

**JEWISH-CHRISTIAN RELATIONS AND THE
ETHICAL PHILOSOPHY OF EMMANUEL LEVINAS:
“AT THE VERY MOMENT WHERE ALL IS LOST,
EVERYTHING IS POSSIBLE”***

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PRECIS

The ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas offers a confronting and prophetic message to the experience of Jewish-Christian relations. Being profoundly observant of the tragedies and piercing experiences of life, his message proclaims a life of *kenosis*, expiation, and substitution. Further, it is a life of extreme desire for the neighbor, above one's personal needs and pleasures. Constantly, we are left guilty before the poor one who is hungry and in fear of death. Our debt is released only by becoming more responsible. Such are the hyperbolic demands of an ethical philosophy that holds sacred the teaching of being made in the likeness and image of an infinite God. Levinas's ethical philosophy gives a foundation to articulate a vision of Jewish-Christian relations in light of (1) the eschatological vocation of the scholar; (2) the Jewish experience of Christianity; (3) the mysteries of creation, revelation, and redemption; and, finally, (4) a phenomenology of evil. His thought offers to both Christians and Jews a hope that everything is possible.

*I. Introducing the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas
to Jewish-Christian Relations*

One of the most heartfelt experiences in Jewish-Christian relations is the love of friendship between Jews and Christians. Friendship produces meaning, evokes catharsis, and inspires hope. It is the liturgy of the Jew's desire for the Christian and the Christian's desire for the Jew that nourishes the regeneration of goodness. In the wake of the *Shoah*—"at the very moment where all is lost"—the developing friendship between Jews and Christians gave hope such that "everything is possible" despite the depersonalizing and anonymous evil of An-

*Emmanuel Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (The Hague: Martinus Nijhof, 1978; London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1995), p. 92.

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tisemitism, murder, and totalizing war. Emmanuel Levinas (1906-95)¹ was himself a presence *par excellence*—not just to dialogue with Christians but a presence that went “beyond dialogue”² between Jews and Christians. Such “beyond dialogue” is the prophetic proclamation that both Christians and Jews share “one common destiny.”³ However, it is a common destiny that is still sleeping. What will become of Jewish-Christian relations? Levinas reflected:

To tell the truth, I don't know. But before smiling at *maturity for insoluble problems*, a pathetic formula, actually, let us think, like one of my young students, of Saint-Exupéry's little prince, who asks the pilot stranded in the desert, who only knows how to draw a boa constrictor digesting the elephant, to draw a sheep. And I think what the little prince wants is that proverbial lamb who is as gentle as a lamb. But nothing could be more difficult. None of the sheep he draws pleases the little prince. They are either violent rams with big horns or too old. The little prince disdains the gentleness that only comes with extreme age. So the pilot draws a parallelogram, the box in which the sheep is sleeping, to the little prince's great satisfaction.

I do not know how to draw the solution to insoluble problems. It is still sleeping in the bottom of a box; but a box over which persons who have drawn close to each other keep watch. I have no idea other than the idea of the idea that one should have. The abstract drawing of a parallelogram—cradle of our hopes. I have the idea of a possibility in which the impossible may be sleeping.⁴

Levinas's idea “wherein the impossible may be sleeping” is grounded in the hope for salvation. Here, his ethical philosophy bears an interrelation between eschatology and soteriology. This suggests that his philosophy might itself be the very “parallelogram—cradle of our hopes” wherein lies an answer to the insoluble problem of Jewish-Christian relations. What do you imagine could be inside this parallelogram of hope and redemption? Even though Levinas said, “I

¹Emmanuel Levinas, born in Kovno, Lithuania, was a Jewish philosopher and Talmudic scholar. He studied in both France and Germany and became a French citizen. His philosophy follows the Husserlian tradition of phenomenology and was credited by Sartre for introducing phenomenology to France. Levinas's ethical metaphysics is deeply original, seeking to challenge polemically the thought of Martin Heidegger and to proclaim the importance of Judaism in a Christian world. Levinas's two internationally renowned major works—*Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1969); and *Otherwise than Being: Or, Beyond Essence*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1999)—are testimony to his search for a religious ethics that is against all forms of political violence and economic oppression. The memory of the *Shoah* pervades all his writings. Levinas's thought touches the reader with a spirituality of teaching, proclaiming a kenotic and expiating love for one's neighbor. He taught at the Alliance Israélite Universelle, the universities of Poitiers and Paris-Nanterre, and, after 1973, at the Sorbonne.

²“Beyond dialogue” is a phrase used by Levinas to emphasize the need to possess “a new maturity and earnestness, a new gravity and a new patience” for approaching such “*insoluble problems*” as Jewish-Christian relations. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, tr. Michael B. Smith, *European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism* (London: Athlone Press; New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [orig.: *Altérité et Transcendence* (Saint Clement: Fata Morgana, 1995)]), p. 87 (emphasis in original).

