

The call to 'radical solidarity': Emmanuel Levinas and John Paul II on religion and human rights

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Abstract

In Western democracies religious freedom can no longer be taken for granted and individuals are experiencing new threats and pressures both politically and culturally. Human rights, refined and legislated for in increasingly intense ways over the last century, is often viewed in absolute terms, whereas the rights of religious believers are viewed as contingent, or seen as lesser rights. Another way of putting it is to suggest that documents concerning human rights are hard and intransigent texts whereas religious commitments (doctrine, teaching, tenets of faith and so forth) are viewed as malleable and ultimately subjective. The dialogue between Karol Wojtyla (Pope St John Paul II) and Emmanuel Levinas highlights the ethical difficulties that arise in such a situation, and how this might place both religion and human rights into a difficult and tense relationship. Wojtyla and Levinas outline some pathways out of this situation, centring upon the incarnate experience of the human person not just as the object of human rights discourse, but as the subject through which such discourse finds its logic.

Introduction

The following exploration of the thought of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) and St John Paul II (Karol Wojtyla, 1920-2005) is done in the context of a contemporary Exposure Draft for a Religious Discrimination Bill under consideration nationally. The draft recognises the right to conscientious objection but problematically says that the right does not matter if state and territory law says otherwise (Section 8(5) and (6)). In such a context, in which personal conscience, informed or not by religious faith, is disregarded by the law, John Paul II and Levinas' dialogue is instructive.

The dialogical I-THOU relationship in Levinas

In a book-length interview with St John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, the Pope speaks of his friend Emmanuel Levinas. John Paul II refers to Martin Buber and Levinas as the '...philosophers of dialogue'.¹ In considering Buber and Levinas, two significant Jewish philosophers in the post-World War II era, John Paul II says:

*...we find ourselves now very close to Saint Thomas, but the path passes not so much through being and existence as through people and their meeting each other, through the "I" and the "Thou". This is a fundamental dimension of man's existence, which is always a coexistence.*²

John Paul II calls attention to the origin of Buberian and Levinasian thinking as it coincides with the Angelic Doctor, St Thomas Aquinas. He asks, '[w]here did the philosophers of dialogue learn this?' and answers immediately with reference to 'their experience of the Bible'.³ For John Paul II, each of Buber, Levinas and Paul Ricœur are not inspired by the text as a cold and lifeless object, but their experiential relationship with what is discovered in that text. It is profoundly the 'experience...' of the '...Bible', imbued with a wealth of symbolic and metaphorical texture, that is able to offer a co-existential vision of the human person to these philosophers. John Paul II is wishing to

¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 36.

² John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 36.

³ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 36.

hold together the universal and the particular in an existential-anthropological description. He writes:

In the sphere of the everyday man's entire life is one of "coexistence" — "thou" and "I" — and also in the sphere of the absolute and definitive: "I" and "THOU". In Biblical terms, the tradition oriented all human experience towards this "THOU", who is the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, then of the Fathers, of Jesus the Christ and of those who inherited their faith.⁴

It seems to me that some of the opposition to including religious practice in the protection of human rights derives from a denial of the every day, of the ordinary, of the coexistence of human experience.

The transcendent dimension cannot be separated from the personalist experience of the God who names himself. He is the primary 'Thou' to one's 'I'. This is not a violence that privileges human presence over transcendence. Rather, it allows John Paul II to claim that to speak of Christian faith is also to consider its sense of the anthropological, in which being and ethics are not understood apart from each other. He goes on:

Our faith is profoundly anthropological, rooted constitutively in coexistence, in the community of God's people, and in communion with this eternal "THOU." Such coexistence is essential to our Judeo-Christian tradition and comes from God's initiative.⁵

It is significant that the orientation towards the divine 'Thou' is one that makes of the 'Thou' the origins of relationship, including that which occurs between people. The divine initiative is what makes one's 'I' an 'I' in the first place, because it is designated by the 'Thou' who alone has the power to name a particular 'I' as a 'thee'. Communion is thus formed in the power of naming and of divine initiation. For John Paul II, such an initiative is connected with creation and leads to creation also. This relates to the Pauline teaching in Eph 1:4, '...the eternal election of man in the Word who is the Son'.⁶ Divine initiative is also one of election, but is extended to the human community most concretely (most obviously en-fleshed) in the Incarnate Word. Even then, the Word is not an abstracted Logos, but the Christ, who is recognised as the divine person by the signification of the familial term: he is the Son of God.

