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John of the Cross and Emmanuel Lévinas: The QUEST for God beyond Being

ABSTRACT

John of the Cross (1542-1591), a Christian theologian and Catholic priest born in Spain, lived through the worst of the Spanish Inquisition. Emmanuel Lévinas (1906-1995), a Jewish philosopher and layman born in Lithuania, lived through the 1917 Russian Revolution and the collapse of the old regime. What, then, brings these two eminent thinkers together: one from the upheavals of 16th-century Spain; the other from war-torn 20th-century France and Germany? Simply put, both of these men refused to start their reflection on life and God from self-contained abstract principles; rather, their point of departure was the ambiguity and complexity of the character of human nature. From this starting point, both are led to a God without or beyond Being. After a comparative analysis of their God talk, the following questions are explored: How do we speak about God? What are the consequences of John's and Levinas' radical negation of the Being of God?

1. CONTRIBUTION

It is an honour and pleasure for me to contribute to this *Festschrift* in honour of Kees Waaijman, O.Carm. on the occasion of his 80th birthday. Kees has been outstanding in his contributions, over several decades, to the development of the field of spirituality. One of the topics of interest to him are studies on the divine name Yahweh. Not content to simply substitute other words or concepts such as *Adonaj*, *ha Shem*, or Kadōsj, his attention was caught by the meaning of the

concept *hajah* – "to be" or "to be with" – the notion associated with the revelation of the Name in Exodus 3:14-15. He was led to understand the meaning of the Name as *Wezer* (Dutch), or *Be-er* (English). This insight led to his full-book publication *Betekenis van de naam Jahwe* (*Meaning of the name Yahweh*) (1984) and subsequent analysis of *Wezer* in his monumental work *Spirituality: Forms, foundations, methods* (2002). This brief article is in the spirit of that quest: to name the unnameable, the *Be-er*.

2. INTRODUCTION[1]

Emmanuel Lévinas spent most of his life in France but travelled frequently to Germany to pursue his studies with Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and Martin Heidegger (1889-1976). In his brief autobiographical account, Lévinas (1990:291-295) makes it clear that, as a practising Jew, the Hebrew Bible has shaped his approach to life and philosophy since childhood.

John of the Cross, after studies at the University of Salamanca (1564-1568), joined Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) to spearhead the reform of the men's side of the Carmelite Order. John wrote hardly anything during his lifetime but, despite this fact, he has profoundly shaped the Western mystical tradition in countless ways (Perrin 1999; Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991).[2]

The apparent contrast between these two eminent thinkers and writers could not be greater. Lévinas worked assiduously to remain within the confines of philosophy, in order to bring his profound reflections, even those about God, to common discourse. Lévinas focused his God talk in the realm of discrete inter-human relations. John of the Cross, a trained theologian in the tradition of Augustine and Aquinas, talked and wrote about God unabashedly. While Lévinas the philosopher hesitated to speak or write of God in theological categories, John of the Cross wrote frequently of his encounter with the mysterious Other and quoted often from theologians (even though he seldom cited them directly). For Lévinas, philosophical discourse can include God talk only if this God has a meaning (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:130); for John, theological discourse can include God talk only if one encounters the mystery of God in faith (CB 1,10, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:481).

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1   A shorter version of this article was presented at a conference hosted by St. Mary's University, London, UK, 21-23 June 2021, titled: "St. John of the Cross: Carmel, desire and transformation".

2   Henceforth, for references to Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991), FB = The living flame of love; A = The ascent of Mount Carmel; DN = The dark night; CB = The spiritual canticle. When John refers to God as "he", the text is modified to be inclusive by substituting "[God]".

What then brings these two men together in this article: one from the upheavals of 16th-century Spain; the other from war-torn 20th-century France and Germany? Simply put, both of these men refused to start their reflection on life and the human encounter with divine Otherness from self-contained abstract principles. Rather, they both launched their reflections from the ambiguity and complexity of the experience of human nature.

As a result, both men refused to bottle up God in a metaphysics that ultimately would freeze solid the very Mystery that spurred them on in their various existential pursuits! Their quest for God was one for a God without Being or, perhaps better, "not contaminated by Being" (Lévinas 1998:xlviii).

They knew that Being is not the foundation of the Mystery of life, but rather, both encountered, each in their own way, a level of reality beyond being – in the dynamics of interpersonal relationships.[3] The dynamics of transcendence emerge from within the space of non-being between the I and the human Other. The alterity of the Other (human or divine) is the ground for what can be said of the Other. The ground of life is thus never a given as a non-disputable ontological foundation.

