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GLENN J. MORRISON

EMMANUEL LEVINAS AND CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Faithful to the Talmudic tradition and seared by the experience of the Shoah, Levinas's life work is both a polemic against Christianity and a proclamation of the Christianity envisaged by Matt 25. His writings inevitably touch on theological themes central to Christian tradition. The author examines four of these – God and love of neighbour, the paschal theme, cosmology, and Eucharist – to show how Levinas can throw new light on these mysteries of our faith, a light that shines from the crucible of kenotic love, both human and divine.

Christianity and Rabbinic Judaism in the past two millennia have grown in wisdom and understanding, mainly independently of each other. What is fascinating in the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first century, is that through the seeds of the Husserlian phenomenological tradition, Christianity and Judaism have met and faced each other theologically and philosophically. This meeting is exemplified par excellence in the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas[1]. Following in the wake of Franz Rosenzweig[2], Levinas's writings prophetically point to a bridge between these two great Abrahamic traditions.

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[1] Emmanuel Levinas was born in Kaunas, Lithuania in 1906 to Jewish parents. In such an environment, he learned Russian and Hebrew, encountered the excesses of anti-Semitism and the deep spiritual life of the Lithuanian Jewry. In 1923, he journeyed to France to study at the University of Strassbourg where he quickly taught himself French and German. Later he studied under Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger at the University of Freiberg. Levinas became a French citizen and is credited by Sartre for introducing phenomenology to France. Much of Levinas' work is both influenced by and is a polemic against the work of Heidegger. It was the event of World War Two that fuelled Levinas' metaphysics with his original phenomenology and understanding of existence as primarily ethical. After World War Two Levinas published extensively. His two major works are 'Totality and Infinity' and 'Otherwise than Being or

Even though Levinas is himself Jewish, his whole corpus is, paradoxically, both a polemic against Christianity and a proclamation of Christian praxis underlined in Matthew 25. Moreover, his work is a process of defining his Jewish identity in a Christian European world of thought, language, violence, and hope. Levinas' writings cannot help but be inundated with Christian theological themes and he does at times directly address them. Speaking Russian, German, and French, as well as reading and translating from the Talmud in Hebrew, Levinas immersed himself in the literature and writings of these traditions. Traces of these traditions have been thematised by Levinas. From a Christian perspective, there are many theological themes in his writings, such as the following: (1) God and the love of neighbour; (2) paschal themes; (3) evil, sin and cosmology; and (4) the Eucharist. It is these theological themes which will be addressed in this article. All four theological themes are interrelated, and help to point the way to the ethical horizon in which Levinas' mind is focused. In articulating about these

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Beyond Essence'. In many ways, Levinas' life and works embody a spirituality of teaching. He taught at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the Universities of Poitiers and Paris-Nanterre and since 1973 from the Sorbonne. Levinas' philosophy is a prophetic stance against all violence, injustice and evil.

[2] Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was a German-Jewish philosopher. His major work combining philosophy and theology is: 'The Star of Redemption,' focusing on the inter-relationship of God, humanity and the world. It upholds that only Christianity and Judaism are the loci for the world's redemption. Judaism's stance to the world is the proclamation of its closeness to God whilst Christianity's stance is its mission of evangelisation in the world. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject,* translated by Michael B. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), 61-63, for a discussion of Rosenzweig's understanding of the roles of Christianity and Judaism – the 'Messianic "theory of Knowledge"').

themes I will be more concerned with seeing the positive contribution of Levinas' writings for Christian theology rather than engaging in a critical analysis. Underlying all the four theological themes is Levinas' ethic of hyperbolic responsibility – an order commanded and ordained by the face of the poor one. Just as God is 'the Infinite', so our love of the neighbour must be a likeness of God's love for us. This points to the kenotic nature of our responsibility. Even one is responsible for the persecutor. It is as if one drinks the 'cup' the Father has given to Christ (Jn 18:11). The 'paschal' theme of kenosis in Levinas' writings points, further, to the reality of evil and sin. One is responsible for the whole universe, and having being made in the likeness and image of God, one is the soul of the universe. In this ethical-cosmic reality, 'Eucharistic life' is the fear for the other's death. All human life remains sacred. By creating the possibility for Christian theology to be encountered by the demands and criticisms of Levinas' metaphysics, a theological dialogue between Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity is attempted in the hope that Christianity can learn from the insights of the former.

1. God and the love of neighbour.

What does it mean to love one's neighbour? Where is God in such loving? In approaching these questions, Levinas produces an ethical thinking that seeks to stretch our imaginations and challenge our consciences. To love the neighbour and to discover the presence of God are both Christian and Jewish values. Such values seek to direct our lives. The degree in which Levinas proclaims such values is hyperbolic.[3] It is the idea of infinity that structures his

[3] Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 54.

ethical understanding of God and the love of one's neighbour. The meaning of other-centered experience is understood from the idea of infinity. Yet such understanding goes further than understanding itself. It is to think more than thinking. Levinas defines such hyperbolic thinking as desire for the other[4] or disinterestedness.[5]

Levinas' Notion of God and Christian Pneumatology

To desire the other or to be disinterested is to experience a rupture of being for oneself. When the other approaches in his or her nakedness and destitution, the rupture of breaking with one's ego-centred life is the effect of the idea of infinity being '*put* into us'.[6] When the infinite (divine) idea of the neighbour's brokenness fills our innards with mercy and compassion, one becomes more than oneself.[7] For one to experience such a surplus – 'the thinker who has the idea of infinity is *more than himself*'[8] – could be the experience of

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[4] In translating Levinas' writings from the French, 'other' [autre] is designated with a small 'o' and alludes 'to otherness in general' or 'alterity'. 'Other' [Autrui] with a capital 'O' makes reference 'to the personal other'. It should be noted that Levinas at times does not distinguish between 'autre' and 'autrui' and also some translators of Levinas' work do not distinguish between 'autre' and 'autrui' because of this difficulty. See the 'Translator's Note' in Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other,* translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1997), viii.

[5] Often, Levinas will write 'disinterestedness' in French as 'dés-inter-esse-ment' in order to show the break with 'being' (which in Latin is 'esse'). As a result, the French makes more sense than the English counterpart.

