ResearchOnline@ND

Theology Book Chapters

School of Theology

2008

The (im)possibilities of Levinas for Christian Theology: the search for a language of alterity

Glenn J. Morrison
University of Notre Dame Australia, gmorrison@nd.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: http://researchonline.nd.edu.au/theo_chapters

THE UNIVERSITY OF
NOTRE DAME
AUSTRALIA

Reference: Glenn Morrison, "The (im)possibilities of Levinas for Christian Theology: the search for a language of alterity" in J. De Tavernier, J. A Selling, J. Verstraeten and P. Schotsmans, eds, *Festschrift Roger Burggraeve: Responsibility, God and Society. Theological Ethics in Dialogue.* Bibliotheca Ephemeridum Theologicarum Lovaniensium, 217. Leuven: Peeters, 2008, 103-122.

The (im)possibilities of Levinas for Christian Theology: the search for a language of alterity

Short description: The paper aims to show how Levinas' philosophy opens up a style of thinking and suggests a vocabulary of expression that can serve Christian theology, especially by opening the possibility of a language of alterity, or radical "otherness", in theology. At the very risk of falling into the language of onto-theology, the paper will make use of a number of Levinasian notions to enhance Hans Urs von Balthasar's theological reading of John 20:19-23 and his analogy of the transcendentals. The sense of the non-phenomenality of Christ's otherness will be pivotal to our inquiry and our hope to unite theological language and ethical transcendence together.

An intense interest is emerging between the connection between the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and Christian theology. In a number of countries, especially Holland, Belgium, France, the United States, Italy and South America, Levinas' work has found its greatest readership among Christian philosophers and theologians.[1] To this list of countries I would also add the United Kingdom and Australia where a growing number of authors, and in particular, Michael Purcell, Graham Ward, Michael Barnes, David Ford and Terry Veling have related Levinas' ideas to particular theologians, saints or to specific areas of theology.[2]

As with the writers I have referred to, I have found that the writings of Emmanuel Levinas contain many ideas of value for Christian theology. One of my major courses of study has

---

[1] See Adriaan T. Peperzak, "The Significance of Levinas's Work for Christian Thought," 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), 184-185.

[2] See Michael Purcell, *Mystery and Method: The Other in Rahner and Levinas* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998); Graham Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); David Ford, *Self and Salvation: Being Transformed* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and Terry Veling, *Practical Theology: "On Earth and It Is in Heaven"* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

been using Levinas' thought to enhance the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar.[3] My method here involved:

(i)   Remarking on Christian theology's discovery of Levinas' philosophy;

(ii)   Introducing three of the major influences of Levinas' philosophy, namely Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger and Franz Rosenzweig;

(iii)   Presenting a number of Levinasian notions to critique and complement the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar under some eleven headings: the *there is*; time, the Other, God, encounter, exposure, passivity, prayer, having a sense, truth and ethical transcendence;

(iv)   Recontextualising, through Levinasian analysis, major sections of von Balthasar's theology (aesthetics, dramatics and logic), namely his treatment of Holy Saturday, the Resurrection, Trinitarian and Soteriological "Inversion", and truth as participation;

(v)   Attempting to develop a prolegomenon to a Trinitarian *praxis*. Intrinsic to the very understanding of this Trinitarian *praxis* is the notion of alterity to such a degree that ethical transcendence is the very inspiration for theology if it is to go beyond the limits of objectivity, being and presence. The prolegomenon, therefore, contains an articulation of Trinitarian *praxis* in the context of ethical transcendence, eschatology and soteriology. To this end, I particularly employed Levinas' ideas of passivity and otherness to critique von Balthasar's eschatological conception of Christian existence and his soteriological understanding of the eucharist.

(vi)   Providing abundant references to Husserl, Heidegger and Rosenzweig at various junctures in this study as Levinas and von Balthasar have both used their writings; and

(vii)   Finally, critically examining the views of four Christian theologians who have been influenced by Levinas (Purcell, Ward, Barnes and Ford) whilst bringing Levinas and von Balthasar in conversation.

The method here provided an horizon to conclude that, with the aid of Levinas' ideas, theology is offered the possibility of breaking out of the limits imposed by traditional notions of objectivity, being and presence. In reaching such a conclusion, I found new ways of

---

[3] See my PhD Dissertation, *Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis* (Australian Catholic University, 2004).

speaking of the Christian mysteries such as Holy Saturday and the Resurrection, in a non-phenomenal manner. Using Levinas' ethical metaphysics, I further discovered that the deepest problem to be faced by a theology is one of giving priority to the ethical over the ontological. Consequently, by learning from Levinas, I argued for a conception of Christian life that goes beyond the categories of ontology and experience. Accordingly, I proposed a notion of Trinitarian *praxis* in which we come to God by way of ethical transcendence. In other words, we come to God by taking to heart the biblical call to be like God, welcoming the stranger, the widow and the orphan (Deut 10:18-19). Trinitarian *praxis* is being sensitive, open and intent enough to love our neighbour.

