for the simple reason that a

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rhetoric of truth is not necessarily violent. I am not rejecting universal claims; I am rejecting an ontology that would condemn all universal claims, simply on the grounds that they dare to be universal or dare to employ a rhetoric of persuasion. More importantly, I reject the Enlightenment understanding of universality in part because it dissembles its own rhetorical basis, and feigns disinterest, and even pretends that "enlightened" rationality is the very opposite of rhetorical persuasion; it is in this way that it lays the ideological groundwork for a certain very modern sort of coercion. Even then, I do not condemn the Enlightenment ideology for seeking to win an argument, but only for trying to end the argument by a false account of how reason functions and of what therefore may legitimately be said. When Smith writes, then, that "Martyrs aren't out to win arguments," I simply must disagree. They do most definitely wish to win: by "demonstrating" the power of Christ to inform their lives, but also by marshalling every resource of reason and argument that they can employ with a clear conscience. St Justin may have earned the honorific "Martyr" by dying for the faith, but his entire theological career—metaphysical debate, moral persuasion, even the philosopher's mantle—was in the most proper sense a martyr's labor.

I do, however, agree with Smith that I might have placed more emphasis on the actual practical nature of the cultivation in any soul of a "taste for the divine beauty," or might have said what I meant by speaking of the Spirit creating new harmonies, or opening new lines of development (or whatever the musical metaphor was that I used). I still, however, cannot assent to the claim that, in distinguishing between fallen and redeemed vision, I should be speaking not of different degrees of seeing, but of different kinds of seeing. Again, the "dialectical" instinct is vanishingly small in me; I can think only in analogical terms. I believe that all seeing participates—even if only very remotely—in God's own vision of and delight in his own essence, in the mystery of the Trinitarian life. Total depravity of the mind would be the total nonexistence of reason in the mind, an inability to see or know anything at all. A completely different kind of seeing could not exist: it would have no actuality. However imperfect, or fallen, or degenerate one's vision of reality, still one cannot fail to see something of God's light, or fail to long to know it. This, in fact—contrary to Smith's reading—is what Paul actually says in Romans 1:20–21: God's wisdom *is* seen in creation, even if the will refuses to acknowledge it. The ascent of the mind into God is an ever deepening recognition, proceeding by degrees, always progressing towards infinite wisdom (as my long treatment of the thought of Gregory of Nyssa argues). And all natural knowledge is already an inchoate knowledge of God; all love, desire, curiosity, and so on is already the result of a primordial movement towards God, made actual by a created impartation of God's own intratrinitarian

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love. Still, all that said, I grant that we are talking about a very great difference of degree indeed—as great, perhaps, as the difference between the self-love of the suicide and the self-love of the saint (who loves himself wholly and only in God).

I hope it does not seem churlish of me to respond to Smith's very generous praise of my work by demurring from so central an aspect of his reading. I am delighted that he finds uses for my book within the ambit of his own theological reflections, and he may for all I know understand the implications of my thought better than I do; I trust he will take no offense, however, if it should prove that, between some of his intentions and some of mine, there is only an imperfect consonance.

* * *

Lois Malcolm has written an intense and scrupulous reflection on my book that compresses many of its guiding themes into a remarkably concise statement. I am chastened by her example, and made all too conscious of the sheer irruence of my own exposition. There are places where her language differs starkly from my own—I would never say, for instance, that I wished to reconcile "social" and "psychological" models of the Trinity, but only that both terms should be avoided—but she has gone to the heart of the text with admirable skill. She understands the ontological issues, it seems to me, with great clarity.

She has also shown me that I was correct to think—in reading Smith's remarks above—that I had failed to make my methodological presuppositions sufficiently obvious. Hence, when she speaks of my "rejecting any notion of a shared human rationality unconstrained by language and history" and my desire to "reduc[e] all theological reflection to rhetoric and aesthetics," she is ascribing to me an intention that I had not thought my text suggested.

