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In Your Face I Hear the Word of God: Lévinas and the Trinity

When was the last time you recognised the Word of God in the face of another person? Or perhaps when was the last time you clearly saw the face of the other beyond those plastic masks - unconsciously moulded upon our faces during the process of enculturation, diffusion and the development of our self-consciousness? Recently, a disabled person travelling on her motorised wheelchair approached me at the station, and began talking to me about her cat that bites her. She told me how fond she is of this cat, and yet how hurt she feels about its strange behaviour. This cat is at once a sacred (albeit vulgar) blessing and a bizarre curse for her. Something she loves so much gives her pain. It is a cruel paradox. In being attentive to her face, her fears, it appeared that she was demanding intimacy – even to the extent of holding me hostage in order to listen and keep her from being alone. Could it be that the face of this woman is indicative of our human condition? It is this neighbour, stranger and poor one who seeks help and sustenance from me (an other) and who ordains the grace of responsibility and the hope for justice. Is it in this neighbour’s face that the Word of God is revealed and if so, at what moment is the Word of God heard (Lévinas 1998, 108)?

When was the last time a stranger sought you out or even looked at you? What did you hear deep down in your consciousness? If you heard the painful call to be responsible for this stranger by responding with justice, then most probably there has been the epiphany of the Word of God. Emmanuel Lévinas’¹ ethical phenomenology of the face seeks to describe how “the epiphany of

¹ Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), born in Kaunas, Lithuania was a Jewish philosopher and Talmudic Scholar. He moved to Strasbourg, France in 1923 and begun his career in philosophy. He studied under Edmund Husserl (1859-1938, who created the phenomenological method where for example a red object is intuited as a phenomena by its essence of redness) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976, who sought to discover the meaning of being, of essence – through authentic existence). Lévinas became a French citizen and is credited by Sartre for introducing phenomenology to France. Lévinas gained international recognition with his first major work, “Totality and Infinity”. Much of his work is against Heidegger as the title of his second major work, “Otherwise than Being or

the face is ethical” (Lévinas 1996, 109). This philosopher offers a new twist of direction to the phenomenology begun by Husserl and carried on by Heidegger. Such a phenomenology is not subject to the confines of philosophy; it transposes itself to other disciplines, especially to theology. In such a context even though Lévinas is himself Jewish, his ethical philosophy has the power to assist the Christian in discovering meaning about the Trinity. Shall we have a go at doing a bit of trinitarian theology in the light of Lévinas?

For Christianity, the Word of God became flesh (Jn 1:16). Upon the naked flesh of the face of Christ is the presence of the Father: Christ’s face is the face of the Father. The Father’s presence is love without eros. This presence is a non-indifference which proclaims the ethical teaching, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matt 25:40). The Father - present to Christ as love without eros and proclaiming in Christ’s face this love – breaks through the totality of economic injustice and political oppression infused upon our faces by the lie of our “good conscience”. This divine rupture is transcendence that shatters our cultural masks of ideology, politics and individualism. It commands us to be responsible for and before the neighbour whose demanding look and suffering cries, moans and tears reveal the face of Christ. In being faced with this suffering, the Holy Spirit is released and provoked in our hearts. Sobering up and awakening to what is beyond our ego-centred lives – to the face of Christ in the “brother or sister [who] is naked and lacks daily food” - the Holy Spirit is at work in our hearts enabling an ethical response and leading us to live the true religion of faith and works (James 2:14-17).

In view of the trinitarian life, how then is the believer to see the face of God? Once we have freed “slaves and fed the hungry” (Lévinas 1994, 162) then the face of God is revealed. Such an action speaks of Christ’s kenosis and humility. To transpose Lévinas’ ethical philosophy to

Beyond Essence,” implies. Crucial for Lévinas’ thought is the experience and memory of the *Shoah*. In many ways, Lévinas’ life and works embodies a spirituality of teaching. He taught at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Universities of Poitiers and Paris-Nanterre and since 1973 from the Sorbonne. Lévinas’ philosophy is a prophetic stance against all violence, injustice and evil.

Christian trinitarian theology is a bold move. It is bold because it challenges the ‘good conscience’ of Christianity in all its theology. It challenges the theologian to think more than thinking and to understand more than understanding. This going beyond thinking and understanding is what Lévinas proclaims as desire for being infinitely responsible for the other. When theologising is infused with such kenotic desire, then it becomes a union of “lexio divina” and ethical praxis. It is akin to liberation theology even to the point where it becomes a hermeneutic of suspicion.