Furthermore, I have found Walter Kasper's theology, pastoral care and counselling and understanding psychosis as other germane contexts for developing Christian theology through a Levinasian lens.[4] These connections reveal that there are a variety of possible contexts for Levinas' pure philosophical thought to be related. As a result, we can imagine ways to theologise beyond the categories of objectivity, presence and being.

Given that Levinas' thought has brought out the ethical significance of the Bible with the language of alterity, can we not do the same for theology? The (im)-possibilities lie on whether theology can ultimately be done beyond ontology, and further, whether it can return back to being with transcendence, peace, prayer and goodness. To begin facing the impossible, the ambiguity of developing a sense of transcendence in being despite (or otherwise than) being, Christian theology needs a language of alterity in the hope of remaining faithful to intensifying the sense of encounter with Christ and of the other in him.

Though drawing on Levinas' ideas, it has been my assessment[5] that Purcell, Ward, Barnes and Ford, are not prepared to sever their ties with ontology (the search to understand the meaning of Being), intentionality (consciousness itself) and hence, analogy (a method using the categories of Being and consciousness to make rational statements concerning God, humanity and the world).[6] However, I do not blame them, for it is the very road that we all

---

[4] See my articles, "Walter Kasper's Religious Quest for Jesus Christ" *Irish Theological Quarterly*, 72 (Autumn, 2007), 274-294; "Pastoral Care and Counselling: Towards a Post-Metaphysical Theology of Friendship," *Australian EJournal of Theology* (March 2007), 1-21; and "Phenomenology, Theology and Psychosis: Towards Compassion," *The Heythrop Journal* (July, 2007), 561-576.
[5] See my PhD Dissertation, *Levinas, von Balthasar and Trinitarian Praxis*.
[6] For a discussion of the various meanings of analogy see Ward, *Barth, Derrida and the Language of Theology*, 71, 97-98, 152.

must take or at least fall into. Whether we believe that Levinas' thought can be appropriately discussed and used with notions of being, or whether, like Levinas, we wish to imagine otherwise, we will nonetheless, at some time, ostensibly or not, choose the good of being (like Purcell) or fall into its very contamination. And whether or not we can discern the difference is another thing. Doing theology with Levinas is both possible and impossible. It is largely possible because Levinas' thought is like a treasury of keys to unlock the mysteries of personhood, prayer and ethics. Yet, we also face a sense of the impossible as the language of alterity itself beckons a whole eternity to be proclaimed. We seem to be always late for the other and find it so hard to welcome our neighbour with a heart and a smile.

Given our paradox, I suggest we need to find ways, as humbly as we can, to approach Levinas writings, discover a whole lexicon of terms, and use them for the benefit of Christian theology. I do not know whether Levinas himself would invite our interest eagerly lest we homogenize his sense of otherness into our personal experience. Yet he may be intrigued to see how we Christian theologians return to his writings with awe, respect and a search for the word of God. As we tremble and find courage to accept the face of the other and learn from Levinas, we may discover a desire to inform our conscience with personal responsibility for those on the margins of society. With this in mind, we may also move from a sense of panic at facing the immensity of Levinas' complex writings towards an emerging and prophetic process of finding a rational way to speak of both the incomprehensible other and infinite God.

Fundamentally, Levinas' thought might become possible for theology when we seek to renew essence or the process of being within the language of alterity, and thus conceive of theology otherwise than its ontological and phenomenal constructions that might lead us away from ethics, justice and mercy. In order to seek out the language of alterity, we will risk being thrown into the language of onto-theology in which the word God is sterilised by the tyranny of public and post-modern delusions that cry "me, me, me!" Hence, granted that it is possible to encounter the word of "God", it would not be unlikely to imagine a difficult condition of alterity, which, in turn, will demand that *theoria* and *praxis* must coincide. In a Levinasian sense, alterity or otherness refers to being made responsible by the Other to such a degree that it overwhelms the intentionality of consciousness. More fundamental still, the self is obliged to sacrifice for the Other to the point of expiation.

The grave implication to do theology with Levinas is to take on the difficult freedom of a biblical, kenotic life for others. Facing this honestly, through the recognition of responsibility for the other, may provide a possibility to traverse the conatus and effort of philosophical intelligence. In other words, the testimony of ethical subjectivity aims to go beyond any form of philosophical objectivity. Facing the question of the impossibilities or possibilities of using Levinas' thought for Christian theology is also to wrestle with the categories of objectivity, presence and being for finding a rational way of speaking of God. Consequently, considering the possibility of Levinas for Christian Theology, we want to begin to conceive of a language of alterity.

As I have indicated, Levinas' complex lexicon brims with new and suggestive terms. Many of them such as the *there is*, trace, diachrony, ambiguity, immemorial past, the face, the Other, otherness, *illeity*, the Saying, testimony, incarnation, God, encounter, passivity, substitution, expiation, sacrifice, gift, conscience, death, prayer, truth, transcendence and humiliation beg to be translated into a Christian theological context. Any attempt to employ and apply these terms for theological purposes will encounter resistance from those ideologically opposed to Levinas. For example, avoiding the significance of the non-phenomenality of the face, some objectors might read the notion of the Levinasian Other as an abstraction without a personal and essential content. Others could simply be opposed to any scent of "leashing" Levinas' thinking for reconceptualising Christian theology as it may result in facile and even tendentious simplifications.