So, once again to clarify my perspective: To say that one can never escape from language and history, or that one necessarily starts from interests, prejudices, and premises that one cannot simply conjure away, is still not to say that one should abandon a belief in shared human rationality, or a belief in its aptitude for truth. It is to say only that our shared human rationality is always situated in a constellation of concrete particularities, and that its operations are various and complex in nature, and that the affective, the persuasive, the intuitive, the dogmatic, and so forth are all moments within reason's primary act. Nowhere, I believe, do I advocate a reduction of all theological reflection to rhetoric and aesthetics; I argue only that the inseparability of rhetoric and aesthetics from theology is not only excusable, but entirely proper, and that there is no true form of reasoning that is not similarly dependent upon these things.

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Of course, if one takes the "metaphysics of supereminence" seriously, as manifestly I do, and believes therefore in the infinite and simple coincidence of all the transcendental moments of knowledge in God, then one must assume that the higher one rises towards the truth, the more nearly one approaches beauty and goodness as well, and the more one's reason must approximate simple vision, and a certain immediate intuition of reality that is also delight and moral satiety. But, even if reason has not yet ascended so far, here below—both theoretically and practically—the transcendentals remain for us to some degree inextricable from one another. In certain necessary moments of critical reflection, we can distinguish, for instance, the movement of love from that of knowledge, but in its totality reason is rendered inert if it ceases to subsist in both. Erich Przywara begins his great *Analogia Entis* by speaking of the distinction between and interdependence of the "meta-ontic" and "meta-noetic" (forgive me for lapsing so wantonly into his lush Germanic idiom). Each, he claims, leads inevitably towards the other; and ontological, alethiological, aesthetic, and moral categories are all radically insufficient in themselves and—without one another—utterly incoherent. For Przywara, the very oscillation of thought between the meta-noetic and the meta-ontic directs reflection towards the perfect coincidence in God of knowledge and being.

Or, to take a somewhat different approach to the question: Our reasoning can never be perfectly "analytic," not because of the deficiencies of the human mind, but because analysis *by itself* is an inherently defective model of truth. The attempt to reduce every synthetic truth to one or more analytic truths—understood as the only truths that reason can establish or properly know—or to reject as false or vacuous any synthetic truth that proves resistant to such a reduction, is nothing more than an endless pilgrimage towards pure tautology. For the human mind, all knowledge is "synthetic," even if this allows for many moments of analytic clarification. As a fairly straightforward Christian Platonist, I believe that philosophy is never simply a discipline concerned with *logos*, in the sense of words refining and governing other words (however necessary that may be), but should is a mediation between *theoria* and *logos*, between what we "see" or "know" and our power to speak coherently of it. In our reasoning, our words seek to ascend to the height of a vision that always already haunts and animates and makes possible every conscious moment of our lives; and, in our words, ideally, what we know becomes better known to us, as conscious comprehension. Hence the true is never known or desired without the good and the beautiful; and the attempt to purge our shared human rationality of its rhetorical residues is actually a descent into irrationality, and a refusal to recognize those "hidden things of Him" that are "clearly seen."

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As for whether I have put sufficient emphasis in my book upon the importance of the law for Jews and Christians, perhaps I have not. It may not have occurred to me that such an emphasis was necessary, but I quite see Malcolm's point. Where I do discuss such matters, I now realize, it is generally only in the negative. I reject, for instance, the Kantian understanding of the moral law within as a fantasy and as a failed project. More pertinently, perhaps, I am obviously no great admirer of Levinas's ethics—though I would argue that Levinas has no actual concept of law: I think he knows only injunction, absolute imperative, the infinite force of an always prior moral accusation and moral demand, all of which is too jealous of its absolute nature to condescend to the economies of law.

I also do not know if I can entirely grant that, as Malcolm writes, "much postmodern thought" shares a biblical concern for "others." At least, in the thought of Levinas and the later Derrida, "others" are nowhere to be found. Instead, one encounters only the Other, who—as far as I can tell—is obligingly devoid of an identity, a faith, an address, or any stated opinion regarding the designated hitter rule (a reference I fear only American readers will understand). In fact, the most attractive quality of the Other, I suspect, is his or her or its absolute purity from any of the obnoxious traits of others: convictions, prejudices, and customs; passions, discontents, and aspirations; and so on. Perhaps there are less apocalyptic manifestations of the Other that allow for contact with others; but this is not the case, I think, with that abyss of ethical obligation, the Levinasian Other. *This* Other is an empty abstraction, one that, as such, makes no moral claim on us at all. To pretend that it does is simply to trade in pious fictions. Real moral obligation is born of a combination of familiarity and difference, a recognition of the analogy between oneself and another (which, like every analogy, is a similitude comprised within an irreducible difference); it is rooted in self-love, though it requires the transformation of such love, and it is shaped by custom, habit, and desire; and it cannot be made actual apart from prudence and practical moderation. It is only, I think, when one acknowledges all of this that one can enter the realm of law. But the Other not only transcends, but refuses, the medium of the law; any mediation would be a betrayal of its transcendence, and would compromise its infinite power of negation.