[6] Levinas*, Collected Philosophical Papers*, 54.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

God, 'the radically, absolutely, other'.[9] What emerges theologically is how and when God comes to mind.

> God comes to mind when the naked and defenceless eyes of the neighbour commands and graces us to be responsible. It is a purely passive experience where the Infinite God overflows our consciousness with the Good. The Divine Word proclaims to our conscience, 'You shall not kill!'[10]

Levinas is seeking theologically to define what is truly human. The true human life is the life of the spirit, the life of disinterestedness (1 Cor 2:9-13).

The life of the spirit (the Holy Spirit in us) is represented par excellence in the love of one's neighbour. Levinas' ethical metaphysics complements Christian pneumatology. St. Paul writes, 'For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?' (1 Cor 2:11). 'The human spirit that is within' is the life of loving one's neighbour – the ethical resistance to murder, political violence, and economic injustice. It is 'the Spirit that is from God' (1 Cor 2:12) that reveals to the human heart 'what God has prepared for those who love him' (1 Cor 2:9), namely the face of the other, the poor one, who points the way to salvation and the eschatological vision of the Reign of God.

Levinas understands the notion of God ethically through being responsible for the poor one. This suggests that God is desired through the face of the other more than merely surmised about. God is posited as closer to the neighbour than

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[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid., 55.

oneself: 'The other must be closer to God than I.'[11] Theologically, the Holy Spirit is wholly other-centred, being the infinite disinterested love the Father and the Son have for each other and the world. The notion of God cannot be removed from the ideas of infinity, desire, the neighbour, and justice. For Levinas, it is that 'unquenchable'[12] desire for the stranger that takes the measure of all that is infinite – God, love, and justice.

This 'unquenchable' desire reveals the notion of God and is at the foundation of both Levinas' phenomenology and non-phenomenology of the face (more like a post-phenomenology). Therefore, in understanding Levinas' notion of God, one is confronted with a movement (that overcomes ontology) from ontological phenomenology to ethical metaphysics, and thus an original reworking of Husserl's phenomenological theory of intuition. This movement can be understood as a movement from 'being' to 'otherwise than being' that is symbolised in Levinas' two major works. In *Totality and Infinity,* we observe a seasoned unfolding of his thought and are presented with a vital opening to appropriate key terms for Christian theology.

Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority (1961)

Levinas first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, is a work of ontological phenomenology[13] directed against the Heideggerian notion of Being. The work

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[11] Ibid., 56.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Phenomenology (*La Phénoménologie*): The seeking of transcendental knowledge of what is experienced in one's consciousness in order to uncover meaning. Levinas' 'phenomenology' seeks to study what goes beyond consciousness, language and thought, namely the Other, God, death and time. In this sense, it is more a post-phenomenology. What makes it original is its

seeks to overcome the totality of Heideggarian Being ('the primacy of freedom over ethics'[14] [le primat de la liberté par rapport à l'éthique]')[15] by replacing it with the 'idea of the infinity of the Other'[16] who 'resembles God'[17]. The idea of infinity is related to the other's face. For Levinas, the face is 'l'expérience par excellence'[18] whereby God puts the self into question. Here, the self is faced with a radical and metaphysical exteriority that Levinas articulates through his phenomenology of the face. He constructs such a phenomenology in order to describe the ethical relationship in terms of his notion of infinity. As a result, the face is an infinite and non-phenomenal testimony of ethics and the resistance to totality.

What is striking in Levinas' metaphysics is that he utilises phenomenology as a philosophical method in order to bring to light the ethical relation. Moreover, for Levinas, morality is first philosophy[19] that is illumined through a phenomenology of the face based on Franz Rosenzweig's opposition to totality[20]

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rejection of Being or presence. As a result, Levinas searches to describe how one can be truly responsible when one is beyond Being or beyond the world of presence.

[14] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1996), 45.

[15] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totalité et infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, Quatième édition (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1984), 16.

[16] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 204.

[17] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity,* 293.

[18] Levinas, *Totalité et infini*, 170.

[19] Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 304.

[20] Ibid., 28.

and Descartes idea of the Infinite[21]. The following quotation from *Totality and Infinity* underlines Levinas' phenomenology of the face and the idea of God:

> There can be no 'knowledge' of God separated from the relationship with men. The Other is the very locus of metaphysical truth, and is indispensable for my relation with God. He does not play the role of a mediator. The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed.[22]

The passage highlights the key terms of the Other, the face, and God. The notion of the face is central to the drama of the ethical relation and God's self-communication. It is an opening to God and the production of justice:

> The presence of the face coming from beyond the world, but committing me to human fraternity, does not overwhelm me as a numinous essence arousing fear and trembling. To be in relationship while absolving oneself from this relationship is to speak. The Other does not only *appear* in his face, as a phenomenon subject to the action and domination of a freedom; infinitely distant from the very relation he enters, he presents himself there for the first as an absolute.[23]

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[21] Ibid., 25.

[22] Ibid., 78-79.

[23] Ibid., 215.

Though we are faced with the presence of the other, that he or she is always nearby, articulating it is a difficult matter. How difficult and even enigmatic is shown in the way Levinas speaks of the ethical relation. He begins, 'The presence of the face coming from beyond the world'. The face is a trace of what is beyond being and it is 'absolute' because it absolves us from seeing it as occasion to mask its truth. This is the encounter with otherness, that by which the other withdraws 'as he presents himself'. Now, the fundamental terms of 'the face' and 'the other,' reveal the derivative, 'otherness,' an abiding disclosure of the good that lies beyond being.

Levinas' phenomenology, along with his vision of God in the other's face, is a confronting order in our ethical consciousness. Responding to the order, the responsible self transcends itself towards the other's fear and loneliness. It is a movement provoked by the other's infinite look of destitution and horror, for everyone is guilty in the face of the other, guilty even in their responsibility. To give all and more, at the dramatic point when justice is demanded, is to live with the burden of constantly putting one's conscience into question. It is the 'good life' because the demand for justice coincides with mercy.

After *Totality and Infinity*, the crucial development from phenomenology to non-phenomenology further directed the unfolding of an original ethical metaphysics in Levinas' thought. Here we encounter new terms such as beyond being, the non-phenomenology of the face, diachrony, *illeity*, proximity, glory, witness, substitution, the Saying and the said.

Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence (1974)

It would seem that true ethical life only becomes possible at the point of disinterestedness. Levinas calls this 'otherwise than being'. This means to live otherwise than the *conatus essendi*. This is because our personal struggles are not so nicely under our control. Tragically and comically they end in an anonymous and depersonalised life that cannot escape both the gaze of the neighbour and judgment of God. *Otherwise than Being* represents an attempt to overcome the totality of Being through the development of an ethical metaphysics that transcends ontology and phenomenology. It extends Levinas' notion of infinity to a non-phenomenology of the face. What is unique in this metaphysics is the rupture it causes among existents. The rupture itself emanates from an immemorial past, namely a time beyond the totalising forces of Being. No longer are existents posited as being interested in the world of commerce and pleasure, but as disinterested.

Otherwise than Being begins with addressing the issue of onto-theology: 'But to hear a God not contaminated by Being is a human possibility no less important and no less precarious than to bring Being out of the oblivion in which it is said to have fallen in metaphysics and onto-theology.'[24] To hear a God not corrupted by Being is to begin reflecting on ethics and avoid contaminating God with thought and language. Having an ethical ground avoids the greater danger of

[24] Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1999), xlviii.

confusing God with Being and the lesser of confusing Being with God.[25] God is a '*being otherwise*'[26] than what is thought and said, and reveals God's self as a trace in the neighbour and in the saying of 'Here I am'.[27] Levinas is seeking to understand God, humanity and the world outside of ontology and sense perception. The danger of onto-theology is it seeks to objectify everyone and everything. It is only through a disinterested subjectivity that God, humanity and the world come truly to mind.

In *Otherwise than Being*, the life of substitution, expiation and kenosis represent the trace of the 'kingdom of a non-thematizable God'.[28] Levinas is haunted and traumatised by the suffering of the other. These experiences awake him to sensitivity and compassion. Here his non-phenomenology of the face emerges: 'The face of a neighbour signifies for me an unexceptionable responsibility, preceding every free consent, every pact, every contact. It escapes representation; it is the very collapse of phenomenality.'[29] How do we keep the other alive and free from danger? How can we ever perceive our neighbour in order to keep him or her safe? In an enigmatic way, the face of the neighbour escapes representation by reflecting itself as a 'non-form'[30]: a 'trace of a past'[31]

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[25] Rudi Visker, 'The Price of Being Dispossessed: Levinas's God and Freud's Trauma,' in Jeffrey Bloechl, (Ed.), *The Face of the Other & The Trace of God: Essays on the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 247.

[26] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 7.

[27] Ibid., 145.

[28] Ibid., 52.

[29] Ibid., 88.

[30] Ibid., 88.

[31] Ibid, 97.

that has never been present. Moreover, the face speaks of the past as 'an immemorial past' of responsibility that is more ancient than sin.[32] With the emergence of the Other's face, comes the command to be responsible, provoking the self's conscience into the experience of guilt. However, the self's consciousness of its guilty state comes too late, for paradoxically as the neighbour approaches, he or she has already withdrawn in a way that even 'expels'[33] its own traces. This is what the otherness [*altérité*] or the non-phenomenology of the face communicates. Already the time for responsibility has long passed

In Levinas' non-phenomenology of the face, the suffering other reveals a 'delay'[34] and an 'extreme urgency'[35] of justice. Being called to responsibility is a disturbance. The face disturbs us otherwise from our present situation. Furthermore the face is a diachronic opening to 'non-said time'[36]: to what is in Levinas' terms, the Reign of God. The face is uniquely a disturbance in which new capacities for living the ethical life are discovered. The diachronic otherness of the face (what Levinas terms the trace of *illeity*) 'concerns me otherwise'[37], freeing our nature from mindless destruction, murder and war.

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[32] See Stephen Webb, 'The Rhetoric of Ethics as Excess: A Christian Theological Response to Emmanuel Levinas,' *Modern Theology* vol. 15:1 (January, 1999), 9. [PLEASE GIVE FULL BIBLIOGRAPHICAL DETATILS – VOL. NO., AND ISSUE, IF NECESSARY] The page numbers of the article are from 1-16.

[33] Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 94.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid., 89.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Ibid.

In spite of the depths of evil in our lives, God commands and ordains us through the other's face.[38] In the other's nakedness and destitution, God takes the form of the call for justice and seeks us out to be responsible, slipping into one like a thief. This is the act of God's glory in us.

Whether we name the glory of the Infinite as the Reign of God or the true ethical life or *illeity*, it is always otherwise than our own needs and pleasures. The face of the other orders us to a life of expiation and substitution. St. Paul's words, 'For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?' (1 Cor 2:11) seems to bear witness to what Levinas means by the glory of the Infinite. The human spirit or the other's alterity is the deep call to put one's conscience into question and be responsible, even to the point of being a hostage for the other. It is also the call for the poor one demanding food and shelter in his or her destitution and nakedness. The human spirit slips into our consciousness like a thief before the face of the other disturbing our consciences and reminding us that we are made in the likeness and image of God. With this in mind, let us now turn to the influence of Haim of Volozhin.

Haim of Volozhin and the Image of God

The Talmudic theology of Haim of Volozhin[39] has helped Levinas to articulate that being made in the likeness and image of God is an original responsibility. He reflects:

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[38] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, xxxi.

[39] The Lithuanian Rabbi, Haim of Volozhin (1759-1821), above all with his posthumously published work, 'The Soul of Life' (Nefesh Hahaim), integrally influenced Levinas' philosophy.

> God associates with or withdraws from the worlds, depending upon human behaviour. Man is answerable for the universe! Man is answerable for others…. Man is, like the Creator himself, at the apex of the hierarchy of the world, the soul of the universe.[40]

To be made in the likeness and image of God means specifically to be called to be like God in the world – creating goodness, expiating and infinitely loving. Levinas' ethical philosophy proclaims a spiritual teaching for all human behaviour. The spiritual teaching is the prophetic call to take on the responsibility of being 'the soul of the universe'. Each one of us bears the irrefragable responsibility of 'being answerable for the universe' i.e. 'answerable for others'. The poor one whom we have ignored, never known or never wanted to know is the universe wherein the face of God commands and orders each soul to create goodness, expiate and infinitely love. Salvation depends upon one's kenotic responsibility. The poor one's face reveals the eschatological Reign of God - the kenotic life of shouldering the world's sins, suffering and horror. The human spirit hopes for what God has prepared through the life of ethical holiness. Again St. Paul's words are proclaimed in the universe, 'For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within?'