Given that Levinas himself was open to engaging with Christianity through writings and friendships, and that many Christian theologians are taking his thought seriously, it is my contention that Christian theology should likewise befriend Levinas' thought with interest and care. As we begin to hear the word of God resound in Levinas, we can begin also to explore the possibility for theology to partake of his writings. Further, we might even dream of the impossible, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9)", that is to say, to hope that a common ground and a common friendship can be found between Jews and Christians through the study of Levinas' writings.

In sum, Levinas' thought and style are, as all admit, of unusual difficulty. His writings are never easy, given the complexity, enigma and rigour of his style. Adriaan Peperzak, to give

but one instance, implies that it is impossible to arrive at a complete overall grasp of his thought.[7] But Richard Cohen argues against trying to simplify or systemise it, or even relate too quickly to other disciplines, lest it be reduced to the ordinary level of moral imperatives.[8] It seems clear that Levinas does not leave us with a body of thought or system in any recognisable sense, as though he was dealing with a particular theory or ethical project. It is more a deeply person-centred philosophy of moral conscience, developed in a context made up of a certain range of interlocutors. Clearly the conviction animating my argument is that Levinas' thinking should not be "totalised" in its complexity, but be respected in its capacities to inspire fresh deconstructive possibilities in other disciplines, above all, in theology.

My special concern now will be engaging the theology of von Balthasar, no less a complex and many-faceted thinker than Levinas himself. In this regard, the inquiry will be limited to exemplifying my approach through firstly enhancing his study of John 20:19-23 where the risen Jesus identifies himself to the disciples, greets them with peace and initiates their mission with the power of the Holy Spirit. Our aim here is to focus on the non-phenomenality of the Resurrection in the specific context of von Balthasar's theological aesthetics. His reflection of the disciples' encounter with the Risen Christ in Jn 20:19-23 provides a context to theologise with the language of alterity. Secondly, and lastly, delving further into Jn 20: 19-23, I hope to show that the Risen Christ's otherness provides a foundation for an ethical metaphysical articulation of the transcendentals rather than an analogical and ontological one which underpins von Balthasar's theology.

Facing the (im)possibilities of using Levinas for Christian theology, I will employ four aspects of Levinas' idea of *illeity* (diachrony, the immemorial, effacement and ambiguity), his sense of the non-phenomenality of the face, and his ideas of the Third, the *there is*, individuation, encounter, expiation and the Good beyond being. In all truth, by seeking to go beyond von Balthasar's language of theology to refer to the Risen Christ, will most likely result in the impossibility of keeping faithful to von Balthasar's theological boundaries. Indeed, it may seem like trespassing upon his thought as a means for developing a language of alterity for theology. Yet, it is a risk and a trespass worth attempting to traverse beyond

---

[7] See Adriaan Peperzak (ed.), *Ethics as First Philosophy. The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature and Religion*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), 184.
[8] Richard A. Cohen, "Difficulty and Mortality: Two Notes on Reading Levinas," *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 7:1 (Spring, 2000), 59-61.

essence towards transcendence. We come, then, to a study of John 20:19-23 with von Balthasar and Levinas.

A Study of John 20:19-23 with von Balthasar and Levinas

Jn 20:19-23 follows on Jesus' self-disclosure to Mary Magdalene and her announcement to the disciples of what she has seen and heard. The passage reads as follows:

> When it was evening on that day, the first day of the week, and the doors of the house where the disciples had met were locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you." After he said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples rejoiced when they saw the Lord. Jesus said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you." When he had said this, he breathed on them and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sin of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."

Commenting on this passage, von Balthasar explains the sending as, "an existential participation in Jesus' self-abandonment, in which the Holy Spirit 'blows' (Jn 3:8) or is (Jn 7:39)".[9] The participation is connected with a sacramental experience of eucharist and reconciliation. In this, the reality of the Risen Christ surpasses that of a mediator because his identity is the eucharist, the forgiveness of sins in the condition of self-abandonment. The Holy Spirit "blows or is" in Jesus' eucharistic identity, enabling the disciples to receive the Easter gift of the power to forgive sins.[10] It follows that Christ is accessible in his sacramentally objective mode, while the Holy Spirit is an object of knowledge and experience within such a mode of objectivity.

Much of von Balthasar's presentation of Christ - from the Incarnation through to the Resurrection – is structured by his use of analogy of being and the transcendentals. Reflecting on the analogy of the transcendentals, von Balthasar writes:

---

[9] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, A Theological Aesthetics, Vol. VII, Theology: The New Covenant*, translated by Brian McNeil (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 151.

[10] See von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. VII*, 151-152.