Specifically, the question this article seeks to address is the relationship between John's *nada*[4] and Lévinas' "trace". While John uses *nada* to describe the nothingness of God and the ultimate absence of the divine Other, Lévinas uses "trace" to describe the impossibility of God's presence. For Lévinas, "trace" signifies that which has never been and cannot be made present in the being of objects or distinct concepts.

But this begs the following question: Do John and Lévinas lead us to an impossible dead-end? Do they leave us with our crying existential plea that there must be something more to life, without so much as providing a clue as to what that more may be?

Both understand that descriptive theological language about God destroys the possibility of relationship to that which is being described – to the God who is being sought. Both understand that anything we attempt to say about God can be contradicted within the same breath. The quandary is how we speak about God and what the consequences are of John's and Lévinas' radical negation of the Being of God – a God who is present in the absolutely absent.[5]

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3   For the meaning of "beyond being", see Peperzak *et al.* (1996:100).

4   See the sketch of Mount Carmel in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:111) and, for example, A I,13,6-12 in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:149-151).

5   The critical analysis of the radical negation of the Being of God undertaken in this article could have included other major thinkers on this topic. Space limited the engagement of these thinkers.

In addressing these questions, we will discover a central point of unity between John of the Cross and Emmanuel Lévinas. Both emphasise that there is no access to God except through the charged but formless space that exists between oneself and one's neighbour. It is the thick and fleeting space between here and there, between the I and the Other, that reveals the *possibility* of the presence of the absolutely absent divine Other. Ironically, for both, it is the irrefutable fact of transcendence that leads to immanence.[6] Transcendence and immanence are two sides of the same coin. This key understanding is at the basis of the quest for a God without Being.

3.   GOD AND DESIRE IN JOHN OF THE CROSS

Christian tradition attests that God has self-revealed in history: The Word became flesh (John 1:14). But Christian tradition also attests that we cannot see or know God directly (for example, Ex. 33:20; John 1:18).

Nonetheless, the quest goes on; by the very nature of what it means to be human, John of the Cross tells us that we possess an urgent and insatiable desire that drives us to seek the ever-elusive God (CB VI,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:498). John calls desire "love's urgent longings" (A I,1,11, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:118).

As the pilgrim seeks God and draws near to the Mystery, John mentions that she encounters a darkness that is ever more intensely the absence of God. However, this very absence drives the quest with even more desire.

The encounter of "darkness" as one edges closer to God leads John of the Cross to the symbol of the "night" as the descriptor of the "who" and the "what" of the mysterious encounter in darkness (DN II,24,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:456). John states: "God is … a dark night to the soul in this life" (A I,2,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:120).

For John, the symbol of the "night" is the primary image for God, because in darkness we can see no-thing; there is nothing there that the

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For example, Martin Heidegger, in *Being and time* (2010), celebrates the end of metaphysics and the onto-theological God. Jean-Luc Marion, in *God without Being* (1995), wants to go further than Heidegger. Marion believes that the end of metaphysics and onto-theology opens the door to a God outside of Being. Marion prioritises a God of love or charity. Richard Kearney, in *The God Who May Be* (2001), also seeks to encounter the God beyond metaphysics.

6   See Peperzak *et al.* (1996:148): "Immanence always triumphs over transcendence". See John of the Cross (F 1,15, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:646): God "delights with the children of the earth at a common table in the world".

senses can sense or the intellect can grasp.[7] For John, human beings literally experience nothingness in their approach to God, but still the insatiable desire for God grows ever more intense.

3.1   The disproportionate nature of human beings to the nature of God

Why is this desire and darkness so intense and so unfathomable? To answer this question, John turns to the scholastic traditions of his day, found in both philosophy and theology, that describe the disproportionate nature of God to human creatures (A II,8,2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:174).[8] Even though creatures carry a trace of God, they have no essential likeness to God. One cannot know what is radically dissimilar to oneself.[9]

The dissimilarity has to do with the faculties or powers through which human beings come to know themselves and the world. John describes these as the sensitive faculties (sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch) and the spiritual faculties (memory, will, and intellect).[10] God cannot be known by the sensitive or spiritual capacities of the human being (A III,12,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:284).[11]

John knew that God cannot be reduced to the measure of human constructs, ideas, and knowledge. John disparages an attempt to do so (CB I,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:479). Instead, John turns to the language of faith to name not an ontological reality, but a relationship of transcendence, that is, of faith, hope, and love (A III,12,2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:284).[12]

The soul is thus seeking a God without measure, without conceptual clarity, and without "being" as human beings understand "being". John encourages a passive reception of God's love and not an active plan,

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7   See A I,2,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:120), where John likens the entire journey toward God to a "night".

