

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Wood, Richard J. (2010) "An Appreciative Response to Corey Beals and Jeff Dudiak," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 114 , Article 7.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol114/iss1/7>

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AN APPRECIATIVE RESPONSE TO COREY BEALS AND JEFF DUDIAK

RICHARD J. WOOD

In *Gilead*, Marilynne Robinson's novel that is an amazing extended letter from the Reverend John Ames to his young son, he says something about love that directly touches on Cory Beals' and Jeffrey Dudiak's helpful reflections on the invisibility and/or visibility of God. Speaking of the fifth Commandment, to honor mother and father, he says:

...I believe also that the rewards of obedience are great, because at the root of real honor is always the sense of the sacredness of the person who is its object. In the particular instance of your mother, I know that if you are attentive to her in this way, you will find a very great loveliness in her. When you love someone to the degree you love her, you see her as God sees her, and that is an instruction in the nature of God and humankind and of Being itself. That is why the Fifth Commandment belongs on the first tablet.

A key word in this paragraph is "attentive," which is also the central term in Iris Murdoch's persuasive (to me, at least) account of love in *The Sovereignty of Good*. Jeffrey Dudiak is right to emphasize that there is something deeply wrong in ethical theories that put God between oneself and the other person. Not only is "I love you because God loves you" outrageous after the Holocaust; it was deeply condescending before. John Ames' interpretation of the Fifth Commandment avoids this mistake, for like Iris Murdoch, he understands that love is a form of undivided attention to the other. (I am resisting the temptation to capitalize "Other" here, though I understand the pull.) Ames' thesis, here, does not require that the person loved be loveable, though he believes this one is. He does not suggest that the validity of the Fifth Commandment turns on parents being worthy of love. To see her as God sees her must include everything she is.

In his dialogue, *Meno*, Plato argues persuasively that good (or The Good) cannot be defined by God's (or the gods') love, because it always makes sense to ask *why* God loves it. Plato, like Levinas, insists on removing God from the radical duality of the ethical relationship.

In Jeffrey Dudiak's language, "God, in setting the ethical scene, removes himself from the scene, must himself be unseen. God, having left a trace of his glory across the responsibility that we bear for one another, is no longer he to whom, or of whom, we speak, even if in speaking to the other in responsibility we bespeak, with or without acknowledgement, the glory of God." (p. 15)

Here is where I encounter a little difficulty with Jeffrey Dudiak's language. He speaks of God setting the ethical scene and being required to remove himself from that scene. But the language of attention gives us another modality. God doesn't just set an ethical scene; God loves radically and completely. (For me, as for many Friends, the Cross is central to this view of radical love, but my point doesn't require that interpretation of Jesus' suffering.) God's presence or absence in the ethical obligation I have to the other is not prior to that obligation, as Levinas and Dudiak rightly insist. The obligation does not depend on God's love, any more than the Good is defined by God's love.

I began with *Gilead* because I believe that Marilynne Robinson's character John Ames turns "I love you because God loves you" on its head: To really love someone is to see her as God sees her. But that is not, emphasize "not", to see her as other than she is, as though God's seeing her put some kind of halo around her. I prefer to interpret Dudiak's "trace of glory" in John Ames' terms—full attention to the other, really seeing the other, requires and reveals Love. It does not do so easily or unproblematically. Shusaku Endo's great novel, *Silence*, set in 17th century Japan during a horrific persecution of Christians, ends with the missionary priest deciding the only way he can honor Christ's love for others is to betray Christ by public denial of Christ.

All our perception is structured by categories, often unconsciously present. Seeing, really perceiving, the other is not simple. Cory Beals rightly stresses the danger of idolatry in relationships among people as well as things. As a Japan specialist, I have spent some time (though not enough!) in Zen training, in which enlightenment is very close to really seeing. Training is largely shedding preconceptions, ways of seeing. But that training, in the Mahayana tradition of Buddhism, presupposes something like the presence of divine Love. Any religious practice, including the traditional sacraments and ways we approach the Meeting for Worship, can become idolatrous. But they can also be preparations for the effort of seeing clearly, "on being present where you are," to us an old Zen phrase.

Iris Murdoch also stresses the effort it takes to see another person clearly and accurately. She sees love as focused attention. The ethical situation is, indeed, as Cory Beals and Jeffrey Dudiak, following Levinas, describe it—radically dual, between me and another. If God is present at all, as John Ames says, it will be in the clarity and accuracy of the seeing, in Love.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Marylinne Robinson, *Gilead* (New York: Picador, 2004), 139.