The face in defence of every human life

John Paul II considers also Levinas's philosophy of the face as a defence of the dignity of every human life. In the penultimate chapter of *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 'The Defence of Every Life', Levinas is appealed to for his defence of human dignity. To understand it, it is important to contextualise the lines of thought present in the preceding interview questions. In the intermediary chapters between the first reference to Levinas and this third reference, John Paul II gives his personal response to questions such as Christian belief in the modern era,⁷ religious pluralism⁸ and the Pope's implementation of Vatican II.⁹ A theme that arises throughout the interview is that of human dignity, referred to often in subtle ways and not always directly. However, John Paul II is asked what he understands to be 'authentic human rights' and what he means by 'human dignity'.¹⁰

⁴ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 36.

⁵ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 36.

⁶ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 36.

⁷ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 27-59.

⁸ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 84-100.

⁹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 170.

¹⁰ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 196.

His answer helps to explain his interest in figures such as Levinas. He describes human rights as having been inscribed by the Creator in the order of creation, such that human institutions such as the State or international organisations merely express what is written into the created order from the beginning. Human rights, as fundamental to the relationship of human communities to the world around them, do not derive from the Christian witness, but are rather clarified and confirmed by it. As he writes, '[t]he Gospel is the fullest confirmation of all of human rights. Without it we can easily find ourselves far from the truth about man'.¹¹ The reason for this is that at the heart of the Gospel is the incarnate Son of God, whose redemptive work restores the fullness of human dignity. It is the liturgy that reminds people of this throughout the yearly cycle, especially during Christmas and the Easter Vigil.¹² John Paul II goes on to describe further the historical dimension of his early interest in the dignity of the human person and the Gospel demand that human rights are integral to the human condition.¹³ Earlier, in *Evangelium Vitae*, objection is made to the liberal statist model of human rights as a minimalist social obligation, one that diminishes the role of love in social ethics.¹⁴ That is to say, human rights are not decided by any human institution, and for this reason they are not limited to the horizontal dimension of human knowing and acting, offered as no more than a limitation of the worst tendencies. Human rights are derived from the divinity that precedes and stands over human institutions, such that they have a vertical dimension, calling human beings out of themselves towards a higher, virtuous sociality.

John Paul II concludes with two mutual confirmations: First that the person must be affirmed as a person in his or her fullness and second, that the Biblical command to love may be translated into philosophical terms as the self-gift of the person, one-for-others.¹⁵ He establishes these two confirmations as part of his defence of the Church's role in protecting human dignity and in the defence of universal human rights.

He develops further the theme of human dignity with regards to the notion of life itself as a right that is intrinsic to the Christian notion of human dignity. It is in this context that John Paul II once again refers to Levinas. First, he makes his oft-repeated claim that the 'right to life' is the 'fundamental right', for it provides the foundation for all other human rights, both chronologically and philosophically.¹⁶ It should be noted that the right to life applies to the whole person, from conception until natural death.¹⁷ The protection of this right is connected with the formation of a culture of life, in which responsible parenthood is not overlooked (he encourages it, in conjunction with the freedom that comes from acting responsibly and not to the detriment of any single human individual).¹⁸ A 'radical solidarity' is called for with each woman, such that the choice for life becomes part of a cultural whole, one that honours the role of all persons, including parents.¹⁹ Indeed, the criteria for authentic responsibility amongst every family, human community and ecclesiastical agency is the intentional witness of

¹¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 197.

¹² John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 197.

¹³ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 196-203.

¹⁴ Wojtyla locates in human rights a minimal standard for the beginning of freedom, rather than its fullness or perfection. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae: The Gospel of Life*, 75.

