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LEVINAS AND THE VISIBILITY OF GOD: A “SEEING” THAT DOES NOT KNOW WHAT IT SEES

COREY BEALS

Can we see God or not? Is God visible or invisible? These questions extend to several others, but first I should clarify what I mean, since there are so many ways in which we can speak of visibility. One could speak of visual perception—the way you might see a bird or a firefly, or another person walking toward you down the path. But one could also speak of vision in conceptual terms—the way I see the way to solve a problem, or in the way I see that the angles of a triangle add up to the sum of two right angles, or in the way that I say, “Do you *see* what I mean?” In this second sense, vision amounts to understanding, or knowledge. It is primarily in this second sense that I am asking the question about the visibility of God, and this conceptual sense of vision can even be taken to include, more generally, knowledge, and speech about what we conceptually see. So the questions within the question of God’s visibility include: “Can I know God? If so, can I know God directly? If so, can I speak of God? If so, when and how can God be known?”

I admit that this is a most difficult topic to think about, and that my approach to it will not be to lay out a set of definitive, prescriptive answers. Nor will I be pursuing a strictly scholarly analysis of the question. Rather, I intend to talk about my wrestling with these questions, and I will also tell about my advances and injuries so far. This has been a struggle and a journey that I am happy to share because I look forward to finding and connecting with others who have struggled or are wrestling with similar questions.

The more I grapple with these questions, and the more I look to the Quaker tradition for help with these questions, the more I am convinced that I am not alone. In fact, I have found that this issue has deep roots in Quaker soil and am convinced that how we address the issue will affect the ways in which Friends live and prophesy in the future.

But rather than focusing on how to answer the questions I have raised, I want to spend most of my time understanding the questions and asking them well. Einstein has said that “If I had an hour to save the world, I would spend the first 55 minutes defining the problem, and five minutes finding the solution.”¹

I will show that we have strong reason and historical precedent for answering both yes and no to the question of God’s visibility, and will look for help from several others—George Fox, Emmanuel Levinas, and Gregory Palamas, who was a Quaker before his time. All of these have helped me greatly in framing the question and have even helped as I have looked for ways to respond to the questions.

THE PROBLEMATIC QUESTION

Though this question has been bubbling for years in me, it resurfaced in an interesting way at the November 2007 QTDG meetings, where we heard a lively set of papers about our Quaker understandings of sacrament.² It was clear from the discussion that this is a controversial and important question needing further attention. As I was moderating—or clerking, rather—it seemed to me that the question that evening on which all of the discussion about sacraments seemed to turn was the question of whether or not divine experience could be experienced directly and in unmediated ways, or whether it was somehow always mediated? So, that is one question I hope to pick up and work on further. This present discussion, then, can be seen as a continuation of that crucial question of sacraments that has implications for how we understand and experience the presence of God in our midst. Can God be seen? Can God be experienced, and if so, then how?

Drawing from the Quaker past, this interest has also been a point of central importance. There are of course many ways that Quakers have been distinctively prophetic in Western Christianity and culture, but it just may be that the most vital of those prophetic contributions has been the possibility and the centrality of experience with the divine. The tension between mediated and unmediated experience is present throughout the tradition, however, since even as the testimonies of direct experience of the divine abound, cautious clarification is often given acknowledging the limitations of our divine knowledge.

The tensions are not just between different Quakers, but are present even *within* the thought of leading Quakers. For example, we see George Fox embracing both the visibility and invisibility of God, saying “All things are seen, visible and invisible, by the divine light of Christ” (*Journal*, p. 29). Not only is this showing a sort of illumination theory of knowledge, whereby all things that are known are known by the light of Christ, but he is suggesting that by this light, we see even that which is invisible. How is it, then, that we “see the invisible?” Was Fox just confused, or was he speaking prophetically?

Even while he has high claims for our ability to see this divine light, and to see all other things by this light, Fox nonetheless admits that there is that about God which remains invisible. He writes that “God hath opened to me by his invisible power how that every [person] was enlightened by the divine light of Christ; and I saw it shine through all.” [*Journal*, p. 33]. Thus, even as he describes the ubiquitous light of Christ that shines through everyone, he also acknowledges the fact that God’s power is invisible. This is a deep tension that he speaks of very matter-of-factly—God’s power is invisible, yet he experiences it directly. This tension is so thick as to make a philosopher nervous and raise suspicion of contradiction. But I want to explore whether this tension expressed by Fox, and many others who also gave testimony to direct experience of an invisible God, were merely confused and conflicted or speaking truthfully of their experience. I will turn now to another expression of this tension—found in the writings of Emmanuel Levinas.