The 'human spirit that is within' is the dignity of being made in the likeness and image of God. Our 'very identity' is unveiled when the poor one

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[40] Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, translated by Michael B. Smith (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 125.

faces us and when we respond with the food from our very own mouth. Levinas teaches that being responsible involves the universe. The universe overflows with economic, political and social evil. Being responsible is being responsive to economic injustice, political violence and social oppression that poison the soul of the poor one with useless suffering, fear and death. To be in the image of God is to be the soul of the universe.

Hypostasis

Ontologically, Levinas implies that the movement from the life of evil to that of kenosis involves a 'hypostasis'[41]. Levinas writes, 'I spoke thus of the 'hypostasis' of existents, that is, the passage from *being* to a *something*, from the state of verb to the state of being.'[42] Living life, as a verb – anonymously existing - is being for oneself which Levinas likens to the state of Heideggerian 'care' (*Sorge*). Existing purely for oneself is evil and signifies a pagan hypostatic existence.

The ethical hypostasis is the responsible human being. In Christian theology, the 'hypostasis' refers to the one divine person of Jesus Christ wherein there is the hypostatic union of a divine and a human nature. Levinas' thought acts as an aid to Christian theology to point out that the hypostatic union in Christ is an event pointed against all anonymous and depersonalising evil. It is a dramatic event of salvation. Ethical hypostasis suggests the possibility of

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[41] Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, translated by A. Lingis, (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), 82-83.

[42] Emmanuel Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity, Conversations with Philippe Nemo*, translated by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 51.

salvation where the goodness of God overflows in the self. As a result, all forms of depersonalising evil that tempt the self such as hedonism, narcissism, gossip, lying and murder and oppression are put into question. In Christian terms, who is the one to overcome all this evil? It is the same as asking, 'Who is Christ?'

For Levinas the archetype of the hypostasis is the 'Messiah': 'The true object of hope is the Messiah, or salvation.'[43] In contrast, for Christian theology, Christ is at once the Messiah, hope and salvation. The hypostasis of the Logos witnesses to the eschatological and soteriological presence of God-with-us. Behind Levinas' reflection on the 'Messiah' are perhaps hidden eschatological and soteriological considerations. However, any articulation about God for Levinas is usually concealed by ambiguity, the main difficulty being that being encountered by God is more an effacement of God's presence rather than a manifestation. The idea of God is truly an enigma. Notwithstanding such an ambiguity, Levinas' thought does seem to parallel the Christian understanding of the paschal (messianic) life as participation in the Reign of God.

2. Paschal Themes in Levinas

Levinas's ethical metaphysics is attuned to the experience of suffering, death and new life. These experiences are personal and Levinas writes in trauma as a guilty survivor of Hitlerism and all its diabolical barbarity.

Persecution, Substitution and Mercy

[43] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 91.

Suffering par excellence is the experience of persecution; death par excellence symbolises being responsible (answerable) for the other's death[44]; and new life par excellence is embracing hope in hopelessness. These Levinasian themes could be conceived as paralleling a 'paschal' life. Levinas even borrows Christian paschal language even though he is himself Jewish. In writing about the *Shoah*, he does use the word 'passion' as the following passage exemplifies:

> In front of the representatives of so many nations, some of whom have no Jews in their numbers, I should like to remind you of what the years 1933 to 1945 were like for the Jews of Europe. Among the millions of human beings who encountered misery and death, the Jews alone experienced a total dereliction. They experienced a condition inferior to that of things, an experience of total passivity, an experience of Passion. Chapter 53 of Isaiah was drained of all meaning for them. Their suffering, common to them as to all the victims of war, received its unique meaning from racial persecution which is absolute, since it paralyses, by virtue of its very intention, any flight, from the outset refuses any conversion, forbids any self-abandonment, any apostasy in the etymological sense of the term; and consequently touches the very innocence of being recalled to its ultimate identity.[45]

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[44] Levinas, *Entre Nous, Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 171-72.

[45] Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, translated by Seán Hand (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1997), 12.

For Levinas, the *Shoah* is 'an event of still inexhaustible meaning'.[46] In this passage, the phrase, 'an experience of total passivity' is profoundly paschal. The experience of Christ was one of complete passivity to the will of the Father. The Paschal Mystery is the life of disinterestedness – the rupture of God in Christ among us. The passion of the *Shoah* too is one of disinterestedness wherein all victims of persecution proclaim through their face an infinite and ethical resistance to murder.

Ultimately suffering is not useless, for suffering as the persecuted one has the possibility of turning into expiation for another's evil. In the absolute passivity of expiating suffering, there is no self-abandonment to self-pity, drugs, alcohol, suicide, or revenge. The ultimate identity of being made in the likeness and image of an expiating God remains. Taking responsibility for one's persecutor suggests an existence to be like God, the soul of the universe. Living out an expiating responsibility is obsessive and excessive state of existence that gnaws at the self's limits. Emptying oneself of all one's freedom to be responsible for the other is what Levinas terms, 'incarnation'[47]. He writes, 'The form of incarnation' of the persecuted one is 'being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin.'[48]

In Christian theology, the theological link between the first kenosis (the Incarnation) and the Second (the Paschal Mystery) is the experience of God's

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[46] Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, translated by Michael B. Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 161.

[47] Ibid., 115.

[48] Ibid.

self-emptying goodness. This same self-emptying goodness 'to the point of death' (Phil 2:8) witnesses to a grave responsibility of fearing for the other's death.[49] For Levinas, fearing for the other translates as fearing for God and is articulated par excellence through the action of prayer. Levinas' notion of responsibility is however subject to his idiosyncratic terminology. He will use the notion of 'diachrony' or responsibility through time to give a nuanced and enigmatic explanation of ethical action in the world. His notion is further complicated and pierced by the memory of the *Shoah*. He points out that the six million dead – representing 'human beings least corrupted by the ambiguities of our world'[50] – bear the dignity of 'martyrs'.[51] We see that diachrony is a notion overflowing with trauma, the hope for the impossible and the incomprehensibility of interpreting whether the one has encountered God or evil. Further, Levinas uses the notion of the hostage as a starting point to draw meaning to the life of diachrony and kenosis.