God does not come primarily as a teacher for us ('true'), as a 'redeemer' for us (good), but to display and to radiate himself, the splendour of his eternal triune love in that 'disinterestedness' that true love has in common with true beauty'. For the glory of God the world was created through it and for its sake the world is also redeemed.[11]

Given von Balthasar's privileging of beauty and its associated disinterestedness, there is the possibility of thinking beyond and outside his phenomenal and ontological framework. In the passage just cited, he describes God objectively as a teacher, redeemer and one who "radiates himself". More generally, he speaks of God's Being as the interplay between beauty, goodness, truth and glory (*doxa*). In contrast to this, an ethical metaphysical conception of this interplay can be developed through treating the non-phenomenality of the Risen Christ's face in our context of Jn 20:19-23. To take this further, it will be necessary to refer to four aspects of the trace of *illeity*, namely diachrony, the immemorial, effacement and ambiguity. This will provide a basis to return to von Balthasar's analogical language of the transcendentals for theology in the hope of thinking otherwise with the language of alterity. Accordingly, alterity rather than analogical thought can provide a way to articulate God's glory, beauty, goodness, truth and unity as ethical transcendence. We press on to uncover the sense of the non-phenomenality of Christ's otherness and face.

The non-phenomenality of Christ's Face

In the resurrection narrative, the disciples are faced with the otherness of the Risen Christ. Here, we keep in mind that Christ's otherness in its fullest dimensions also signifies the Holy Spirit in the depth of the Risen One. In their approach to Christ in his risen appearance, the disciples are described by John as rejoicing when they see the Lord. We could imagine that the disciples rejoice or go generously towards the Risen Christ because they have been faced by him in a metaphysical sense. Their encounter with Christ (Jn 20) is beyond phenomenal experience, thus presuming an ontological unveiling of truth. At this point the question arises as to how the disciples might express the Risen Christ's otherness? The resolution of such a quandary lies in their sacrificial action in their desire to participate in Christ's self-

---

[11] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work: In Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 80. See also Angelo Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar. A Theological Style*, (Grand Rapids MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Compnay, 1995), 37.

abandonment.   In other words, the otherness or the non-phenomenality of Christ's face commands the disciples to exist beyond their death like the Risen Christ himself.   Thus summoned with a morality of "being otherwise" than existing in the limits imposed by their own death, the disciples have the possibility of thinking of what had been closed to them, namely the incomprehensibility of Christ's abandonment to the Father's will.   Their experience and thought demand a language of alterity by which to express the desire to participate in Jesus' self-abandonment through the Spirit to the Father.

We must go further in this consideration of the non-phenomenality of the Resurrection, as we pick up again on the notion of desire. The disciple's desire for Christ unfolds as a plot of individuation and expiation as identity and alterity are united. Like Christ's individuation on Holy Saturday, the disciples' individuation depends on the non-phenomenality of an encounter. The idea of non-phenomenality is important because it makes space for the word "God" to be pronounced. Levinas states: "The direct encounter with God, *this* is a Christian concept. As Jews, we are always a threesome: I and you and the Third who is in our midst. And only as a Third does He reveal Himself".[12] The idea of "the Third" speaks of the trace of *illeity* and of a triadic structure between the I, the other and God. In such a Levinasian frame of reference, we can conceive of the Resurrection from a different angle. Even though the disciples are face to face with Christ, it is the non-phenomenal aspect of the encounter that is more significant, as can be indicated in reference to the trace of *illeity* and its bearing on the otherness of the Risen Christ.

The Trace of Illeity

The idea of the trace of *illeity* provides a non-phenomenal sense of the Risen Christ's otherness. We can discern then that it is not surprising that the disciples cannot make an authentically individuative response until Christ breathes the Spirit upon them.   Before receiving the Spirit, they are in a state of confusion as Luke's Gospel describes, "They were startled and terrified, and thought they were seeing a ghost" (Luke 24:37). With this in mind, let us consider how Levinas distinguishes *illeity* from the *there is*, the better to explicate the otherness that the Gospel witnesses to. He writes:

---

[12] Seán Hand (ed.), *The Levinas* Reader (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), 247.

> Ethics is not a moment of being; it is otherwise and better than being, the very possibility of the beyond. In this ethical reversal, in this reference of the desirable to the non-desirable, in this strange mission that orders the approach to the other, God is drawn out of objectivity, presence and being. He is neither an object nor an interlocutor. His absolute remoteness, his transcendence, turns into my responsibility – non-erotic par excellence – for the other. And this analysis implies that God is not simply the "first other," the "other par excellence," or the "absolutely other," but other than the other [*autre qu'autrui*], other otherwise, other with an alterity of the other, prior to the ethical bond with another and different from every neighbour, transcendent to the point of absence, to the point of possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is*.[13]

Levinas states that for God to be drawn out of objectivity, presence and being, ethics must be conceived as the very possibility of the beyond. The ethical metaphysical idea of God is otherwise and better than essence. God can only be truly meant in reference to the neighbour's proximity and the self's responsibility for this Other. God's transcendence is an ethical signification of what is beyond essence. Furthermore the trace of God in the Other's face is described in four ways:

● diachronic ("other with an alterity of the other");

● immemorial ("prior to the ethical bond");

● effaced ("transcendent to the point of absence"); and

● ambiguous ("to the point of possible confusion with the stirring of the *there is*").