Finally, I take Malcolm's words on the need for lamentation, and for a recognition of the persistence and magnitude of evil in earthly experience, very much to heart. I wrote a small book recently called *The Doors of the Sea*, which is a meditation upon suffering and evil, and which she might think serves as a corrective of, at the very least, my theological emphasis. But, in defense of *The Beauty of the Infinite*, I should say that, if it is an excessively cheerful book (which is not my impression of it), it is nevertheless far from being

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one long, boisterous romp of merry rhapsody. The argument does, for instance, return again and again to the death-camps. There is a dark current that runs through my argument that I would not want any reader to fail to note. My complaint, for example, against those who use Attic tragedy as a heuristic model for reading the gospels is not that tragedy offends against Christian hope, but that tragedy is in many respects still far too consoling and soothing a form of art to cast more than an inconstant light upon the sheer irredeemable evil of suffering and death, at least as these things are understood by Christians. I take it as indisputable that Christian thought cannot—as classical tragic thought must—accept the comfort of knowing that there is some cosmic necessity to the suffering of the innocent or of the just. For all the triumphalism of the gospel of the empty tomb, it is nevertheless a triumphalism inseparable from an anguished refusal of the consolations of wise resignation. Like the Jews suffering under the Seleucids, Christians should not trade their lamentations for a higher wisdom, but should be willing to rejoice only in the knowledge that those who have perished will be restored. There lies in this expectation, necessarily, a kind of ultimate defiance of "reality," and even of God if he will not raise the dead. I do say, after all, that the loss of the tragic opens up a deeper pain within us, an inability to find rest anywhere but in the "insane expectation" of resurrection—which is, of course, foolishness to the Greeks.

Again, though, I must offer my thanks to Malcolm for so precise and thought-provoking a piece, and profess my admiration for her analytic gifts.

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Gerard Loughlin's essay is such a model of rhetorical elegance that I feel almost disarmed by it; and it is so balanced a mixture of praise and reproach that it induces a disorienting combination of gratitude and combativeness in me. I shall, however, confine my remarks to his more critical observations, since they seem to me to raise genuinely probative questions of the text.

First, though, let me address one semantic issue. Loughlin ascribes to me certain "Radical Orthodox" themes, among them "the naming of God as being rather than beyond being." I am not authorized to speak for Radical Orthodoxy, except as a friend and occasional fellow traveler, but I feel certain that the theologians in that school would agree with me in calling this a false opposition. Both ways of speaking of God are correct, as the word "being" is not univocal between the two usages. This is important in part because certain writers—for instance, Christos Yannaras among my fellow Orthodox—have used this distinction for polemical and, to my mind, rather unfortunate

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purposes. When the Greek Fathers spoke of God as Being—as, that is, *to ontos on* or *ho ōn*—or when Thomas spoke of God as *the actus essendi subsistens* or *esse*, they were quite correctly speaking of God as the transcendent source and end of all things, in whom there is no unrealized potential, deficiency, or change, and whose being is not merely the opposite of non-being. But it is precisely this way that God is also (to use the venerable Platonic phrase) *epekeina tēs ousias.* That is, he wholly transcends "beings," or discrete "substances," or the "totality of substances," or even the created being in which all beings share. Thus he is sometimes referred to as "superessential" or "supersubstantial" Being. The proper distinction, then, is not between two incompatible ways of naming God, but between two forms of the same name, corresponding to two distinct moments within the *analogia entis*.

