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A RESPONSE TO MUERS AND WOOD ON LEVINAS

COREY BEALS

I am grateful for the dialogues that occur in this journal and in the Quaker Theological Discussion Group. And I am grateful for how the responses of Rachel Muers and Richard Wood have continued the discussion, and spurred us to keep the conversation going. Wendell Berry told me that the pre-requisite to having a real conversation is admitting what you don't know. So, in order to keep this conversation alive, I will admit what I don't know.

This morning before dawn, a heavy rain fell down my neck as I stood next to Hess Creek, which runs through the middle of our campus at George Fox University. It was dark, and I could barely see the water, but I could hear it roar, as I thought about the issue that these set of articles and replies have addressed.

As I stood there, I thought of the several “cautions” that Rachel Muers offered me (emphases mine):

- She expresses her “*caution* about the extent to which, or the ease with which, we can make Levinas and Palamas talk the same language or inhabit the same conceptual world.”
- Muers is “a little more *cautious* than is Beals about seeing Levinas’ work as describing a way of *seeing* God in the face of the other.”
- Levinas, Muers suggests, is “even more *cautious* about making the further move to ‘God [...] directly *present* in *all things*.’”
- And Levinas has “extreme *caution* around the language of seeing is intended precisely to dissuade any move towards specifying the nature of God’s visibility.”

I appreciate these cautions in that they give me an opportunity to clarify the nature of my query about the visibility/invisibility of God. Cautions are like banks of a river that keep the water flowing and keep it from overflowing and doing damage, so it is worthwhile to be cognizant of those boundaries.

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By way of acknowledging those cautions, allow me to clarify the flow of ideas I am attending to. Dudiak, in his response to Muers and Wood, wrote that he “should clarify that in my article I attempted to represent Levinas’s position rather than my own.” And, because he did such an excellent job of representing Levinas’s position, it gave me freedom in my article to represent my own position (or my own desperate quest for one) rather than that of Levinas.

Also, I should clarify that I was not assuming that Levinas and Palamas were talking the same language or inhabiting the same conceptual world. My goal was not to provide a conceptual map of either thinker. There is a place for such mapmaking, but that was not my task in this conversation. If I were doing conceptual cartography, then superimposing Palamas’ James River (which flows near Mt. Athos) with Levinas’ Seine River would be a serious flaw. I agree with Muers that they were addressing different problems in different places—not to mention different times. Theirs were not the same waters as each other, much less my own Hess Creek.

While authorial intent is important, that was not my singular goal in drawing upon these writers. Rather, I was focused on the dilemma that faces Friends today—a dilemma that surrounds the question of intimacy with the divine. If we claim that such intimacy is possible—that we can see the divine—then we face the risk of making those visions of the divine into idols. Others, fearing idolatry, deny contact with the divine, which makes divine intimacy impossible. My academic studies have made me aware of a plethora of cautions, and I wonder what I am to do if my philosophical cautions lead me to the conclusion that the left and right banks overlap, leaving no space for the water to flow?

Muers points to a resource that I did not mention—a source that gives testimony to living water. She suggested “a re-engagement with the biblical roots of some of our Quaker vocabulary.” In particular, she suggested the Fourth Gospel as a root from which to draw. I was delighted by the irony of a British Friend chastising an Evangelical Friend for not drawing upon Biblical resources.

It is interesting advice, since my experience that brought me to this place of discovering the dilemma has been a faith practiced in the Quaker tradition that included a habit of meditating upon the Fourth Gospel. I absorbed from these sources both an intimate awareness of a living water that flows, and a healthy caution against idolatry. But as I increasingly encountered sources that denied this presence, or

embraced it in ways that seemed idolatrous, I sought further sources. And both Levinas, speaking from his Jewish tradition, and Gregory of Palamas speaking from his Eastern Orthodox tradition, helped me view my own Quaker tradition in new light.

I turn to John 15 and am at once intrigued, baffled, enticed and mystified by the following words:

Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.¹

This speaks not only of divine intimacy, but of *abiding* intimacy—sustained and sustaining intimacy. Not only so, but it speaks of the impossibility of doing anything *apart* from that intimacy.

As I stood by the river in the pre-dawn darkness and felt the rain down my neck, I wondered if perhaps our rational, conceptual focus on vision is misplaced. Picking up on our discussion of sight Richard Wood quotes John Ames saying, “If God is present at all, as John Ames says, it will be in the clarity and accuracy of the seeing, in Love.” And I agree that we need to see as accurately as possible. But, given that “we see through a glass darkly,” perhaps I might turn my attention less on sight and more on the other senses. I wonder why I felt compelled to talk about the sight of God as the primary metaphor for our knowledge of divine intimacy. The “abiding” metaphor, if it is a metaphor, is one that is inter-indwelling. The one who meditates on the Word is like the one who is planted by streams of water.² So perhaps our roots can touch the waters in ways that are indeed invisible or inaccessible to the eye.

I may not be able to see those living waters clearly, but I can feel them down my neck, and I can hear them roaring. Muers suggests that we turn the conversation toward “testimony” which is something both Quakers and Levinas address at length. In *Levinas and the Wisdom of Love*, I write that “testimony ‘brings me out of invisibility.’”³ But that testimony is not simply speaking about what we *see* or hear. “This bearing witness is not a mere pointing to some other experience, but the very act of saying, ‘here I am!’ is both testimony and that about which is being testified.”⁴ It is the testimony that sees a person crying out for comfort and opens the arms in an embrace that says, “Here

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I am.” So the testimony is not primarily one of word or of sight, but of touch.

I have said what I know in order to show how much I do not know and to say how delighted I would be to have a face-to-face conversation with Dudiak, Muers, Wood, and others. Perhaps we could continue the conversation by taking Muers’ suggestions. We could turn to the bewildering passage from John 15, and we could also give testimony about “testimony.” Maybe some future QTDG? Wood quotes Iris Murdoch saying that she sees love as “focused attention,” and I would learn much if we focused our attention on these questions and on what each other has to say.

ENDNOTES

- 1 John 15:4-5, NRSV.
- 2 Psalm 1:1.
- 3 The text quoted is from Levinas’ *Otherwise than Being* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press 1998), 150.
- 4 Corey Beals, *Levinas and the Wisdom of Love* (Waco: Baylor University Press 2007), 119.