These four aspects of *illeity* (otherness) assist a theological interpretation of Christ's otherness as recounted in Jn 20:19-23. In other words, the event of the Resurrection evokes diachronic, immemorial, effaced and ambiguous aspects of God. This is to argue that the approach inspires the disciples to exist in Christ's victory over the power of death. This conquering of death speaks of substitution to the point of expiation rather than the *conatus* of being.

---

[13] Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), 165-166.

There is diachronic aspect: it approaches God only by way of participation in Jesus' self-surrender. The influence of the Resurrection is immemorial because the disciples have been called by Christ who in turn has been called by the Father before the time of creation to do his will. It leads to effacement because in the presence of Christ a greater absence is signified in the objective world. Lastly, the Resurrection works with a certain ambiguity, in a Levinasian sense, allowing for the possible confusion of *illeity* and the *there is*. Like the stirring of the *there is*, the trace of *illeity* disturbs the self when the neighbour approaches.

We have begun to present how the Spirit of the Risen Christ acts in ways that are diachronic, immemorial, effaced and ambiguous. Here we may insert Levinas' idea of the trace in a manner relevant to our interpretation of von Balthasar. The encounter with the Risen Christ resists what must be reduced to history and memory in the synchrony of time, for it also signifies Christ's Crucifixion and going to the dead on Holy Saturday. The trace of God that marks the Risen Christ, inspires in the disciples a sense of Christ's atonement for humanity. It overwhelms cognition. In other words, when the Risen Christ approaches the disciples, his otherness signifies the trauma of being obedient to the Father's will: this is an unimaginable encounter with the dead in hell. The disciples too must suffer the trauma of being under the obligation to live lives of substitution to the point of expiation. The Spirit which Christ gives, disturbs and opens the disciples' consciousness to the transcendence of Christ in regard to history. Only in the site of transcendence, in this horizon of openness, can they express the word of God in their proclamation of God's Reign. Thus, the otherness of the Risen Christ appears in a non-phenomenal sense, never representable to their consciousness, but rather signified in their responsibility to, and for, others.

To sum up: the Spirit of the Risen Christ inspires in the disciples a mission specified not only by Christ's Crucifixion, but also by his going to the dead. The disciples, like Christ, might be called to live a life of substitution to the point of expiation. A Levinasian "otherness" helps to uncover what lies concealed in Jn 20:19-23. In contrast to von Balthasar, we would argue for a hearing of the Gospel's enigmatic language through the language of alterity. For this purpose, I will firstly examine von Balthasar's understanding of the transcendentals. After

that, I will focus more precisely on the ideas of diachrony, the immemorial, effacement and ambiguity as they relate to Christ' otherness in the resurrection narrative.

The Transcendentals and the Language of Alterity

Von Balthasar's theological aesthetics focus on the form and beauty of God's glory. What he describes and explains has an ontological and phenomenological structure. His aesthetics and, indeed, his whole trilogy uses the analogy of the transcendentals as the lens by which the qualities of God's Being might be experienced. Let us look more closely at the way von Balthasar makes use of the analogy of the transcendentals in his theology. In the following example, he argues that the theological *transcendentale* of glory is in an indissoluble perichoresis with the philosophical *transcendentalia* of the one, the beautiful, the good and the true:

> In so far as *doxa* is a theological *transcendentale*, it necessarily has something in common with the philosophical *transcendentalia* of being (the one, the true, the good, the beautiful): namely, that it exists in an indissoluble perichoresis with these, such that everything that is theologically true is also good and glorious, and everything that is glorious is so to the extent that it is also good and true; for God himself is the original One, and all his self-manifestations bear the seal of this unity. Therefore too all dogmas are only aspects of the one, indivisible, good and beautiful truth of God.[14]

The passage explains the existence of the transcendentals in God on the basis of the analogy between God and statements about God (dogmas). In other words, the analogy of being is the underlying foundation for the analogy of the transcendentals. Von Balthasar emphasises that the philosophical transcendentals are properties of God's Being of glory by speaking of *perichoresis*. This manner of speaking follows from the purpose of theological aesthetics, namely to articulate the qualities of God's Being as dogma in the hope that these qualities can be incorporated into Christian *praxis*.[15] However, in line with Levinas, we might presume to suggest a formulation that is "otherwise than being".

---

[14] von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Vol. VII*, 242-3.
[15] See Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 36-38.

Inasmuch as von Balthasar understands *doxa* to be a theological transcendental quality of God's Being, he must admit that such understanding depends on an ontological unveiling. For him, glory is the Lord's intrusion upon consciousness.[16] In Scola's reading of this matter, he notes, for example, when God's Being is perceived as a formal object, the thematisation of the object of consciousness as the beautiful means to be dominated by God's glory (*doxa*).[17] This is to say that God's glory becomes a manifestation in consciousness intent on explanation and proofs of the qualities of God's Being. In short, *theoria* precedes *praxis*.