8   This is a reference to Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 2.1, as well as Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1-2.96. 1; 1-2. 1; 1-2. 114. 2. 102, as indicated in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:174, fn. 1).

9   A II,8,3, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:174). This reflects the teaching of Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa theologiae* 1.4.3, as indicated in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:174, fn. 2). See also A II,8,3, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:174) and A II,8,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:175).

10   For a fuller account of John's anthropology, see Perrin (1997:21-33). See also A II,8,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:175).

11   See also A II,24,2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:240).

12   See also A III,12,3, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:285).

which John refers to as our "lowly" operation (A III,13,3-4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:286-287).

However, John describes "spiritual feelings" and "delightful touches" experienced in the soul as experiences of God's presence in the world (see A II,24,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:241). Through these feelings and touches, God imparts a loving and obscure knowledge of God, which John calls "faith". But even these experiences must not be clung to lest they also begin to lead the soul astray. To follow the path of being, that is, knowledge, images, and apprehensions, is to follow the path of the exact opposite of what is sought.

3.2   The beyond Being of God: The dark night of the soul

Entry into the beyond Being of God is through the encounter of John's well-known "dark night of the soul" (A I,2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:118). To experience this night is to enter deeply into the process to allow God to be God in one's life. In other words, the darkening of the knowledge of God is the refusal to pull God into the ontological language of Western philosophy and theology. John does *not know* what lies beyond the darkness, but he pushes forward driven by his and God's desire.

John's journey of human-spiritual development has as its core *God's desire* to make human nature proportionate to God's divine nature (F 3,28-29, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:684). John states: "[only] the things of God in themselves produce good in the soul" (DN II,16,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:431). John describes this transformation as a log of wood being transformed by fire (A II,8,2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:174). The remarkable result of this transformation is that "the soul knows creatures through God and not God through creatures" (F 4,5, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:710). Ultimately, the Trinitarian God is discovered as a secret mystery hidden in the heart of the pilgrim's soul and through this mystery the world is known.[13]

3.3   Encounter with the Trinitarian nature of God

It is remarkable that, through the "dark night of the soul", the pilgrim encounters the fullness of the Godhead, the Trinitarian nature of God.[14]

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13   "The substance of the secrets is God himself, for God is the substance and concept of faith, and faith is the secret and the mystery. And when that which faith covers and hides from us is revealed … then the substance and mysteries of the secrets will be uncovered in the soul." (C 1,10, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:481).

14   See, for example, FB II,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:657-658).

In darkness, the soul does not experience less but experiences more: the fullness of the Trinity. John's discovery is paramount in the Western mystical tradition and is often overlooked as a result of the journey of "the dark night of the soul". It is the answer to the quest for God without being because it is constituted solely on the basis of the relational qualities embedded in the heart of the human being actualised in the encounter of Trinitarian love (C 1,6, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:480; F 2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:657).

God is *realised* in a community of persons just as the Trinity *realises* the fullness of the Godhead in its dynamic exchange of Divine leitourgiā (Greek for "public service") – Being-for-the-Other. The secret mystery of God is encountered in this emptiness, in this nothing (John's famous *nada*).[15]

For John of the Cross, the journey of faith is a dark one lit only by the light of the Trinitarian Spirit of God fashioning human-being slowly into the *nada* of God: God's way of being in the world (see Perrin 1997:97-112). God is not named; God is *performed* as God performed for us in Trinitarian Love (FB II,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:657-658; DN II.17.2-8, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:436-438; F 3,14, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:679). By being open to God's creative grace in life, John mentions that the individual "has become God through participation in God" (F 2,34, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:671).[16] In this way, God endows human beings with the non-being of God: God's attributes of self-giving sacrificial love.

4.   GOD IN EMMANUEL LÉVINAS

Lévinas inherited a concept of God that is well instilled in Western philosophical and theological thought. Many thinkers contributed to this concept of God. We will engage a primary one known to many: Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas (1225-1274) attempted to provide a rational foundation for theology, which, in turn, would provide a unified discourse about God. This temptation gripped the minds of scholastic philosophers and theologians and eventually would become known as onto-theology. In brief, onto-theology is all about ascribing to God some form of being whereby human beings can come to name and know God by way of analogical attribution (Ricoeur 1977:273, 303-309).