¹⁵ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 202.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 204.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 205.

¹⁸ This follows the language pattern laid out by Paul VI, who is often quoted as encouraging 'responsible parenthood' in the controversial and rarely practiced teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. However, the original Latin of the encyclical actually uses the term '*...paternitatem consciam attingens...*', which, in context, would be better rendered as 'conscious parenthood'. In this light, English language allusions to the encyclical as having some kind of parallel Catholic approach to what some contemporary institutions understand as 'responsible parenthood' lack justification. See Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae, On the Regulation of Birth* (Vatican City, 1968), 10.

¹⁹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 206-07.

an ethic of love. Many persons are viewed by John Paul II as already fulfilling this criteria. Of them he says, '[i]n their lives we find confirmation of the Christian and of the personalistic truth about man, who becomes fully himself to the extent that he gives himself as a free gift to others'.²⁰ In addition, John Paul II calls for greater collaboration between pastors, biologists and physicians.²¹ By reference to so many stake-holders, this is a universal vision.

The pope concludes these thoughts in 'The Defence of Every Life' with the following reference to Levinas. It is helpful to quote it in full:

I cannot dwell here on contemporary thinkers, but I must mention at least one name—Emmanuel Levinas, who represents a particular school of contemporary personalism and of the philosophy of dialogue. Like Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, he takes up the personalistic tradition of the Old Testament, where the relationship between the human "I" and the divine, absolutely sovereign "THOU" is so heavily emphasized.

God, who is the supreme legislator, forcefully enjoined on Sinai the commandment "Thou shalt not kill," as an absolute moral imperative. Levinas, who, like his co-religionists, deeply experienced the tragedy of the Holocaust, offers a remarkable formulation of this fundamental commandment of the Decalogue — for him, the face reveals the person. This philosophy of the face is also found in the Old Testament: in the Psalms, and in the writings of the Prophets, there are frequent references to "seeking God's face" (cf. Ps 26[27]:8). It is through his face that man speaks, and in particular, every man who has suffered a wrong speaks and says the words "Do not kill me!" The human face and the commandment "Do not kill" are ingeniously joined in Levinas, and thus become a testimony for our age, in which governments, even democratically elected governments, sanction executions with such ease.

*Perhaps it is better to say no more than this about such a painful subject.*²²

This reference to Levinas highlights John Paul II's ongoing interest in the notion of the face as an epiphany of the other. For him, this is intrinsically incarnate, whereas for Levinas—as shall be seen—the face is a non-incarnate epiphany of the other. A number of observations and judgements may now be made of Wojtyła's references to Levinas.

Judgements on the John Paul II-Levinas dialogue in *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*

It is clear that in 1994, when *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* was published, Levinas had made an impression upon John Paul II. Keeping in mind the initial references to Levinas at the beginning of the book, in which John Paul II favoured the hermeneutical understanding of the human person of both Paul Ricœur and Levinas as indebted to the language of symbol and of metaphor, these paragraphs extend the interest in Levinas towards a more robust ethical description of the mystery of personhood. This is discussed in the context about the inherent dignity of human life and of ethical responsibility for its protection as well as that of universal human rights. Following the insights of Buber and Rosenzweig on the 'I-Thou' relationship, Levinas develops his own ethical understanding of the role of alterity in the inter-subjective experience of human living.

John Paul II felt that in the context of an interview about death and the defence of life, Levinas stood out as the name that 'must' be mentioned amidst a number of

²⁰ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 209.

²¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210.

²² John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210-11.

contemporary thinkers.²³ John Paul II chooses to recommend Levinas as a personalist voice who speaks in harmony with the witness of the Old Testament. This is in direct conflict with some interpreters of Levinas, who claim to find in him an ethics of alterity that favours the other's right to specific acts such as euthanasia and abortion.²⁴ There is variation in the practical application of Levinas' ethics.