Still, von Balthasar's intention is always to protect the reality of divine transcendence. For that reason he employs the various types of analogy. On the other hand, he appears to limit the conception of God to the transcendental properties of being. This analogical position is grounded in a "renewed phenomenology" by which to gaze upon God's glory through representations accessible to the eyes of faith.[18] A counterposition to both von Balthasar's ontology and phenomenology can be developed by way of Levinasian ethical transcendence and sense of otherness. I hope to show that which will throw light on the unique character of the otherness of the Risen Lord – in a manner that evades the constraints of being and phenomenal experience. Specifically, I want to show how the four aspects of the Levinasian idea of the trace of *illeity* (diachrony, immemorial past, effacing and ambiguity) can lead us to an articulation of the beauty, goodness and truth of the risen Christ's glory in the language of alterity.

Diachrony and Immemorial Time

For von Balthasar, the Resurrection, like the death and burial, is "a historically determined event".[19] Furthermore, the idea that Jesus has risen into history amounts to a disclosure of God's Being as love, that is, "the direct presentation of the new eon embodied in Christ".[20] Yet, we are faced with an ambiguity of what remains beyond representation in historical time, as when Christ rises "into history" after his death on the Cross. At this juncture, the Levinasian idea of the trace of *illeity* can be pressed into service. First, let us examine the

---

[16] Aidan Nichols, *The Word Has Been Abroad. A Guide Through Balthasar's Aesthetics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark Ltd, 1998), 99.
[17] See Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 2.
[18] See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic, Theological Logical Theory, Vol. I: The Truth of the World*, translated by Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000), 32-33.
[19] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale. The Mystery of Easter* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1990), 242.
[20] von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale*, 216, 229.

diachronic aspect of the trace and its relevance to a theology of the Resurrection. The event of Resurrection is, in some obvious sense, an interruption of historical time; it disturbs synchronic time with an unthematisable deed and word of God. The "appointed time", the *kairos*, of Jesus' rising into history is not measurable by quantitative "clock time". It introduces a qualitative change in time as it summons to a new sense of time as awakening to responsibility to the other in the light of the Incarnation and Paschal Mystery. The diachronic time of Christ's encounter with the disciples makes up the concreteness of the Resurrection event. It is an encounter outside the disciples' capacity to measure or reduce the appearance of the Risen Christ to an act of their transcendental consciousness. In place of an all-reductive subjectivity, the disciples are overwhelmed by a time-transforming otherness. Through the gift of Holy Spirit, time is torn away from its moorings in the structure of self-sufficiency, to be drawn into a new time of responsibility. In this state of deep passivity, in the all-summoning proximity of the other, the disciples are taken out of themselves, and so disposed to be possessed by the Spirit of Christ.

Hence, the diachrony in the Resurrection event prohibits the disciples trying to grasp Christ's Resurrection as an ontological unveiling or as a synchronic experience. For the objectivity or otherness of the Resurrection is not related to the disciples' transcendental ego, as though Christ were an empirical object or intuited essence. Levinas' understanding of diachrony permits viewing the Resurrection, not as a phenomenal appearance in synchronic time, but more through a pure passivity to the other who comes from beyond the frame of any presence. In this way, Christ's Resurrection breaks open the disciples' consciousness and its thematising propensities. Christ's own state of absolute passivity is the mark of super-individuation effected through the Cross and Holy Saturday. He bears the trauma of the wounds of his obedience to the Father. Having risen from the dead, Christ now faces the disciples in the Spirit of a new time, transcendence and responsibility.

Von Balthasar, however, limits his understanding of the non-phenomenality of the Resurrection. He expresses Jesus' Resurrection more in terms of the synchrony of being rather than the diachrony of time. But the synchrony of being works in reductive fashion, and constricts the full disclosure of truth. In ontological terms, the "truth" of Christ's

Resurrection would be reduced to a thematisation or an objective proposition of experience.[21] In contrast, with a more diachronic inclusion of the Cross and Holy Saturday, the Risen Christ is in the non-obectifiable other facing the disciples. He breathes on them the Holy Spirit (Jn 20:22) and opens their minds to a diachronic understanding of the Scriptures in the light of what God has done and spoken to him (Luke 24:45). Thus they are equipped to proclaim the Good News and forgive sins. These dramatic events do not produce an experience and objective understanding of Christ's being. They are the outcome of Christ facing his disciples, marked with the diachronic trace of obedience to the Father's will.

In the otherness of the face of the Risen Christ, there is both a diachronic and immemorial trace. For Levinas, diachrony and immemorial time are interconnected terms. For diachrony is awakening to the immemorial past as an obligation to be responsible prior to any meaning of freedom. On the basis of the Levinasian idea of immemorial time, I would argue that Christ's otherness inspires a responsibility of such far reaching consequence that answers even for another's responsibility - for it communicates the power to forgive and retain sins (John 19:23). By receiving the Spirit, the disciples enter time in its immemoriality, beyond the measurements, memories or representations of history, as it recalls "in the beginning with God" (John 1:1). Levinas likens this to the "*in*" of infinity.[22]

Through this trace of the immemorial past signified in Christ's mission and Resurrection, the disciples are summoned to their own kind of individuation or non-indifference in the Levinasian sense. Beyond the systematic comprehensions of ontological thought and intuitions of essence, and further than any project of the ego-consciousness, the disciples are subjected to a responsibility to the point of expiation. Such substitutionary responsibility bears the trace of the Crucifixion and Holy Saturday, as it is still embodied in the wounds of the Risen Christ. When faced with the Risen Other, this responsibility cannot be declined. Henceforth, in their new experiences of time, there can be no history that separates them from either Christ or the suffering other.