For Levinas, the persecuted one or martyr is the 'hostage'[52] expiating for the other. In Christian terms the persecuted Christ has taken the form 'of a slave' (Phil 2:7). As a hostage, the archetypal persecuted one conveys the quality of maternity: 'Maternity, which is bearing par excellence, bears even responsibility for the persecuting by the persecutor.'[53] The degree of such 'maternal'

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[49] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 174.

[50] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 98.

[51] Ibid.

[52] Hostage [*L'Otage*]: The ethical state of existence beyond all essence par excellence. The vocation of atonement, substitution and expiation. The kenotic life of suffering even for the persecutor.

[53] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 75.

responsibility gives light to the witness of Christ in the paschal drama and emphasises that to be made in the likeness and image of God is to engender mercy to the world.

Kenosis and the State of Being a Hostage

To envision the persecuted one as an expiating hostage is to witness to the glory of God's kenosis. Sharing in this divine kenosis of being infinitely responsible is at the heart of both Christianity and Judaism: 'I am pleased to accept the parallelism in the theory of kenosis, and in the idea of an omni-human universality and a 'for all men'. I have understood Christianity in its 'to live and die for all men.'[54] Being for all people is analogous to being a hostage or a slave. It is to enter the diachronic time of responsibility that allows one to substitute himself or herself for the other as a hostage. This is the 'beyond being' of expiation wherein one's true identity is found through service. The spiritual development of a kenotic life (diachronic time) is experienced in 'the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself'[55] as a hostage for the other.[56] Levinas' use of Christian theological and Scriptural language is necessary as a Jewish philosopher living in a Christian world. The influence of Christian language deepens his desire to translate the Talmud through his philosophy. The phrase, 'the very fact of finding oneself while losing oneself,' suggests a 'paschal' character as expressed in the New Testament (Mt 10:39. 16:25; Mk 8:35; Lk 9:24. 17:33). The question arises as to how far Levinas' ethics parallels Christian theological themes. For example, the 'activity' of losing oneself for the other

[54] Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, 164.

[55] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 11.

[56] Ibid., 11-14.

speaks of a passivity that only a God-Man might endure: 'But this saying[57] remains, in its activity, a passivity, more passive than all passivity, for it is a sacrifice without reserve, without holding back, and in this non-voluntary – the sacrifice of a hostage designated who has not chosen himself to be hostage, but possibly elected by the Good, in an involuntary election not assumed by the elected one.'[58] In view of thinking of Levinas' thought otherwise in a Christian theological context, the passage raises the question on whether Christ's will is 'involuntary'. To what extent was Christ's action of obedience to the Father's will passive? Did not Christ take the form of a 'slave' (Phil 2:8)? Christ's expiating for humanity on the Cross was indeed 'a sacrifice without reserve'. Christ possesses a human nature absolutely obedient to the Father's will. In Levinasian terms, could not this obedience be signified as 'a passivity, more passive than all passivity'? If so, Christ in taking the form of a slave in the world could be conceived as the 'hostage' of God.

Prayer

In the spirit of Rabbi Haim of Volozhin's writings, Levinas states: 'True prayer, then, is never for oneself, never for one's own needs.'[59] Prayer is despite oneself. To pray is to be beyond the being of one's suffering. Prayer is the experience of kenosis and the allowing of the kenosis of God to assuage one's

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[57] The Saying (*le Dire*) signifies a disturbing proximity toward the other producing the witness of responsibility.

[58] Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 15.

[59] Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, 129.

suffering.[60] Levinas reflects in a spirit seemingly very near to the Christian paschal mystery:

> When you are truly in distress, you can mention it in prayer. But are you going to eliminate in this manner a suffering that wipes away sins in expiating them. If you want to escape your own suffering, how will you expiate your wrong-doings? The question is more complex. In our suffering God suffers with us. Doesn't the psalmist say (*Psalms* 91:15): 'I am with him in distress'? It is God who suffers most in human suffering. The *I* who suffers prays for the suffering of God, who suffers by the sin of man and the painful expiation for sin. A kenosis of God! Prayer, altogether, is not for oneself.[61]

In Christian terms, Christ could be conceived as the God-Man 'who suffers by the sin of man and the painful expiation for sin'? Even though such a question faces the danger of Christianising Levinas's philosophy, his Talmudic reflection here appears almost Christian and paschal in character. Could this be why more Christian theologians are perhaps interested in his thought rather Jewish theologians?

3. Evil, Sin, and Cosmology

Levinas' ethical metaphysics is concerned with understanding evil as a form of impersonal and anonymous existing. He names this impersonal nature of

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[60] Ibid., 130.

[61] Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 182.

Being as the 'there is' [*il y a*]. Levinas' thinking on the 'there is' begins with his book, *Existence and Existents*, written during his time of captivity in the 'stalag'[62][SHOULD THIS BE UPPER CASE S? - no] during World War Two. The context of Levinas' philosophical reflection on evil is important. In the midst of a Europe drowning in totalising evil, Levinas sought to perceive the nature of this diabolical totality. Just as he saw the rain coming down anonymously, so he perceived Hitlerism murdering countless numbers of innocents anonymously. Every participant in the Nazi regime who murdered did not possess a face. To kill, to murder, to forget the hungry and the poor, is to mask one's true face with the plasticity of evil, violence and of totality. Levinas describes this 'phenomenon of impersonal being'[63] as a disturbing and silent rumbling: 'It is something resembling what one hears when one puts an empty shell close to the ear, as if the emptiness were full, as if the silence were a noise. It is something one can also feel when one thinks that even if there were nothing, the fact that 'there is' is undeniable. Not that there is this or that; but the very scene of being is open: there is. In the absolute emptiness that one can imagine before creation – there is.'[64] The 'there is' is a trace of the nothingness that was before all creation. The 'there is' alludes to Gen 1:1-2. In these verses, there is a feeling of 'absolute emptiness,' especially in the phrase, 'formless void'. In the beginning, the earth lacked all the beautiful and good creation of God. Because 'the earth was a formless void,' it existed only anonymously as an impersonal nothingness. These verses of Genesis help to point to an understanding of Levinas's notion of anonymous Being as a 'formless void' or an 'absolute emptiness' that lacks the

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[62] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 47.