LEVINAS AND THE VISIBILITY OF GOD

What then does Levinas write about the invisibility and visibility of God? Using the *conceptual* sense of the word vision, one can imagine why Levinas would insist on the invisibility of God. For Levinas, one encounters infinity in the face of the Other—a particular human. So reducing the infinite to a finite category is not only *impossible*, but the *attempt* to do so is *harmful*. In this sense, the Other—and the infinite encountered in the Other—is irreducible to a concept and is therefore invisible. So it is easy to see why the infinite in its infinity is inconceivable and likewise invisible.

I concede and embrace the invisibility of the divine. The difficulty is asking whether God is ever visible, and if so, how that is possible

in conjunction with God's invisibility. I was helped in seeing how Levinas framed this tension. In the opening pages of his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, he states that the infinite is invisible. This seems to be a clear denial of the visibility and presence of the infinite. But in the very next sentence he says that this "invisibility does not denote an absence of relation; it implies relations."³ So is he contradicting himself? If not, then what does he mean? Elsewhere, in *God, Death and Time*, he writes that *transcendence* does not come down to the fulfillment of an aiming by a vision.⁴ He rejects that transcendence is something that we see in this intentional way. He says quite clearly that "the idea of fulfilling an aiming or intending by a vision is out of the question."⁵ But later, on the same page, he writes of the infinity directly encountered in the face of the Other. He says, "It is impossible to elude the other [person] in his exigency, in his *face*, which is extreme immediate exposure, total nudity."⁶

Later he expresses this paradoxical visibility and invisibility in even sharper distinction saying that in the face of the Other we find a "transcendence... *without vision*, a 'seeing' that does not know what it sees."⁷ Let me emphasize that again—in the face of the Other we find a "transcendence... *without vision*, a 'seeing' that does not know what it sees." How is this possible? Is he again confused and contradictory within one sentence? Or is it possible that he is speaking of two types of vision? Perhaps one vision is a vision that encompasses the subject with complete thought, while the other is a raw, direct, though incomplete, encountering?

There are other equally perplexing formulations of what must either be a contradiction or a paradox. He says that the "in" of infinite can be taken in two ways—that which is *not* finite, or that which is *within* the finite. So Levinas is saying that that which is not finite—the infinite—is present within the finite.

Two more examples of real or apparent contradictions are "wakefulness without intentionality"⁸ and "attention without exposition."⁹ Both references speak of the possibility of being attentively aware of the infinite even though it is something one neither could have expected nor have explained. But the fact that one cannot expect it or explain it does not remove it from the possibility of awareness.

Though this is perhaps surprising coming from a postmodern philosopher, Levinas appears to be saying that direct—immediate—

awareness of the infinite is possible, even though it is unpredictable and non-explicable and uncontainable. He sees the invisible infinity directly in the visible and finite face of the Other. This is where Levinas shows himself to be a true Quaker, I think (despite his being Jewish), since he sees that of God in everyone.

TO SPEAK OR TO REMAIN SILENT?

By this point in the discussion, perhaps I have done nothing but show that Quakers and Levinas have encountered this paradox of the visibility and invisibility of God, and they have tried in various ways to express this paradox. One might wonder why a philosopher should attempt to say anything about such a matter to begin with. If it is a mystery, then it seems that speaking philosophically about such a matter can only kill the mystery. The last thing I want to do is to kill this mystery, so why do anything other than pass it over in silence?¹⁰

I will be honest that the reason I am looking at this is because this is an issue I am trying to work out for myself. I am trying to wrestle through competing intuitions and testimonies that I have encountered. On the one hand is the testimony of others and my own experience that suggests to me the possibility of direct communion with the divine. On the other hand is my acknowledgement of the impossibility of finding words or conceptions that capture this experience, along with the awareness of the harm that can and has been done by those claiming intimate knowledge of the divine. One testimony or intuition is likely to negate the other, yet I want to find a way to preserve them both. Why not just declare paradox and leave it alone? Why be any more specific than that?