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15   See John of the Cross' drawing of Mount Carmel in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:110-111).

16   "Although the substance of this soul is not the substance of God … it has become God through participation in God." (Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:671).

However, according to Lévinas, problems arise because analogical attribution is based on ontology of participation in Divine Being using known *human* categories to describe the nature of *Divine* Being. God, albeit by analogy, was at the top of the heap of these analogical attributes, but on the heap, nonetheless. Lévinas has the same problem in naming God as John of the Cross does!

This ontological move separated the poetic witness of biblical revelation that portrays God as "event" (the biblical God who self-reveals, inspires and empowers), in order to establish a framework for speculative theological discourse that establishes God's existence or Being *per se* as the Christian foundation for all existence and belief. Following this approach, we can "know" a God adequate to reason alone.

In the language of Lévinas, this leads to the "totalizing of experience", to incorporating the "other" into the "same" and thus conquering "otherness" (Lévinas 1969:35-40). Lévinas is wary of all relationships being reduced to a network of functionality. The use of reason to thematise the Other (Divine or human), according to Lévinas, thus exposes the violent nature of reason itself.

But he will not trade in these markets (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:130-131). Lévinas does not believe in the necessity of conceptual precision, in order to endow Yahweh of the Hebrew Bible with relevancy or meaning in our lives (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:146-147). God is not to be portrayed from the perspective of being, since it makes God in accordance with the measurements of human beings, which is idolatry.

Lévinas' task, therefore, is to find a way of talking about God without using specific names or attributes to avoid simply putting God at the hierarchal top of whatever list is contrived (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:135). Lévinas is attempting to move the needle beyond the limiting framework of an onto-theological discussion of God. Like John of the Cross, Lévinas begins by describing the fundamental characteristic of what it means to be human, namely the potential of "desire".

4.1   Lévinas' concept of "desire"

Lévinas describes the reality of the Infinite or God (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:140) in terms of human desire. Desire is the relation which attaches the I to the Other and from which is born the Idea of the Infinite (Lévinas 1966:42). Before the Other, one senses the mystery and transcendence of one's Being, which summons a response that is a desire for the good of the Other.

Desire leads to a deepening of desire in its self-transcendent, "perfectly disinterested" movement for the unconditional well-being of the Other, which Lévinas (1969:50) describes as metaphysical desire for the Good: "To be for the Other is to be good" (Lévinas 1969:261). Desire does not turn in on itself for satisfaction (as does need).[17] Thus Lévinas, like John, speaks of the subject who becomes ever more desirous of the desire of the Good, which is the desire of the Infinite or God.[18]

> In the accomplishment of the Good, God is drawn out of objectivity, presence, and being. … [God's] transcendence turns into my responsibility … for the other (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:141).

Desire, therefore, is at the foundation of self-transcendence and the idea of the Infinite or God that was first placed within the human being (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:139).

4.2   Thinking totality *and* transcendence

Beyond the dynamics of desire already sketched, how does Lévinas frame our understanding of the God-beyond-Being? Let's go back to the dynamics of the interpersonal. We know that the other person's otherness (*illiety* – his/her individuality expressed in desire, suffering, hope, thinking, and so on) cannot be left "present" in *being*-available – and never could be. Lévinas extends our comprehension of his God talk by leveraging the transcendence of the Other who stands before me and summons *my-desire-to-be* for the Other (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:142-143).

With the arrival of another person in my life, I encounter her "face" – her high Otherness or indelibility of being. The "trace" of the "face" of the Other brings her own limitless subjectivity (transcendence), and in this speaks to me and commands me, "Do not obliviate me in your quest for mastery"; that is, do not reduce me to your conceptions of me (see Lévinas 1969:84-85, 213, 276-277; Lévinas 1998:121-126).

Confronted with the "face" of the Other, we always turn our heads too late to discover what Lévinas calls the "trace" of the Other – wondering if ever the Other was encountered or present at all. The "trace" is the "third

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17   "Metaphysical desire has another intention; it desires beyond everything that can simply complete it. It is like goodness – the Desired does not fulfill it, but deepens it" (Lévinas 1969:34).

