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Interfaith dialogue and transcendence: Being face-to-face

Glenn J. Morrison

University of Notre Dame Australia, glenn.morrison@nd.edu.au

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Interfaith Dialogue and Transcendence: being face-to-face

My favourite philosopher is Emmanuel Levinas. He was born in Kaunas, Lithuania in 1905 and died, Christmas day in 1995. His philosophical and Talmudic scholarship and writings especially during the past thirty years have had a defining influence upon the direction of Western thought. His influence has also flowed over to Christian theology. Indeed, he was very happy for Christian theologians to develop their writings using his ideas.

Particularly, what makes me so enamoured by his thought is the way that he opens meaning into life itself. Our experience is often characterised by the way we think about and see the world. Our senses provide a lens to understand and process our existence and reality. Even the mention now of 'existence' and 'reality' can provide some level of vertigo! Levinas' philosophy, however, is more than a mere guide to life. He speaks as a modern day biblical prophet, challenging the way we interpret our reality of life in the world with the wisdom and insight that often lies hidden from our everyday existence, freedom, choices and responsibility. If we listen to his call to care for the stranger, the orphan and the widow, we are not far from having a sense of peace and savouring God's promise of healing for those who are near and far (Isa. 57: 19).

Levinas speaks to us as a prophet. The presentiment and memory of the Shoah are never far from his writings. Living through the horror of Hitlerism and the near extinction of European Jewry, Levinas encountered a grave insight about evil itself. Evil is always an excess that aims at us and seeks us out. It devours personhood and mutates life into a depersonalised and anonymous existence. Evil contaminates the human soul mocking all that is good. However, experiencing evil, Levinas knew that suffering is not useless and for nothing. Facing evil and the encounter of death, he began to hear the word of God and envisage a future world of what no ear has heard or eye has seen (Isa. 64:4). He found the word of God in the other's face, the poor one who hungers for a little good, a piece of bread and food from the other's mouth.

Listening to the outrage of the other, encountering the pain and tragedy of fear, loss and desolation, our philosopher Levinas encountered a moment so shocking and overwhelming: the nakedness of the human face. For the most part, we cannot see the other's face in all its mystery and truth. However, there are moments where the word of God comes to mind revealing feelings and emotions that lie hidden and repressed in our language and thoughts. And it is here that we can learn so much from Levinas' philosophy and Talmudic writings about the challenge of interfaith dialogue, and the necessity to move beyond our self-interested and competitive concerns to the world and feelings of the other.

Interfaith dialogue demands transcendence towards the sacred reality of the other's face. The other is always sacred. In the other's face we hear the word of God ordering us to journey into ways of peace, healing and compassion. These are the ways of loving our neighbour with all our heart, mind, strength and hope.

The other's face is an enigma. Given that our identity contains levels of mystery, the face becomes an entry point to begin to enter into the enigma of the other. Yet, we are indeed strange beings. We become strangers to ourselves and to others. However, facing reality and discerning its contours and colours evokes the hope to partake of wisdom and maturity. The other's face offers the gift of God's word to lead us to learn ways of gentleness, hospitality, intimacy and prayer.

Moreover, the other's face opens a world of interpersonal relations and bodiliness. Encountering the other's outrage and pain, we give meaning to suffering as compassion: to suffer through the suffering of the other. Being exposed to the other's wounds, to be wounded through the woundedness of the other, we learn that sacrifice is an integral part of compassion. And partaking of joy, being joyful through the joy of the other, we discover the truth of bodiliness: the transcendence of love. The art of bodiliness, of developing a life of compassion, sacrifice and love, becomes a response to God's word living and breathing in the other's face. Where interfaith dialogue unveils moments of the heart and gentleness, friendships may well begin to sprout, and this can lead to a whole manner of transcendent encounters that ultimately lead us beyond dialogue towards a messianic era and a future world of partaking of an ancient and Edenic vintage of being a gift of self for the other.

Remaining at the heart of interfaith dialogue is the challenge to develop our emotional sensibility of the other's life and world. Consequently, encountering the other's face in dialogue demands a difficult freedom to take courage and confidence to be gentle and sensitive to the other's world and emotions. Naturally in dialogue, we are led by one another's ideas and thoughts. Yet emotions have equal weight. The other's face contains something so overwhelming and wonderful, namely God's word that is full of emotional weight and value. And by listening attentively to the other's way of expression, we will begin naturally to take on an emotive way of life that is on the near side of the soul.

If interfaith dialogue leads us to the sacred space of encountering the other's soul, here we will find a place to encounter meaning, wisdom, healing and the promise of peace. Interfaith dialogue evokes spirituality and transcendence. Where God's word becomes an integral part of the face-to-face relation in interfaith dialogue, nurturing a spirituality of openness and gentleness will facilitate horizons of creativity, friendship and beauty. Levinas' thought has much to offer, and his thinking has led me to realise how emotions and the life of the soul are deeply connected to our everyday thoughts and actions. In a practical way, this means that the success of essential interfaith dialogue demands the sense and sensibility that everything good, true and beautiful begins and ends in love and gentleness.

Associate Professor Glenn Morrison
Chairperson