Furthermore, the Holocaust plays an important role in the minds of those who, like Levinas, would speak of ethics at all after experiencing its horror. In mentioning this, John Paul II locates the importance of what may be learned from Levinas within the historical dimension in which it emerges, specifically that of the experience of evil at such a large-scale level of bureaucracy and organisation. The utter destruction of so many Jewish persons and their communities, as well as those in other minority groups, is not an event which ought to be forgotten in general terms, let alone when considering voices like Levinas who lost so much in the events of the Shoah.

The 'philosophy of the face' is not, in John Paul II's reading of Levinas, an isolated approach to understanding the human person, but rather to be interpreted in close correlation with the divine law.²⁵ The commandment of the Decalogue—'Thou shalt not kill' (Ex 20:13)—is intimately related to the epiphany of the face as an extension of the transcendence that is present in each other person. This reveals that the divine law is not simply passed on in a propositional manner in the form of the law upon the tablet, but is given in each individual person. The cry of anguish that emerges from a human face, the contorted facial expressions of urgent plea, 'do not kill me', the tilt of the downtrodden face as it bears down upon the body's suffering frame; these are revelatory moments not simply of the intense desire to be liberated from suffering and the threat of death, but are revelatory of God's own command not to kill the other. John Paul II describes this linking of the epiphany of the face to the Old Testament witness in terms of a 'remarkable formulation of this fundamental commandment of the Decalogue'.²⁶ Of course, the face does not simply reveal the presence of the divine law in the order of creation, but 'reveals the person'.²⁷ After the Holocaust, it remains crucial to locate the relationship between the event of Sinai and the contemporary requirement of love in human relationships, which remain always the event of being among faces.

Furthermore, there are political consequences from the enjoinder in Levinas of the human face to the commandment not to kill. The relationship of the face and the divine command are '...ingeniously joined in Levinas, and thus become a testimony for our age...'²⁸ As a testimony, this enjoinder speaks directly to all ethical concerns, including the manner in which ethics is made concrete, specifically that of politics. While the face is an epistemological vehicle of ethical knowledge, it is not passive knowledge. It is the knowledge that makes a demand, which is the requirement of action. On its own, '[d]o not kill' remains a negative construct, lacking the divine fullness of actually seeking out life and affirming, protecting or cultivating it. Life itself is the demand of such an ethics. John Paul II comments that in our own age, '...governments, even democratically elected governments, sanction executions with such ease'.²⁹

²³ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210.

²⁴ See for example, Torben Wolfs, 'Levinas, Euthanasia and the Presence of Non-Sense', in Roger Burggraeve, *The Awakening to the Other: A Provocative Dialogue with Emmanuel Levinas* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 303-19; Rosalyn Diprose, *Corporeal Generosity: On Giving with Nietzsche, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

²⁵ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210.

²⁶ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210.

²⁷ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210.

²⁸ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 210-11.

²⁹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 211.

Moreover, the comment that, '[p]erhaps it is better to say no more than this about such a painful subject', indicates the role of silence before suffering. More could be said, but the thought of what has transpired causes us to falter.³⁰ In considering seriously the role a Levinasian ethic might have in the further development of John Paul II's philosophical anthropology, these indications from Wojtyla himself show us how much Levinas is of help.

In John Paul II and Emmanuel Levinas, the logic of human dignity runs like a thread through the experience of human subjectivity. Religion, even when it utilises a rich account of transcendence, is a way of grounding the human subject in the experience of the face, and as Levinas would put it, the face-to-face which elicits a 'radical solidarity' for one another. Legislation that respects private conscience is a protection for universal human freedom. In other words, it is not a sword but a shield, creating the parameters in which human solidarity can flourish. The I and the Thou, as John Paul II outlines, is a sacred context and the law has a duty to protect that space. In the realm of human conscience we ought to care for the 'face-to-face' because it is that beautifully incarnate human reality that defies the pressing in of bureaucracy and process, totalitarianism and intimidation, violence and manipulation which are so often the temptations of modernity. That which sacredly takes place in intimacy and friendship between people away from prying forces belongs to that which is most true in religion, and that which is most truly human.

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³⁰ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 211.