The theologian should be “suspicious” of theologising and forgetting the proclamation of Mt 25:40. To forget the poor is to forget the icon of the Trinity. In the face of the poor one is the trinitarian icon. Lévinas’ life experience of the *Shoah* points to the imperative of “be suspicious of having a good conscience” lest it embodies what Pascal proclaims, “My place in the sun. There is the beginning and the prototype of the usurpation of the whole world” (Lévinas 1998, 231). Lévinas begins his whole thinking from the non-philosophical experience of the *Shoah*. He is in trauma and is vigilant to the point of insomnia of proclaiming a dis-interestedness of goodness - of being infinitely responsible for-the-other. Describing his deep feelings about Christianity and the Shoah, he writes:

“Then comes what you call Holocaust and what we call the *Shoah*. At that time two things became very clear. First, the fact that all who participated in the *Shoah* had, in their childhood, received a Catholic or Protestant baptism; and they found no interdiction in that! And the second fact, very, very important: during that period, what you call charity or mercy appeared to me directly. Whenever the black robe was to be seen, there was refuge. There, discourse was still possible. A world without recourse is one of despair.” (Lévinas 1994, 162)

The event of the *Shoah* remains an event of infinite meaning and proportion not just for Judaism, but also for Christianity. It challenges both Jewish and Christian theodicy as well as the

“good conscience” of the mainly Christian-baptised West. Lévinas’ memorial words emphasise how during the *Shoah*, the face of the Jewish other was never present except where Mt 25:40 was enacted in a spirit of kenosis and humility by the “black robes” and the others who risked their lives. The tragic fact remains concerning those who “participated in the *Shoah*”. For Lévinas, the executors who participated in the genocide of the Jewish people do not have a face. To have a face is to know one’s guilt, to realise that threatening and killing or “exterminating” the neighbour with violence is evil (Lévinas 1998, 105). Against this diabolical evil, the face of every Jew proclaimed the commandment, the Divine Word, “Don’t kill me!”

This imperative, commandment and the Word of God on the face of every Jew who perished in and survived the *Shoah*, is the trace or vestige of the Trinity. Lévinas understands the trace as a past that has never been present. The trace is the face – the saying of “Thou Shalt not Kill” – proclaiming life is sacred. This past of holding life sacred was not present during the *Shoah* except as traces on the faces of all those murdered and persecuted. Upon these faces is the pure experience of the Trinity, namely the paschal drama of Christ dying for us as a victim of political violence and injustice. This pure experience is an ethical resistance to murder. What does this teach us? In times of violence and injustice, our suffering is not useless. In showing one’s face to the persecutor in a spirit of trinitarian kenosis is to affirm that life is sacred. The trace of the Trinity on the face of the victim infinitely challenges the “good conscience” of the persecutor in his/her world of totalising violence and murder. If the persecutor murders, then the word of God in the face of the victim has not been heard. It cannot be heard, because the persecutor is without a face. The face is responsibility containing the trace of the Divine Logos. The persecutor in wearing the plastic mask of ideology and political violence can never transcend its negating of life. It is only the trace of the triune God in the persecuted one who can unmask – in the pure act and experience of love without eros – the plastic faces of evil.

Lévinas philosophy is a Jewish humanism advocating a life of kenosis and humility for every human person. The human person is called to live out an asymmetrical relation with the other. Lévinas writes, “The only absolute value is the human possibility of giving the other priority over oneself” (Lévinas 1998, 109). We are called to a life of holiness. This asymmetrical relation to the other recalls the intra-trinitarian relation where the Father gives everything to the Son and keeps nothing for Himself and in the same manner, the Son gives everything to the Father and keeps nothing for Himself. This divine kenotic self-giving beyond the realm of the impossible is the Holy Spirit. The other who ordains (ordonné - orders and gives) responsibility represents the Holy Spirit, and the Self (who takes on this painful burden) represents both the Father and the Son. The Trinity *ad intra* is enworlded in the ethical, asymmetrical relation where such a relation gives testimony to the Trinity *ad extra*.

Next time you meet a stranger, look at the face - the icon of the Trinity in this poor one. If you look further, perhaps you can perceive a multitude of other poor ones in whom one will never find the face of God in this stranger’s face. You are now “being faced” with an insomnia of responsibility, an infinite responsibility and an expiating God who cries out in this poor one’s face that your responsibility for all these strangers comes before your freedom.

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