Now, Loughlin's two principal complaints regarding *The Beauty of the Infinite* are: first, that it is on occasion needlessly polemical, to the point almost of a betrayal of its own argument; and, second, that it is unfair or misleading in its treatment of Nicholas Lash, or at least of a particular essay of Lash's. The former point I will in large measure concede. Some years ago, when I wrote the first draft of the book, I did so in an environment of often acrimonious debate and with a kind of intellectual urgency that, in retrospect, strikes me as slightly absurd. Moreover, I have a taste for satire that is perhaps overdeveloped. As it happens, I especially regret a passage that Loughlin himself mentions: the remarks on certain "unnamed" pacifists. The missing name was John Howard Yoder, and that passage was an uncharitably strong reaction to remarks of Yoder's that I thought notable for the historical ignorance they exhibited and for a rather sanctimonious condescension towards other Christians. Had I named him and also tempered my tone, or omitted the passage altogether, the book would have been better.

All that said, I doubt I shall ever become a man of mild speech. Moreover, I never anywhere argue in *The Beauty of the Infinite* for a "peaceful rhetoric." Quite the contrary. At one point, admittedly, I speak of a "true (and so peaceful) rhetorical style," but obviously it is the word "peaceful" that is qualified in that phrase. I argue rather that rhetoric as such is not somehow always implicated in violence, as certain denizens of the world of "theory" have been heard to opine; and that we are not bound to accept the ontological presuppositions that underlie the belief that it is. For that reason, I assay a "rhetorical ontology" (of which I will spare the reader any reprise here). Honestly, I never meant to suggest that we should be more peaceable or inoffensive in the rhetoric we employ. Indeed, the only sort of rhetoric that I grant to be *essentially* violent is the sort that conceals its own intentions behind a façade of ingratiating insincerity. That my own practice sometimes oversteps the bounds of charity I will not deny.

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Still, I think Loughlin is wrong to speak of my "denigration of those who don't get the point." My conscience is largely untroubled on this score, as I think one will find that those thinkers with whom I engage most . . . let's say *robustly* are not merely persons who have failed to see some point I think they ought to see, but are propagandists of a gospel of their own, often vehemently anti-Christian, and often surprisingly inhumane in their thinking. Given the rather revolting remarks that, say, Deleuze thought it proper to make regarding not only Christianity but Christ, and the quiet currents of cruelty that one sometimes discerns just below the surface of his thought, I cannot see why the deficiencies and not infrequent barbarisms of his thought should not be plainly described and denounced.

I do, of course, regret those moments when my tone becomes "wearing." But, if I may be frank, what *I* often find wearing is the faltering, apologetic, restrained, and hesitant tone of much modern theology. It is what I quite shamefully and unfairly tend to think of as "the modern Anglican inflection": the sorrowful diminuendo towards embarrassed silence, by way of prolonged clearings of the throat and the occasional softly whistled tune, as one contemplates changing the subject before anyone is so indiscreet as to venture a firm opinion. I have little patience for the notion that we know so little (on account of the mystery of evil) that we must abandon our efforts to advance the story of Christ as the true story of the world. And I have even less patience for the claim that "we must speak . . . only 'tentatively, indirectly, metaphorically'," etc. I cannot, try as I might, make that description of evangelical rhetoric conform in my mind to the practice of Christ, the Apostles, or the martyrs of the Church, nor can I bring myself to think of that practice as in any sense violent, or even excessive in its confidence. And I should hate to think that theology should now become little more than a judicious preparation for Christianity's ultimate obsolescence, and faith little more than a nostalgia for vanished gods. I simply do not believe that we have *always* somehow refused to recognize ambiguity or ignored the brokenness of others' lives or been insufficiently attentive to uncertainty and pluralism if we choose to be forthright and even a bit unrestrained in our rhetoric. One reason for arguing that Being itself is "rhetorical," and also an original peace, is to help quell the agitations of those oversensitive consciences that cannot adequately distinguish between speaking an unpleasant truth and kicking a puppy.