[63] Ibid., 48.

[64] Ibid.

goodness of creation. Moreover, Levinas' phenomenology of evil implicitly seeks to unravel the mystery of the universe.

Developing a Levinasian Cosmology

Levinas' understanding of the 'there is' is the starting point of a cosmology that can be intuited from his ethical metaphysics. The 'there is' mirrors the 'formless void' of Gen 1:2. The origins of the nature of the universe could be conceived as, firstly, the anonymous existing of this formless void and secondly, God's act of creation. God began God's acts of creation out of nothing, out of the anonymous evil of the formless void. Before all creation, there existed goodness (God) and the formless void (evil or an infinite excess of anonymous Being). The first verses of Genesis are perhaps a key to the whole of our human existence studied in the light of Levinas' thought. What does God do when 'the earth was a formless void'? God creates. First God creates 'light' by separating it from the darkness and secondly God creates the sky by separating the upper and lower waters. Everything God creates is envisioned as 'good' (Gen 1:10). The origins of the nature of the universe – wherein the earth is used as an archetype – is God's idea to create infinite goodness that seeks to overcome the anonymous and impersonal nothingness of the formless void (the 'there is').

For Levinas, the origin of evil is posited as the 'there is' - this 'absolute emptiness' that infinitely seeks to totalise all of God's creation into its own diabolical nothingness. This implies that every experience of evil in our world is a trace of the formless void that existed before all creation. The purpose of evil is to destroy all creation to the degree of absolute emptiness. This means that every time there is a murder, a lie or an injustice, some part of God's good creation reverts into an image of the formless void.

This evil seeks to annihilate the 'human' out of human beings; it seeks to depersonalise us such that there is 'existence without existents'. Evil rests in the ruins of a human spirit leaving only the darkness of 'horror and panic.'[65] Such 'horror and panic' are inscribed upon every victim's face of dehumanising evil. The 'there is' is a totality of formless infinity, trapping like a black hole, every thought and action of human evil. Only the 'goodness' of God's creation found in the state of disinterestedness – of being responsible for the poor one – can hypostatically break the hold of evil's gravity. To be human is to be responsible, and with such a stance of goodness, one is responsible for the universe. Moreover, having been made in the likeness and image of God, one is 'the soul of the universe'.

Levinasian Cosmology, Eschatology and Soteriology

In Christian terms, the soul of the universe par excellence is Jesus Christ who, through his expiating death, took responsibility for the universe. Jesus is the new creation. Rom 8:22 proclaims, 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now.' Levinas's implicit cosmology is an aid for the Christian in understanding the promises of the cosmic Christ: 'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for there is the kingdom of heaven' (Matt 5:3) and '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).

[65] Ibid., 49.

The formless void (the 'there is') is constantly in tension with the goodness of God's creation, ever trying to return to its reign of absolute emptiness. It is only the act of creation – present as traces in every human act of goodness – that can hypostatically confront and overcome the anonymous 'sheer fact of being'.[66] It is the hypostasis of the God-Man Christ who, through his kenotic sacrificial death on the Cross, instils sacred feelings of mercy, compassion and love into our human existence. At the very moment where all was lost on the Cross, everything became possible. The faith of Christ upon the Cross to the point of death was itself an act of creating goodness giving birth to hope in this very moment of despair. Levinas writes on the mystery of hope, time and salvation:

> Time is not a succession of instants filing before an I, but the response to the hope for the present, which in the present is very expression of the 'I', and is itself equivalent to the present. All the acuteness of hope in the midst of despair comes from the exigency that the very instant of despair be redeemed. To understand the mystery of the work of time, we should start with the hope for the present, taken as a primary fact. Hope hopes for the present itself. Its martyrdom does not slip into the past, leaving us with a right to wages. At the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible.[67]

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[66] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 58.

[67] Ibid., 92.

Levinas' phenomenological analysis of hope opens an eschatological and soteriological context for cosmology. One of the most moving sentences in all of Levinas' works is: 'At the very moment where all is lost, everything is possible.'[68] Perhaps this gives an insight into the origins of the universe where the state of absolute emptiness – a moment of despairing nothingness that consumes 'the infinity of existence'[69] – naturally resists (and rejects) the goodness of God's creation. Traces of such evil remain and appear too close in our world. Levinas reminds us how close the depersonalising evil of the 'there is' came to its ultimate return to itself, to absolute emptiness:

> This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason set limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.[70]

Levinas' ethical thought reinforces especially to Judaism and Christianity that suffering is not useless. At the very moment where all was lost at Auschwitz, the faithfulness to God of every Jew proclaiming the sacredness of life was able to disarm the diabolical evil of Hitlerism. Judaism survived Hitlerism, and such an

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[68] 'Au moment même où tout est perdu, tout est possible'. (Emmanuel Levinas, *De l'existence à l'existant*, Seconde édition augmentée (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1998, 158).

[69] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, 78.

[70] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 97.

event of survival points to the fact that God's creation of goodness will survive the annihilating presence of evil. The 'passion' of Auschwitz and the 'passion' of the Cross, witness to the hope that the impossibility of surviving death[71] is possible. In this context, the origins of the nature of the Universe are a possible impossibility of God's gift of the Good.

The Divine Comedy

How many times in our own life do we confuse evil as goodness, and goodness as evil? Being encountered by God in the world can be easily confused as evil. How often in our own lives do we interpret sufferings as a burden or being harshly treated by God? To break such confusion, Levinas teaches us to live 'beyond being' or 'otherwise than being'. However, these are very enigmatic teachings that often leave the reader hoping for any practical examples to decode Levinas' phenomenological language. The task of comprehending Levinas' writings is itself a laborious task. For example he refers to the trace of the 'divine comedy' in ambiguous terms as 'transcendence to the point of absence'.[72] Surprisingly, he does give a practical example for this by paralleling it with 'the [that] laughter sticks in one's throat as the neighbour approaches'.[73]

Now what possible cosmological and theological association could we make with such an explanation? I realise to pose such a question is to depart from Levinas' thought as his interests did not specifically lie explaining the origins and

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[71] By 'surviving death' I am referring (1) to the Jewish people's survival of the 'second' death, to the death of all Jews that Hitler tried to eventuate, and (2) that Christ survived his death through the resurrection.