Effacement and Ambiguity

---

[21] Emmanuel Levinas, *Basic Philosophical Writings*, edited by Adriaan T. Peperzak, Simon Critchley and Robert Bernasconi (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), 99.
[22] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 166.

So far I have spoken of diachrony and the immemorial past in the disciples' encounter with the Risen Christ. An effacement is also implied. For the Spirit comes from Christ to the disciples without showing itself, beyond all categories to the point of invisibility and absence; for their encounter is beyond the domain of essence. Resurrection is related to Holy Saturday, but in a non-phenomenal manner. It penetrates the disciples only on the condition of unconditional receptivity and passivity to the inspiration of the Spirit and the will of the Father. The self-surrender involved with their encounter with Christ parallels Christ's own individuation or self-abandonment on Holy Saturday. As the dead were able to hear the Father's word of salvation through the Spirit, so in the same Spirit emanating from the Risen Christ, do the disciples become witnesses to the offer of salvation to all. In overwhelming consciousness, in turning it inside out and rendering it incapable of containing the event of salvation in any present, God's word is revealed in its transcendence, and its self-effacing character. In short, there is confusion and ambiguity surrounding the revelation of God's word.

The non-phenomenality of Christ's Resurrection also signifies ambiguity. If the Father's word in the Risen Christ betokens a transcendence to the point of absence, it is in reference to the ethical site in which that word can be articulated. The ambiguity involved means that the disciples cannot simply preach salvation to the world apart from their own responsibility. The meaning of salvation must be signified in a place and time when the neighbour's face draws near in all its forsakenness - otherwise God's transcendence will be reduced to essence. Furthermore, the non-phenomenality of the Resurrection has resulted in dogmatic statements (*doxa*) of God's beauty, goodness and truth. But such statements could be proposed within involving responsibility in this Levinasian sense. Hence, theology, if it is intent on appreciating God's transcendent alterity, must grapple with such ambivalence. Theology needs to be critically aware of the ease with which "God" can simply be thematised as a presence in consciousness. When theology tries to conceive of *praxis* and dogma together, it must continually pass through ambiguity, in the realisation that it could fall back into onto-theology and its associated form of presence. Only by way of "a crooked road", as Levinas remarks, can God's word be signified in the world.[23]

---

[23] See Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania: Duquesne University Press, 1999), 147.

Until now I have tried to show how the non-phenomenal characteristics of the Levinasian idea of the trace of *illeity* (otherness), namely diachrony, immemorial past, effacing and ambiguity, provide a unique perspective to the Resurrection. It remains to show how the idea of the Risen Christ's otherness can challenge von Balthasar's analogical understanding of the indissoluble perichoresis between *doxa* (statements about God) and the beautiful, the good and the true. Here, it will be a matter of a concording of dogma and *praxis*.

The Resurrection and the Holy Spirit

When the disciples received the Spirit, they were inspired with the necessary grace to participate in Christ's self-abandonment. In their encounter with Christ, as I read it, the disciples are inspired by his otherness, as he breathes the Holy Spirit on them. In the Spirit of Christ crucified and risen, the disciples are individuated to a life of expiation and responsibility for the lost and the dead. From a different angle, the Spirit-inspired individuation also signifies an indissoluble *perichoresis* between *doxa*, such as in, "If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20:23) and the Paschal encounter with the non-phenomenality of Christ's death, his going to the dead and of his rising from the dead. A concordance of dogma and *praxis* occurs through the disciples' encounter with Christ's otherness. In its light, they are summoned to undertake Christ's mission to the point of expiation, as we have said.

Here we have the opportunity to articulate the beauty, goodness and truth of Christ's glory in the language of alterity. An appreciation of the otherness of Christ provides an alternative to the analogical structure in von Balthasar's idea of the indissoluble *perichoresis* between the theological and philosophical transcendentals. Insofar as *doxa* concords with Christian *praxis* in the context of the Resurrection, it must exist beyond essence, that is through the encounter with the otherness of Christ breathing the Spirit on the disciples. As a result, the glory of the Lord (the beautiful) is testified (the good) through the disciples' state of persecution and humiliation for others (the true). In this way, the otherness of the Risen Christ summons the disciples to live out the beauty, goodness and truth of the Resurrection. Hence, beyond any conception of essence and the event of Being, the otherness of Christ signifies God's glory in its good truth as the life of difficult freedom to the point of expiating for others. In this regard, a priority is placed upon the good.