18   "That is Desire: to burn with a fire other than need, a fire which saturation would put out; to think beyond what you think. Because of this unassimilable overgrowth, because of this beyond, we have called the relation which attached the Self to the Other – the Idea of the Infinite. The idea of the Infinite – is Desire" (Lévinas 1966:42). See also Peperzak *et al.* (1996:138-141).

person",[19] which leads us not to the identity of God but to the absolute otherness of the Other, which Lévinas *then* identifies as the Infinite or God who, again, is always the absent non-phenomenal "third" person. For Lévinas, God is the most radical example of alterity whose alterity is the foundation of the desire of desire presented earlier.

In the presence of the Other, an absence/desire grows that is the very opposite of satisfaction and contentment. That which is absent is the presence of the Infinite which creates an unquenchable desire or hunger (Lévinas 1969:34; Lévinas 1966:39) of *one-for-the-Other* – which is meaning itself and is more primordial than being (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:102).[20] In other words, the encounter with the Other creates transcendence, because the Other summons me to his infinite particularity, and in this highness I discover God.

Such is the terrifying absence experienced in the "trace" of the "face" of the Other. The encounter of the "face" is to sit on the edge of nothingness, beyond which there is no-thing but void or darkness, because "*nothing* was ever there". For Lévinas, this is the "trace" of God. God is not phenomenal but is traced in the infinity of the Other, who summons my desire that reveals itself as goodness and moves me to the Good.

For Lévinas, the "trace" of the "face" is the classical conception of the *imago Dei*. To be in the image of God is to find oneself in God's trace – in the presence of the absence of the God-beyond-Being. To go toward God "is to go toward the Others who are in the trace [of God]" (Lévinas 1966:46).

God, understood thus, is the other of the Other person and remains unnameable, infinitely absent, but *is present* in the justice – the good – rendered to persons (Lévinas 1969:78). For Lévinas (1969:17; 78-79), to know God is to know what must be done. God is thus "known" through the desire for the Good, a desire that directs itself to fair relationship (Lévinas 1969:50; Lévinas 1998:122-123).[21] I am touched or moved *not* by another's beauty, talent, or cleverness, but by the Other's human otherness – a radical otherness (*illeity*) – which calls me out of my natural egocentrism.

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19   "Beyond Being is a third person who does not define himself by the Self-same, by Ipseity" (Lévinas 1966:44).

20   Lévinas goes on to describe this dynamic as "the soul" of the other within me, "a sickness of identity" (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:102).

21   "The Good is before being." (Lévinas 1998:122); "Illeity is that direction of the 'I know not whence,' of that which comes without showing itself, of the nonphenomenon … of an order to which I am subjected before hearing it" (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:106).

For Lévinas, ontology is not the pathway to "know" God. The pathway to know God is the spirituality of relationships formed in justice, goodness, and hospitality. Lévinas (1998:162) states: "Being qua being is a function of justice."

> The Other is not the incarnation of God, but precisely by his face, in which he is disincarnate, is the manifestation of the height in which God is revealed (Lévinas 1969:79).

5. JOHN OF THE CROSS AND EMMANUEL LÉVINAS: GOD-BEYOND-BEING

It is remarkable that both John and Lévinas leverage Exodus 33:19-23 as a core biblical passage to make their case about God.[22] In this passage, Moses is seeking confirmation of the Lord's presence and commitment so as to calm the anxiety of the Israelites on their way to the land the Lord promised them. Moses demanded of the Lord, "Show me your glory." But the Lord said,

> I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you … but you cannot see my face … when my glory passes by I … will cover you with my hand … but my face must not be seen.

The divine Other's "face" is never seen, never phenomenally present. God only shows Godself through the "trace" left behind which is always God in the "third person". Thus originates the refusal from both thinkers to attribute in language either positive or negative traits to God. For John, this refusal originates in his profound mystical experience which both emanates from and builds his faith; for Lévinas, this refusal originates from within the reason of philosophy, and thus he could rightly be called a "natural theologian", as some commentators have done.[23]

Lévinas views the transcendence of the human Other as the non-substitutional source of the extrinsic value of human life. Human beings are invited to become the trace, the face, of the transcendent divine Other such that the subjectivity of the human Other is displayed in its full depth and freedom. Ethical relationships reveal the always-present, always-vanishing, and hidden dwelling place of God.