[72] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 166.

[73] Ibid.

nature of the universe in cosmological and theological terms. I think the essential point is the starting point for theological-cosmological considerations must begin with ethics, for our love for the neighbour. Any discovery about the universe and our place in it speaks of a kenotic participation in God's divine plan for the world. In Levinasian terms this translates as being like God, the soul of the universe.

The Soul of the Universe

'The soul of the universe' is another enigmatic phrase that Levinas borrows from Rabbi Haim of Volozhin. It points specifically to the principle of justice in God [*Elohim*] that we too find in ourselves as images of God. In another guise in Levinas' thought, the role of being the soul of the universe is articulated as substituting for the other as a hostage. To substitute one's freedom for the other's well-being is to transcend the absolute emptiness (the 'there is') that seeks to trap and then sap the 'universe' of all created goodness. Evil is overcome through suffering for the other, and this is why Levinas defines 'substitution for another' as 'the condition – or the unconditionality – of being a hostage'.[74] The evil suffered on the neighbour's face - branded on his or her 'wrinkled skin'[75]- is apprehended by the hostage as if they are 'cries … already addressed to God'.[76]

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[74] Ibid., 167.

[75] Ibid.

[76] Ibid.

Just as the 'there is' is conceived as a rumbling silence, the silence upon the face of the poor one resounds to the responsible hostage. Awakening to these poignant cries despite one's own needs and afflictions, is for the hostage to realise that he or she can never be passive enough to the other's destitution. There is an infinite obligation. Levinas is fond of quoting Dostoyevsky's, *The Brothers Karamazov*, 'Each of us is guilty before everyone, for everyone and for each one, and I more than the others.'[77] Just as God has never finished creating the universe, so we are challenged to never finish 'emptying myself of myself'[78] of all one's needs, greed, and narcissistic pursuits of life. The hostage – responsible to the point of insomnia – represents the soul of the universe par excellence. Whenever one gives the food out of one's very own mouth to the poor one, one is witnessing to the Infinite and to the reality that God saw all creation as good.

The Secret of Gyges[79]

Desire is a very common experience. When we are young, we desire our family and friends and things that give pleasure. This pattern of desire continues through our life. It is only through conversion, through proclaiming, 'Here I am!' to the neighbour, that one experiences 'the glory of a long desire'. In this experience, the Infinite – the Logos – speaks 'through my mouth'[80] in order to

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[77] Ibid.,168.

[78] Ibid., 169.

[79] The story of Gyges, who finds a magic ring that makes him invisible, is related in Book II of Plato's *Republic*. See Plato, *The Republic and Other Works*, translated by B. Jowett (New York: Achor Books, 1989), 43-44.

[80] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 170.

break 'the bad silence which harbours Gyges's secrecy'.[81] The secret of Gyges,[82] in one sense, is like the silent rumbling of the 'there is' that seeks to totalise its victims into anonymous existence. Through reflection, the secret of evil is revealed, and above all through the ethical life one perceives the invisible suffering of the poor one. Answering for our neighbour's poverty through the sacrifice of one's time, energies, wealth and spirit is to open up the horizon of infinite goodness in a universe of expanding hope. Gyges' secret action of seducing the queen and usurping the kingdom speaks of the dark side of the human ego. Left to our own pleasure-seeking needs, one becomes a tyrant. This is what Levinas means by 'being'. However, to be 'otherwise than being' is to be 'in the name of God'[83] a hostage of the poor one. Such a kenotic life of being for the other is the secret of the universe witnessing to the glory of the Infinite God. The life of kenosis is the glorious transformation of being a new creation. From the standpoint of Christian faith, it is the Lord Jesus Christ who 'will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself' (Phil 3:21).

4. Levinas and the Eucharist

In Levinas' writings on 'Judaism and Christianity,'[84] he tries to deconstruct the meaning of the Christian Eucharist. For him, the true Eucharistic sacrifice is the expiating responsibility one takes for the poor one. Levinas

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[81] Ibid.

[82] 'The secret of Gyges' is 'the subject that sees without being seen, without exposing himself, the secret of the inward subject'. (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being*, 145).

[83] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 170.

[84] See Levinas, *In the Time of Nations*, 161-66.

asserts: 'Having learned later the theological concepts of transubstantiation and the eucharist, I would tell myself that the true communion was in the meeting with the other, rather than the bread and the wine, and that it was in the encounter that the personal presence of God resided.'[85]

Theologically, the Eucharist gives the believer spiritual strength to be in a 'true communion' with the other. The proclamation of the Gospel is demanding. Levinas's dialectical polemic against Christianity helps to reinforce to the Christian the reality of living the life of 'eucharistic sacrifice' demands the imitation of Christ. There is much the Christian and Christian theology can learn from Levinas' understanding of 'Eucharist'.

Levinas emphasises Eucharistic living as analogous to the spiritual understanding of 'God's kenosis' and 'the humility of God's presence on earth'.[86] Isn't the celebration of the Christian Eucharist a sign of God's true presence with us on earth? At the heart of the Eucharist are the paschal mystery and the call to live one's life in a paschal way. Levinas' metaphysics underlines this meaning by emphasising the religious ethic of being responsible for the other's death:

> I think in responsibility for the Other, one is, in the final analysis, responsible for the death of the other. Is not the rectitude of the other's look an exposure par excellence, an exposure unto death? … This is probably the foundation of sociality and of love without *eros*. The fear for

[85] Ibid.

[86] Ibid.

> the death of the other is certainly at the basis of the responsibility for him.[87]

In the celebration of the Eucharist, Christ's sacrifice for us is understood as the divine action of God's love for us (Jn 3:16). In Christ, the triune God feared for our death; moreover our eternal death. Christ's fear for our death was encountered par excellence on the Cross – in his death. Christ's death meant the Eucharistic communion of God eternally being with us, despite our lack of responsibility and sinfulness.