But, again, let us grant that I personally am occasionally too fierce (or was when I wrote this book). If that is so, there is no need to exaggerate my malfeasances by misquoting me, or by reading more into my words than the words themselves warrant. This is perhaps a trivial example, but when Loughlin writes that "predictably enough . . . Hart chides Wagner" and that "needless to say Hegel is a bad thing," he is wrong on both counts. To begin with, and momentarily to

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surrender to pride, my judgments on music are my own, and are never simply "predictable." More importantly, though, while I certainly do argue that the potentially endless thematic developments of Bach's music, with all their limitless contrapuntal possibilities, offer a better image of the "ontological parataxis" of creation than does the Wagnerian system of leitmotivs—which always, in every case, leads towards a certain "fated" resolution—I speak no ill of Wagner's music, which I love. Nor do I say Hegel is a "bad thing." I note that his thought marks the transition from the highest triumph of modern metaphysics to its inevitable collapse, I clearly reject his understanding of history, I try to situate him—in Heideggerean fashion—in the history of metaphysics, and I point out his special genius in recognizing that Christianity represents an interruption in the history of metaphysics that must be recuperated and absorbed by philosophy. But none of that is a denigration of Hegel's thought, or even very controversial.

In *The Beauty of the Infinite*, moreover, I do not—as Loughlin says I do—speak of the "depravity" of those I criticize. I do not even "dismiss Levinas' thought as 'a little depraved'." For one thing, my long and admittedly entirely negative reading of Levinas (which, for the record, I cannot make myself regret) could hardly be described as a mere dismissal of his philosophy; it is, if ferocious, nonetheless a careful argument, thoroughly grounded in Levinas's own texts. And what I actually say is that ". . . Levinas advances a view of the world that is perhaps a little depraved." This last word may seem unpleasantly strong, but I am using it very precisely, and I do go on to explain my meaning. I am pointing to a single aspect of his philosophy that—were it not for his enchanting habit of tirelessly telling us to be good, and for our commendable desire to have some sense of the categorical imperative, even if we have lost any coherent rationale for thinking in moral terms—would almost certainly perturb us more than it typically does. We should at least ask why Levinas's rhetoric must always be not only so uncompromisingly absolute, but so violently so. When Levinas speaks of the evil of being, of my persecution by the Other, of infinite guilt, of absolute accusation, of my being taken hostage, of the need for endless expiation, of my absolute unquestioning availability to the Other, and so on and so on, it is all so unremitting, and so uniform in tone, that it has something of that cruel, morbid, pitiless, unrelenting quality one finds in masochist fantasy. Nothing I do can ever be enough before the Other, I am guilty, indeed guilty even for seeking to please the Other, for daring to love, I must be punished for presuming to desire to be punished, tortured in fact, for my offense is infinite . . . . I am injecting none of this into Levinas, nor is it merely one small element of his thought. I do not, as it happens, suspect Levinas of the philosophical equivalent of a sexual psychopathology. But I do believe that he was driven by

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a certain hyper-Kantian scruple regarding the presence of personal interest in the ethical act to suppress in his philosophy—and perhaps in his own consciousness—any awareness of those discreet analogical mediations by which each of us is prepared to recognize another person (*not*, that is, the "Other") as an object of moral concern. And this caused him to approach ethical questions in the most ponderously dialectical fashion imaginable (in the purely metaphysical sense), and incessantly forced him towards formulations that were ever more urgently apocalyptic, ever more absurd, and ever more destructive of genuine moral reasoning.

Incidentally, I also do not say of Deleuze and Derrida, or of others like them, that "their metaphysics . . . necessarily open unto fascism." I quote John Milbank's opinion to that effect; but, for myself, I say only that they cannot adequately prevent their rhetoric from gravitating towards uses they would dislike, and that many have not been sufficiently circumspect in this regard. For instance, despite Foucault's claim to the contrary, Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* is in no meaningful sense an "anti-fascist" primer, and contains much that one could quite easily take in a fascist direction, if one were so disposed. My point concerned only the arbitrariness of the ethical claims such writers tend to attach to their thought.

Now, regarding the passage on Nicholas Lash, I cannot really amplify upon the case I make there. I can say only that, as far as the single essay in question is concerned, I believe both my summary of Lash's argument and my rejection of it are correct. Lash most definitely *does* collapse the resurrection into the crucifixion. At least, he wonders whether it might not be enough to say that "in death, in dying, Jesus discovers that his whole history, and every moment in that history, far from slipping away, ephemeral, into non-existence, stands, eternally—and stands by the transfigured reality and significance which belongs to it from the standpoint of God's eternal light;" and he means this (quite explicitly) to be understood as a possible description of what Easter really was. It is not a difficult essay; Lash merely wishes to advance the hypothesis that it might be proper to say that Easter is not, in relation to Jesus's death, another historical event, or the realization of a life beyond—or, rather, after—this life. And, as a consequence, perhaps we should be content to say that, in finding in Christ that our own lives stand in God's eternal light, we can surrender ourselves in faith into the arms of the Father who never abandons us. It is a perfectly conventional argument, hardly without precedent in the work of other modern systematic or dogmatic theologians. I would even grant that Lash is in this matter, as Loughlin says, not very different from Barth (though many Barthians might disagree).