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22 For John of the Cross, see, for example, A II,8,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:175); A II,24,2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:240); A III,12,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:284), and CB XI,5, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:512), and yet God is "hidden in the soul" (CB I,3, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez (1991:479). For Lévinas, see, for example, Lévinas (1966:46).

23 For example, see Wyschogrod (1972:33).

John of the Cross identifies ultimate transcendence with the personhood of God in the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity share a passive gaze of the face of the Others which overflow into human life, leaving their "trace" and thus transforming the heart of the human soul.

John and Lévinas both tell us that genuine alterity results in expiation of the self, a selfless self-giving to the point of non-being where God is encountered. Charged with the fullness of transcendence, one becomes the "hostage" of the Other for the sake of the Other, and the Other becomes the Self (see Peperzak 1996:142-144; Lévinas 1966:39; Lévinas 1998:158). The Christian God made such a journey, becoming literally the hostage of humanity's totalising ego. In the Incarnation, God put Godself in our place, substituting Godself for our state on every level.

The alterity of human subjectivity follows these same tracks. In genuine alterity, totalising ontology is disrupted: one loses one's self-being (totalising egoistic self) and finds a new other-centred-being in the displaced Self-for-the-Other. This new Self-for-the-Other is not swayed by consequences or context. It lives as a predisposed unified-Self-for-the-Other, regardless of the situation and consequences. In this instance, we perceive again a similarity between John and Lévinas. John speaks of the new self in tune with God's way of being in the world (see Perrin 2014:31-42), and Lévinas of the one obsessed with the Other (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:142-144; Lévinas 1966:39). Such is the framework for unconditional love.

In short, both follow the *via negativa*, but understood in a new way. Both follow the call to the *via negativa* as a negation of *oneself*, in order to live something more beyond oneself: the primeval relationship with self, God, others, and creation. For John, God is at the centre of this self-emptying-self; for Lévinas, it is the movement of the genuinely human connected to the depths of the primordial self.

6. THE NIGHT OF GOD IN JOHN OF THE CROSS AND LÉVINAS

Both John and Lévinas speak of an empty space, a God-without-being, that compels the pilgrim to return over and over again to this *nada* where, paradoxically, All is given. This very emptiness creates an infinite cauldron of encounter. Neither John nor Lévinas holds that God is "something". Neither the mystic's nor the philosopher's language allows anything to be said about God. For both, God "appears" in a way of life. Literally, human beings have a capacity for God that "shows" God in the marketplace of life

and leads the pilgrim into darkness. John ends up in the darkness of night, as Lévinas does.[24]

For Lévinas, like John, "desire" is unsatiable. In this instance, consider John's three infinite caverns of desire named the intellect (seat of faith), memory (seat of hope), and will (seat of love). Each cavern is infinite, because the Infinite fills them with Infinite absence, thereby filling them with the desire and capacity for Infinite faith, hope, and love (see FB III,17-22, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:680-681). Any images of the Divine, which emerge from the profound and sublime encounters with the three infinite caverns of the soul, must eventually be abandoned.

What is left after God's Being is dispatched? The renunciation of expression and speech "sinks into the equivocation of silence" (Lévinas 1969:263). For Lévinas, the silence of God allows the "voice" of the human to break through in "the hyperbolic passivity of giving" (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:145) and, ironically, to reveal the presence of the Divine in testimony (see Peperzak *et al.* 1996:97-107).

> The Infinite [thus] transcends itself in the finite, it passes the finite, in that it directs the neighbor to me without exposing itself to me. This order steals into me like a thief, despite the outstretched nets of consciousness (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:103).

Similarly for John, only God can Self-reveal or give God, and God does this in silent absence (A II,4,5, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:161; F 3,67, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:701). For John, the individual becomes the testimony of the glory of the Infinite as Being-for-the-Other displayed in goodness (DN II,16,4, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:431-432).

Both John of the Cross and Lévinas insist on the refusal of the prioritisation of ontology over human relationships. For too long, theological anthropology and theology have been anchored in ontology rather than the dynamics of the interpersonal. In other words, abstractions about God have been prioritised over fundamental human relationships. Authentic self-transcendence is anchored to life with one's neighbour. For the Christian, this relationship is modelled after the self-giving life of the Trinity; for the non-believer, it is modelled in a self-becoming that is grounded in ethical terms.

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24   John's talk of "night" is well known. For Lévinas, less so, but he does reveal thinking along these same lines: "The transcendence of God cannot be stated or conceived in terms of being, the element of philosophy, behind which philosophy sees *only night*" (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:147; emphasis mine).