In dying, Christ through the Resurrection bears the fruit of God's salvific presence with us. No longer is death to be feared. No longer are we alone for Christ is with us in the form of having a 'Eucharistic' love for the neighbour. In dying, Christ's face upon the Cross proclaimed, 'Thou shalt not kill!' The Eucharist commemorates the sacredness of life and the reality that disinterested love for the other conquers death. Where the poor one is fearful of death or frightened by a rumbling silence, this neighbour whom we have never known or never wanted to know, is the locus of God's 'rumbling,' calling us to partake of Eucharistic communion with the poor one.

Levinas' metaphysics emphasises a love free of eroticism: the love of one's neighbour. This is sociality or, in Christian theology, it can be coined as Eucharistic living. What makes Levinas negatively interpret erotic love? It is because such love is exclusive and fed by one's personal needs and hunger for

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[87] Levinas, *Ethics and Infinity*, 119.

pleasure. It is not disinterested love. Erotic love is the life of 'being' (being for oneself). Levinas' prophetic ethical metaphysics – immersed in the wisdom of the Talmud and directed by the memory of the *Shoah* – mirrors the experience of Christ. Is not the death of Christ a kenosis? Is not the *Shoah* a 'passion' and a kenosis wherein the faith of every Jew in God was infinitely tested?

The Eucharist is itself a sign of the commandment, 'Thou shalt not kill!' Levinas reflects: 'To give oneself totally to the other to respond to his unspoken request, to the expression of his face, to his mortality, his 'Thou shalt not kill.''[88] Developing a theology of the Eucharist with Levinas' metaphysics helps to give clarity to Christ's mission and the Trinity's love for us through the Eucharist. Christ's mission is kenotic to the point of self-emptying himself on the Cross. This symbolises that we are not alone in death and suffering. God is with us in the ruins of our human spirit. Triune love is experienced not only through partaking of the Eucharist, but also in the Eucharistic communion of hearing the Word of God in the neighbour's face. The Holy Spirit awakes our spirit and conscience to the command of the other's face. The inner secret revealed to our spirit and conscience is that 'God writes straight with crooked lines'.[89] Even though we follow a 'crooked road'[90] and we are at times broken to the point of despair, we are nonetheless responsible for each other and for the whole universe. The host is broken during the Eucharist, and so symbolically our broken lives are offered to God as an expiating sacrifice. Our sacrifice is to be 'otherwise than

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[88] Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, 164.

[89] Levinas, Ethics and Infinity, 110.

[90] Ibid.

being': ethically responsible for the other's death. All our mind, heart, soul and strength share in the Eucharistic love of the triune God.

Conclusion: L'chaim – to Life!

A common thread in intuiting various Christian theological themes from the works of Levinas is kenosis. It underlies expiation, substitution, infinite responsibility, and disinterested love. Kenosis is the grace of holiness that seeks to reconstruct the ruins of the spirit broken by economic oppression and political violence. To perceive God in the neighbour is to attend to the neighbour's suffering. It is to hear his or her cries, moans and sighs. To enter the neighbour's world is to behold a naked face. The face is full of destitution because it is suffering. The trace of goodness has never been present.

I have pointed out that any thinking about the origins of the universe must begin with ethics. For the Christian, this gives an insight to the question, 'Who is Christ?' How can we learn about Christ if we do not seek to participate in the triune drama of goodness? Christ himself took on the world's insoluble problems infested by power, envy and pride. If we too, like Christ, answer before the suffering neighbour with our lives, then perhaps the Divine Word may in fact be articulated. The problem with any knowledge by itself is its possibilities to control and destroy. However, knowledge with a foundation of ethics produces hope especially to overcome the insoluble problems of human suffering and evil. Does not the glory of the Cross and Resurrection testify to the victory over human death and sin?

Levinas' metaphysics is a valuable tool for Christian theology. It emphasises that Christian theology is imbued by philosophy. Just as Aristotle proved of enduring value for Aquinas, Levinas and the whole tradition of Husserlian phenomenology is a valuable partner for Christian theology. What makes Levinas' works also appealing is the presence of the Talmud in his writings. The Talmud in many ways has been a tradition that has barely been present to Christian theology. Through the transposition of Christian theology to Levinas' metaphysics, the Talmud is made available – at least for Christian academics.

In responding to the following lines of a talmudic text[91], 'A Sadducee saw Raba buried in study holding his fingers beneath his foot and rubbing it so hard that blood spurted from it,' Levinas writes:

> As if by chance, to rub in such a way that blood spurts out is perhaps the way one must 'rub' the text to arrive at the life it conceals. Many of you are undoubtedly thinking, with good reason, that at this very moment, I am in the process of rubbing the text to make it spurt blood – I rise to the challenge.[92]

In this article, I have indeed tried to 'rub' at Levinas's writings 'to make it spurt blood'. It is a bold challenge particularly because Levinas is Jewish and to

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[91] 'Tractate Shabbath, pp. 88a and 88b.' (Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, 30-31).

[92] Ibid., 46.

transpose Christian theology to Levinas' philosophy runs the risk of Christian imperialism. Despite this danger, Levinas' writings offer a meeting place for Christian and Jewish academics. The meeting place is one of ethics. Ethics is a common ground for Christians and Jews especially because of the primary ethic of the love of one's neighbour. Although, I have tended not to be critical of Levinas' writings, except in isolated instances concerning the difficulty of interpreting them, there are several limitations. What seems to stand out is the lack of understanding the importance of joy. Should not the life of responsibility for the neighbour be one of joy? Having encountered and reflected upon the world's tragedies, Levinas' writings become very grave and exhortative. For Christians, the paschal life is not only a burden to be made light by Christ, but also the possibility for joy (cf. Luke 15:10). The absence of joy in Levinas' thought points to an important contribution for Christian theology to offer to ethical metaphysics.

Theology must never be dormant. Ultimately, one only has a partial understanding of God. Developing the theological themes in the context of Levinas' writings such as God, the love of one's neighbour, the paschal mystery, evil, sin, cosmology and the Eucharist is to attempt 'to arrive at the life' Levinas 'conceals' for Christianity. This life is the prophetic teaching of infinite responsibility and that each of us is 'the soul of the universe'. Possessing the dignity of 'the soul of the universe' is to share in God's kenosis and suffering. Our suffering is not useless. Levinas gives us a good reason to live. Being responsible for the other before our personal freedom is life. This is the witness of glory proclaiming, 'L'chaim!'