I, however, see no similarity at all between Lash's position and my own. Far from avoiding the "metaphysical closure" of which Loughlin

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speaks, this idea that eternal life might really be "this life as known from God's eternal vantage" quickly—and inevitably—becomes a retreat to the worst sort of purely metaphysical consolation, and an alternative to the very different solace—or joy—that the gospel offers. I do not believe that, in that essay, "Lash is . . . concerned . . . to insist that death is death, and that it cannot be given some spurious nobility in and of itself." Lash may think he is, but, if so, his argument betrays him, for it is the argument of a metaphysical optimist. Were it correct, what would Christ have brought into history, apart from a new, more engaging motive for Stoic resignation, under the newer and tenderer name of faith?

Let me simply admit that, on this matter, I am an unregenerate primitive. As far as I am concerned, Christ's resurrection must be understood both as life beyond death and as life *after* death; and eternal life for us must mean the same thing. Moreover, I am quite certain that Easter must be understood as another *historical* event, literally occurring *after* the crucifixion, and in this way—and only in this way—overturning the verdict of the powers that crucified Christ (a verdict that Lash's understanding of Easter, I believe, inadvertently confirms). If the tomb was not empty, if Easter did not concretely interrupt the customary course of nature and history, if the risen Christ did not reveal himself as the one "who died and is now alive forevermore," then there is no gospel about which any person should remotely care, and no comfort we can or should dare to offer. Certainly no message of any significance is conveyed by vague talk about the eternal "meaningfulness" of our lives before God, or about our lives "standing in God's light" (whatever that might mean). If, say, the Jewish child who choked to death in a cloud of Zyklon-B is not restored to a life that is more than life, is not given joy and eternity in his own person, is not given *back*, then why should we care what private intimations of transcendence Jesus might have experienced on the cross? And why should we want to find ourselves embraced in the arms of the demiurge whose world thrives in the death of children?

As for Loughlin's suggestion that, if I accept that God is the first cause, present in every moment of being, I ought to accept the proposition that, in the Spirit, God is the endless interrelatedness of all things, including the interrelatedness of Jews and Nazis—well, frankly, I must wonder if at this point in his argument he has not momentarily taken leave of his senses. Surely he has a sufficiently broad grasp of traditional Christian metaphysics to understand that it defines evil as a *steresis agathou* or *privatio boni* precisely to prevent us from imagining that, because all things—insofar as they are real substances—participate in God, every relationship between created things is a manifestation of the divine. Yes, God is equally present in the persecutor and the persecuted; he is not, however, present in

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the persecution, which "exists" only as a negation of his presence to the creature. Sin distorts and destroys and creates structures of evil that—while they possess no real being in themselves, and so *do not* participate in God—nevertheless mysteriously and damnably subsist.

Having said all of this, however, I must thank Loughlin not only for his incisive criticisms of my arguments, but for the many kind things he says about my book, and especially for taking the trouble to affirm my Orthodox pedigrees. The tendency of much modern Orthodox theology to confine itself almost exclusively to the idiom created for it by the neo-Palamite writers of the mid-twentieth century ought not to be mistaken for a healthy or necessary tendency, or a proper reflection of the richness, openness, and diversity of Orthodox tradition.

* * *

Finally, I want simply to say that I am fortunate to have found readers of so high a caliber. Each has forced me to articulate vital aspects of my argument better than I originally did. These articles—along with articles and reviews written by other authors, and papers delivered at symposia and conferences, and conversations at colloquia convened to discuss my work—have made me aware that, however ambitious *The Beauty of the Infinite* is, it remains only a first attempt at expressing a certain theological vision, requiring supplementation, qualification, revision, and constant reconsideration. For that I am genuinely and profoundly grateful.

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