For some, that may be all that is needed, but I find that I need more help than that in preserving the mystery. I want to help protect my experiences and these deep intuitions from the voices (internal and otherwise) that deny the possibility of *encountering* the divine on account of the impossibility of *conceiving* of God. Yet, I also am aware of the dangers that come with affirming the possibility of encountering the divine—the dangers of destroying that mystery by domesticating or misusing it—and I want to guard myself against those as well. I am listening and speaking about this not to let words solve the problem, but to help preserve the mystery in which I can eventually rest in silence.

In my quest to preserve this paradoxical mystery, I have found much aid recently from Gregory Palamas, a 14th century Orthodox writer. In the 11th and 13th centuries, Eastern and Western Christians were debating this central issue of the direct knowability of God. In the West—Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and his view of the distant God won out over Bernard of Clairvoux’s (1091-1153) view of an intimate God, and thus began *scholasticism*. But in the East, Symeon the New Theologian (949-1022) and his view of an intimate God won out over Stephen of Nicomedia and his picture of a distant God.¹¹ The West sided with the impossibility of directly encountering God, while in the East the same debate went a different direction. The Reformation, with some notable exceptions, did not reform on this central issue, and the God of the West was viewed as one that could only be experienced in a mediated way. This is probably why Fox and the Quakers did not find that the Western Church spoke to their condition. One is not surprised, then, to find a deep connection between the Friends and the Orthodox (though on the issue of form, there are some obvious differences). So, what was taking place on the other side of the world?

GREGORY PALAMAS (1296-1359)—BEYOND KNOWING AND UNKNOWING

Gregory Palamas affirmed the transcendence of God by using the *via negativa*—negative theology—to say what God was not. And he used the apophatic approach to say, with others, that “Thou art God ineffable, invisible, incomprehensible.”¹² Yet, at the same time, he defended the possibility of seeing the light of God directly. Bringing this paradox to a fine point, he writes, “For God is not only beyond knowledge, but also beyond unknowing.”¹³

Gregory also provided a distinction—a way of understanding the question—that I have found tremendously helpful in preserving this paradox of God’s invisibility and visibility. The distinction he makes is between divine *essence* and divine *energies*. Gregory writes that God’s essence—God’s nature—is absolutely invisible to us. But there is that of God—God’s energies—which comes directly from God and is uncreated.¹⁴ It is this (God’s energies) that we may see. The analogy he uses is that of seeing light from the sun, which, while not being the sun itself, is still in some way a direct contact with the sun. Or consider the way we look at a fire and see flames and feel heat; still

we do not encounter the “essence” of fire. The “energies” would be analogous to the light and heat being emitted from the fire, but the “essence” of the fire would be inaccessible to us. He writes that “The rays [of God’s energies] are consequently visible... although the divine essence is absolutely invisible.”¹⁵

This distinction is one that has helped many in this tradition speak of and practice direct encounter with the divine without falling into pantheism. This distinction also protects one from claiming to *be* God. Just as the bush that Moses observed was burning without being consumed, so he describes how one might see or encounter God without becoming the fire itself. Even though the bush is dwelling in the fire, it does not take on the nature of fire. So we may speak of direct dwelling in God without becoming God.

He speaks a little more explicitly about this distinction saying that “this spiritual light is thus not only the object of vision, but it is also the power by which we see; it is neither a sensation nor an intellection, but is a spiritual power, distinct from all created cognitive faculties.”¹⁶ But this still retains greater ambiguity than would please most philosophers. Nonetheless, this is the greatest degree of clarity at this point that I can muster. I am writing about this without having figured it out, and I write in attempt not to figure this out completely because I am not sure that is possible. Philosophy certainly can and certainly has in some cases, played the role of demystifying and demythologizing, and I want to avoid that trap. Instead, I am trying to think as clearly as appropriate in order to protect that mystery. I am doing this as part of my own journey, but invite others to join me in helping speak of boundaries that might protect the space where mystery is allowed to live and breathe freely.

LIVING FROM THIS QUESTION

In our treatment of the question of the visibility or invisibility, my respected colleague, Jeff Dudiak, took on the additional task of explaining Levinas to those unfamiliar with his philosophy, and though there is a wide variety of interpretations of Levinas (made possible by the difficulty in comprehending the writing of Levinas), I will say that I think he has presented Levinas very accurately. I also agree with him in explaining why God might be inclined to “disappear”. As Dudiak says so well in the companion essay, God is that which turns me to the

other, and turns the other to me. But God remains invisible in order to get out of the way of me loving my neighbor. One can easily see and even experience what it is like to seek that of God in my neighbor, but to miss truly seeing my neighbor because I’m only looking for the divine residing therein.

