

1-1-2010

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Recommended Citation

Muers, Rachel (2010) "Levinas, Quakers and the (in) visibility of God: Responses to Jeffrey Dudiak and Corey Beals," *Quaker Religious Thought*: Vol. 114, Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/qrt/vol114/iss1/6>

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LEVINAS, QUAKERS AND THE (IN) VISIBILITY OF GOD: RESPONSES TO JEFFREY DUDIAK AND COREY BEALS

RACHEL MUERS

I was sorry at the time not to be able to attend the discussion of the papers by Corey Beals and Jeffrey Dudiak and am even more so, having read the papers themselves. I have long agreed with Dudiak, and others, that Levinas' account of responding to the face of the other has resonances with the Quaker summons to "[answer] that of God in everyone". Dudiak points us towards an account of God that begins with, and never departs from, the face-to-face encounter with the other, for whom I am always-already responsible. As Dudiak so clearly explains, for Levinas "knowledge" of God begins in bearing witness to, responding to, the "traces" of God's glory in the world—primarily, in the summons to ethical responsibility. In other words, God is answered, responded to, when we answer our fellow human beings in their need.

Dudiak convincingly demonstrates that this does not domesticate God. Indeed, as Corey Beals also notes, it can be seen as Levinas' way of remaining faithful to the biblical injunctions against making images of God. God Godself never becomes graspable; what is perceived in the face of neighbor is, not directly *God*, but the "glory" of God, or the command of God. There is no risk here of reducing God to a property or characteristic of persons. For myself, I would argue that Levinas might point us back to the original context and import of the well-loved expression, "that of God in everyone," which was not an indicative statement about where God is to be found, but a proposal about how God is to be *responded to*, and witnessed to, through action that transforms social relationships.

For this reason, I would want to be a little more cautious than is Beals about seeing Levinas' work as describing a way of *seeing* God in the face of the other—of *seeing* "that of God in everyone"—and even more cautious about making the further move to "God [...] directly *present in all things*" (my italics). On my reading of Levinas, he would be reluctant to use the language of visibility and presence

here, precisely because of the risk of conceptual idolatry, to which Beals alludes. For Levinas, working within Jewish tradition, glory does not need to be about visibility or knowability; glory is *kabod*, weight, the “impact” of God in the world, which is encountered as much or more when we follow or obey God as when we contemplate God. (Thus, note a common interpretation of Exodus 33:17-23, when Moses asks to see God’s glory and is shown the “back” of God—the part that is seen by *the one who follows*.) The glory of God does imply “relations”—see the quotation from Levinas with which Beals begins his discussion—but these relations are not necessarily appropriately described in terms of vision. I suspect that when Levinas writes of “a ‘seeing’ that does not know what it sees,” his extreme caution around the language of seeing is intended precisely to dissuade any move towards specifying the nature of God’s visibility.

Interestingly, I suspect that Levinas (or at least some of his Jewish interpreters) might have a way to make sense of Beals’ reflections on the presence of God “in all things,” in the idea that the *command* of God, and the invitation to respond to it, accompanies people in everything they do. In other words, while Levinas’ primary focus is undoubtedly on the “face” of the human neighbor, the wider religious context on which he draws might suggest a wider—perhaps an indefinitely wide—range of contexts for witnessing to God’s “glory,” as any ordinary activity or event may carry with it the injunction to fulfil a *mitzvah*.¹ Perhaps this, in turn, might resonate with aspects of Quaker thought—for example, with the insight that one’s “walk,” one’s manner of everyday life, is both a witness to the reality of God and a means of deepening one’s relationship with that reality.² That would not, however, be the same as saying that we could see or know the *presence* of God in everything.

Gregory Palamas’ theological and spiritual framework is, of course, radically different. Palamas speaks from the experience of the contemplative life, and out of an Orthodox tradition for which deification, the transformation of humanity into the very likeness of God, is a central concern. I would agree with Beals that we can—and indeed may need to—learn something from Palamas in order to make fuller sense of Quaker tradition. We probably cannot settle, as Levinas might, for an account of God’s “glory” in human life that remains focused on the encounter with the neighbor. We need to speak of how we are ourselves transformed by God’s indwelling in us, enlightened by the inward Light. Palamas’ work may indeed offer rich resources

here—see for example the suggestive quotation used by Beals about how the “spiritual light” is “not only the object of vision, but also the power by which we see”. I would merely wish to express 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.

This caution of mine could, admittedly, cause some problems if we want to say that both Levinas and Palamas are expressing insights that are crucial to Quaker thought and experience. Beals is probably right to say that the “visibility and invisibility” of God (to use his terms) is a dilemma *for Quakers*, even though I (and perhaps also Dudiak?) would contest his claim that it is a dilemma for Levinas. One hunch—which I confess is at this time untested—is that way through the dilemma might be found through a rereading of, and reflection on, the Fourth Gospel. This, the source of so many of the key terms for Quaker thought, is a text both profoundly Jewish and profoundly Greek, in which becoming-present of the invisible God is narrated and reflected upon in ways that both use and break apart an earlier theological and philosophical vocabulary. I wonder whether (what I felt to be) the missing central ground in Beals’ article might be found through a re-engagement with the biblical roots of some of our Quaker vocabulary.

Taking this hunch one step further, I end by offering a modest proposal for further work in this fruitful area. One category that might be particularly valuable in interpreting and developing Levinas’ thought for Quaker theology is that of *testimony* (which is also, of course, a Fourth Gospel term—see for example Jn. 1:7-8). Dudiak, in his article, emphasises Levinas’ references to “*bearing witness*” to God’s glory by one’s actions in response to the neighbor. In Quaker thought, also, “testimony” is thought of primarily, or at least significantly, in terms of action (and one’s “walk” as a way of life). To call our actions testimony is to say that they are a way of witnessing to, responding to, our encounters with God. Taking Levinas’ understanding of “bearing witness” seriously may have significant implications for a Quaker theology of testimony.

For example, as Dudiak suggests (particularly in his example of the incident of sudden illness), the compassionate and responsible action that “bears witness” to God is not mediated by *beliefs about* God—this would in fact turn God into an idol. So Quaker testimony, if it is anything like Levinasian “bearing witness,” is not just about “acting out what we believe,” nor about imposing an alien religious

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or ethical ideal on recalcitrant reality. It is, rather, about being utterly realistic about the world and the neighbour, responding to their calls to us—and speaking of God only *after* being summoned to give this practical testimony. Is it possible to say that Quakers, like Levinas, *begin* with ethics, and what would this mean for how we conceptualize “testimony”? I look forward to further conversations, on this and related topics, with Levinas and his contemporary Quaker interpreters.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Thus Midrash Rabbah on Deuteronomy 21:10-23:9 (III): “R. Phinehas b. Hama said: ‘Wherever you go, pious deeds will accompany you.... If you have made for yourself a door, the precepts accompany you, as it is said, *And you will write them upon the door-posts of your house* (Deut. VI, 9); if you have put on a new garment the precepts accompany you, as it is said, *You will not wear a mingled stuff*’ (ib. XXII, 11)...God said: ‘Even if you are not engaged on any particular work but are merely journeying on the road, the precepts accompany you.’” *Midrash Rabbah: Deuteronomy, Lamentations*, J. Rabbinowitz trans. (London: Socino Press, 1939), p. 123.
- 2 Thus, for example, “you will come to *walk cheerfully over the world*, answering that of God in everyone” (George Fox, *Journal*, ed. J.L. Nickalls; London: 1952; p. 263; my emphasis).