Where von Balthasar prioritises the beautiful within an ontological scheme, we suggest giving priority, in a non-phenomenal way, to the Good – if we are to come to a critical understanding of the divine glory. In this suggested reprioritisation, the Good is beyond being. It is realised only by way of self-surrender and conformity to the will of the Father, in an extreme state of passivity. In their self-dispossession and dedication to the divine will, the followers of Jesus exist beyond analogical or ontological structure that essence might entail. In this state of exposure, the disciples are vulnerable to accusation and persecution, and awaken to the responsibility of bearing the guilt and wretchedness of others. This surrender of the ontological self for the sake of being responsible for others, resists an analogical objectification. The ethical imperative immeasurably transcends any purely objective thematisations.

Conclusion

Throughout the paper, I have set out to look at the (im)possibilities of a language of alterity for theology. I have emphasised that if God's transcendence is to have meaning, then an approach that passes beyond the ontological must be articulated. Consequently, towards re-contextualising von Balthasar's theology with the language of alterity, I have pursued this new formulation by employing Levinas' ideas of otherness (the trace of *illeity*), the non-phenomenality of the face, the *there is*, encounter, and so forth.

More specifically, I have examined von Balthasar's theology by developing a non-phenomenal sense of the Resurrection. By a selective use of Levinas' thought, I have been able to venture beyond the confinements of phenomenology and ontology to discuss the encounter which took place between the Risen Christ and the disciples.

In this evaluation, I have given priority to Levinas' idea of otherness, and the consequent sense of the non-phenomenal. Further, I have been able to develop the Levinasian ideas of encounter, the face, immemorial time, diachrony, ambiguity, effacement and the Good beyond Being, all in relation to the Risen Christ meeting with the disciples. As a focal text, I have referred frequently to John 20:19-23. Here we found an opportunity to develop von

Balthasar's reflection in regard to Easter Sunday. By applying the Levinasian ideas of *illeity* ("the *he* in the depth of the you"[24]), diachrony, the immemorial, effacement and ambiguity, I have argued that the Spirit in the depths of the Risen Christ works to individuate the disciples, so that they share in the Christ-like self-offering to the Father's will. When Christ breathes the Spirit on the disciples, they begin to speak of the other beyond quantitative clock time, that is to say, proclaim the glory of the Risen Christ. Hence, rather than having *doxa* as the presupposition for Christian *praxis* (in Scola's reading of von Balthasar[25]) in the context of the Resurrection, *doxa* concords with Christian *praxis*.

Furthermore, in reference to von Balthasar's understanding of *doxa* and Christian *praxis*, I argued that the ideas of God's glory, beauty, goodness, truth and unity can be better understood through the idea of Christ's otherness, rather than through analogical thought. This meant bringing out a non-phenomenal understanding of how the Risen Christ's otherness signifies *doxa* (Jn 20:23) in the disciples' disinterestedness. At stake is signifying the encounter with the Risen Christ as encounter beyond essence, and beyond the phenomena of experience, so that divine glory might be proclaimed without reducing it to theological concepts.

Accordingly, Levinas' idea of otherness (trace of *illeity*), with the corresponding aspects of diachrony, the immemorial past, effacement and ambiguity, provided an occasion for developing von Balthasar's idea of the indissoluble *perichoresis* between God's glory (*doxa*) and the one, the beautiful, the good and the true. Rather than providing an ontological and analogical structure to the theological and philosophical transcendentals, it is more appropriate to conceive of them under the aegis of alterity. The transcendence of Christ's otherness, rather than the transcendental ego, should be the locus in which to speak of the indissoluble *perichoresis* between God's glory and the interplay of beauty, goodness and truth.

In coming to speak of the possibility of Levinas' thought for Christian theology, it has been a task full of complexity. I have engaged Levinas' ideas with only a fragment of von

---

[24] Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, 165.
[25] See Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar*, 37.

Balthasar's theology. At first glance, it might seem that these notions may in fact limit theology. However, by bringing out Levinas' non-phenomenal context of alterity, a development is possible. Indeed, he even allows that an ethical metaphysical view of the "Man-God" is possible. He states:

> On the one hand, the problem of the Man-God includes the idea of a self-inflicted humiliation on the part of the Supreme Being, of a descent of the Creator to the level of the Creature; that is to say, an absorption of the most active activity into the most passive passivity.
>
> On the other hand the problem includes, as if brought about by this passivity pushed to its ultimate degree in the Passion, the idea of expiation for others, that is, of a substitution. The identical par excellence, the noninterchangeable, the unique par excellence, would be substitution itself.[26]

In this reflection, Levinas attempts to understand whether the idea of a Man-God can be related to consciousness. For him, these ideas have philosophical value, especially as they point to the limits of phenomenology.[27] But the passage exemplifies why Christian theologians have been naturally attracted to his writings: his ideas touch upon the theological imagination exciting insights and possibilities. In a final word, we seem to learn so much about the Bible and theology from Levinas. His writings have a life, power and spirit of their own because they beckon Christian theologians with meaning and an encounter with the word of God. Levinas is testimony to the sacredness of Judaism for Christianity.

---

[26] Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous, Thinking-Of-The-Other*, translated by Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 53-54.

[27] Levinas, *Entre Nous*, 54. Levinas writes, "These ideas, at first blush theological, overturn the categories of our representation".