I agree that there are significant ways in which God’s essence is utterly invisible to us. I am inclined to think, though, that these can all be true without eliminating the possibility of directly encountering God’s energies. These are not the terms that Levinas uses, but it seems entirely compatible with the paradox of which he speaks.

For me, at least, this way of framing the question helps me keep either side of this paradox from collapsing and overwhelming the other side. So now I find myself with this refined question: Instead of asking whether God is visible or invisible, I now ask, “*In what ways is God invisible and in what ways is God visible?*” Or, “*How is it impossible for us to know God immediately; how is it possible for us to encounter God directly?*” This does not solve the mystery, but helps me live inside the mystery of encountering and loving God and neighbor. The mystery just seems to get more magnificent rather than becoming smaller.

Asking such a question has implications for how we view the sacraments, and all of the discussion revolving around those topics in an earlier issue. If one begins looking for ways in which God’s energies are directly encountered in all of God’s creation, then that implies that there is a way in which the divine is encountered directly in all of one’s interactions with God’s creation. It opens up an intimidating range of ways in which I might encounter God. If this is true of sparrows, and lilies, rocks and trees, then how much more so is it true of my interactions with my neighbor? If there is “that of God” in everyone, and it is possible for me to engage that reality directly, what glorious weight does it bring to every interaction with my neighbor?

Each portion of the question acts as a sort of balance to the other portion of the question. Once I become aware that God is directly present in all things, quickly the danger of pantheism arises, as does the concern that I may give divine weight to what is really only a distorted view of God’s goodness. So the part of the question that asks how God remains invisible is a profound reminder that there are many ways in which I can idolize the very creation that God indwells. Asking the question in this way opens up the possibilities for

encountering the indwelling divine presence. But it also opens up the possibilities for idolatry.

Quakers have obviously been aware of the possibility of idolatry when it comes to sacraments, and have played a prophetic role in this regard. But perhaps it is time for us to extend our prophetic reach. Not only are external religious forms open to idolatry, but internal religious ideas are also open to becoming idolatrous. Why are inward pictures of God any less vulnerable to idolatry than external pictures of God? Perhaps the inward pictures are even more vulnerable to idolatry, since I may be more likely to think that my inward picture of God as God's essence, which is utterly unknowable. By asking how God's essence is invisible, I perhaps open up new areas of my life for examination. I must now look not only at outward forms to see if I am idolizing them, but now I must also examine my internal forms. It is not being external that makes them idols, or being internal that makes them real. It is whether or not I presume to have captured God's essence in anything.

This way of asking the question has exponentially increasing ramifications. It opens me up to new awareness of idolatry, and it also opens me up to new awareness of divine presence. Approaching the issue of visibility and invisibility in this way is dangerous, and it means that there are more ways of being idolatrous than I formerly thought possible. But it also means that there are more ways of encountering the divine than I thought possible. This means that my ways of interacting with my neighbors and God are not under my control to the degree that may be comfortable. This is terrifying! And in some ways, it seems terrible. But in fact, the more I walk into the implications of this all-pervasive question, the more I realize that this is terribly good.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Peter Merrill, *Innovation Generation : Creating an Innovation Process and an Innovative Culture* (Milwaukee, Wis.: ASQ Quality Press, 2008), 69.
- 2 These papers and some of the discussion that followed can be read in *Quaker Religious Thought* #109 (2007).
- 3 Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, Duquesne Studies (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 34.
- 4 Here he is critiquing Husserl's idea of transcendence being an aiming of thought, which is vision, toward that which must somehow come to be fulfilled.

- 5 Emmanuel Levinas, *God, Death, and Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 138.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 8 Emmanuel Levinas, *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 59.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 60.
- 10 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, David Francis Pears, and Brian McGuinness, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Routledge Classics (London ; New York: Routledge, 2001), 3. Here he famously writes that the “whole sense of the book might be summed up in the following words: what can be said at all can be said clearly, and what we cannot talk about we must pass over in silence.”
- 11 Symeon, *Symeon the New Theologian : The Discourses* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), 1-14.
- 12 Palamas Gregory and John Meyendorff, *The Triads*, Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 1983), 14.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 93-111.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 16 *Ibid.*