For the Christian, the category of witness to this self-giving God thus rises to the fore as the ultimate category of faith: the witness to something or someone who has passed this way and left a trace taken up by the believing subject in a life of goodness and faith (A II.6.2, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:166-167; A II.9.1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:177). The fundamental relationship with God is lived in the living discourse of goodness between persons.

"Language" humans must; concomitantly, humans must be aware of the limitations of their "babble" and behave accordingly. Interpretation through language must be accepted for what it is: a limited attempt to bring into conceptual clarity what is mysterious and indeterminate. "Meaning" is to "show oneself", and this "appearing" is ultimately the guide in life (Peperzak *et al.* 1996:130).

Both John and Emmanuel "know" God, not through active pursuit, knowledge, or language, but when God is "practiced". For John of the Cross, it is in the doing of loving wisdom (see DN II.17.7, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:438); for Lévinas, it is in the doing of the ethical relationship (Lévinas 1969:77-81).

Both know, in the end, that it is better to "*not* understand". Understanding the Other will inevitably lead to violence. We are free only when we do not understand the Other, even when it is thoughtful categorisation of the Other. This is the only path to freedom, that is, to avoid narcissism. The Other must remain radical Other – even God.

John, like Lévinas, urges the subject to trust and be summoned forward in an act of faith. Faith, for John, becomes a way of loving justly and giving ourselves in the community of the world. Both teach that we will never know whether God exists, but we can take a step of faith and trust in the *imago Dei* encountered in our neighbour.

It is interesting to note that both envision the foundation of the relationship with the transcendent Other as the equivocal *par excellence* of the erotic. Lévinas (1969:255-266) describes the dynamics of the transcendent "caress" that transcends the sensible but appears in the relationship to the "formless real" as "erotic nudity". He describes a suffering in the relationship which transforms into existential joy: "The caress does not *act* [but is] a pleasure, a suffering transformed into happiness" (Lévinas 1969:259). Lévinas (1969:258), like John of the Cross, uses the language of "the Beloved", struggling to word the intimate yet transcendent wholly Other.

John describes a "touch" as a "sweet cautery", a "delightful wound" that "divinizes and delights it" [the soul] (FB II,1-11, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez

1991:657-661). John uses the image of the bride and groom enjoying their nuptial banquet as the kind of relationship the human subject enjoys with God (F 4,15, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:714). God's presence in the heart of the human being is a "delicate flame of love", sensual and heartfelt (F 1,1, in Kavanagh & Rodriguez 1991:641).

7.   CONCLUSION

The relationship with God for both our authors is dependent on the transcendence of the human Other: being created as *imago Dei*. The relationship is defined by absence, *nada*, the beyond of the beyond of the Other, which *is* the absolute transcendence of God. What one discovers in the caress of the Other is an emptiness filled with an inaccessible presence. This is what Lévinas defines as "religion": Being-for-the-Other in an utter state of not-knowing, yet ever ready to be-for-the-Other in a self-emptying dynamic of non-mutuality. This is leitourgiā defined from a secular perspective. Religion, for Lévinas, is a metaphysical desire-for-the-Other that never turns back on itself in self-sufficient satisfaction.

God is revealed in the face of the Other – one's neighbour – for John, a revelation that speaks in the works of justice, hospitality, and love. It is in the "trace" of the interpersonal that God has a "place" and can be known in absolute absence. The meaning of my life, which emerges in the space of that mystery, is the happiness, hope, and love that fill life with transcendent joy. Meaning is the place of the appearance of being and the appearance of God beyond Being for both John of the Cross and Emmanuel Lévinas.

For both John and Lévinas, the search for God without or beyond Being revolves around three key words: desire, night, and erotic passion. Desire: both frame desire as insatiable and thus compels the search for God to ever new heights; night, for John, is the "dark night of the soul"; for Lévinas, it is the "dark night of God"; erotic passion: both frame God-Beyond-Being as the divine Other who draws the predisposed unified-self-for-the-Other into the unconditional well-being of all through hospitality, social engagement, and care of God's creation.

John's story about God corroborates that of Lévinas! Or perhaps it is the other way around? Either way, the Christian mystic and the Jewish philosopher both agree: God is beyond Being, a finding that presents multiple challenges to the way in which we understand *imago Dei* and the Christian way of life (spirituality), of worship, of theological anthropology and language, and of doctrine.

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