³*Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 88-89 (emphasis in original).

don't know," his ethical philosophy attempted to fill out the parallelogram imagined by the little prince of our dreams. This is exemplified in his eschatological imagination whereby he articulated the hope of a messianic time free of political violence and economic oppression. The hope finds its form through the vocation of "the scholar who has direct access to the Revelation and the knowledge of God."⁵ For this quintessential Jewish thinker, the scholar was the link between the "messianic era"⁶ and the "future world."⁷

II. *The Eschatological Vocation of the Scholar*

Levinas asserted that "the scholar . . . is called upon to attain the highest rank: that of the future world,"⁸ "announcing a new *Logos*, and with it another humanity."⁹ This is the world of "the lost paradise . . . irrigated by that 'which no eye has ever seen', which we shall find near the end"¹⁰ (cf. Is. 64:4 and 1 Cor. 2:9). His thinking gives a vital foundation for understanding the nature of Jewish-Christian relations as both eschatological and soteriological. Yet, how can we concretely understand or imagine this? Our hope lies in Jewish and Christian scholars' entering into a relation of "*maturity and patience for insoluble problems*."¹¹ In doing so each scholar repents; takes responsibility for murder, persecution, and Antisemitism; and proclaims the Reign of God. This "future world" signifies the reality of salvation and the witness of glory¹² proclaimed in Is. 64:4¹³ and 1 Cor. 2:9.¹⁴

Levinas's emphasis on scholarship is of vital importance to Jewish-Christian relations. It brings to light the question: *At what level are Jewish-Christian relations achieving friendship and understanding?* Certainly, at the level of scholarship Jews and Christians are searching for understanding and listening to each other. Of course what must essentially coincide with such scholarship, as Levinas suggested, are "good deeds and repentance."¹⁵ There-

⁵Emmanuel Levinas, *Difficult Freedom: Essays on Judaism*, tr. Seán Hand, Johns Hopkins Jewish Studies (London: Athlone Press; Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1990 [orig.: *Difficile Liberté: Essais sur le judaïsme* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1963 and 1976)]), p. 63.

⁶The "messianic era" is the foundation of the future world. It is mediated through "the life of the disinterested and gracious mind of the scholar, who is called upon to attain the highest rank: that of the future world" (ibid., p. 64).

⁷Levinas associated the future world with the spiritual-moral life in the world. It is the opening of humanity to the Reign of God. See ibid., p. 62.

⁸Ibid., p. 64.

⁹Ibid., p. 66.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 67.

¹¹Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, p. 87 (emphasis in original).

¹²Glory (*La Gloire*): witnessing to the Infinite God through the debt of responsibility for the other that increases as it is paid.

¹³Is. 64:4: "From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him."

¹⁴1 Cor. 2:9: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him."

¹⁵Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 69.

fore, we can conceive that to go “beyond dialogue” between Jews and Christians is to seek a union of scholarship and praxis.

Levinas’s ethical metaphysics implies that for Christians to begin to have “the *maturity and patience*”¹⁶ for relating with Jews is to enter into their world. This is the desire to see their face,¹⁷ holding sacred the memory of the *Shoah* and the hope of the State of Israel. Let us now be faced with the voices of Levinas and Franz Rosenzweig.¹⁸

III. At the Very Moment Where All Is Lost:

The Jewish Experience of Christianity in the Lives of Levinas and Rosenzweig

In the aftermath of World War II, in the hearts of virtually all Jews, the words “Christian,” “the church,” and “Jesus” took on a new, diabolical meaning. In contrast to attesting to the eschatological Reign of God and to salvation, these sacred words had become anathema for the Jewish people. This is evident in Levinas. His bitterness toward Christianity appears especially in his writings for decades after World War II, as exemplified by the two following statements on Christianity, the church, and Jesus:

But is it really the Church that prevents us from rejoining Christ? The Church is, after all, what we understand best. The old neighbour! . . . Here is a great modern institution which directs the lives of millions of our citizens. The evil it has inflicted on us in the past cannot make us deaf and blind. . . . The figures of the Gospels leave us cold and stupid; we feel we are lying to ourselves when we take them up again. Explain that by uneffaceable memories, invoke psychoanalysis, speak of stubbornness. Two thousand years of Jewish history is worth the triumph of Christianity, in order that our refusal should not be suspected of utopia. It is not enough to call Jesus Yechou and Rabbi to bring him closer to us. For us, we who are without hatred, there is no friendship. It remains far off. And on his lips, we no longer recognize our own verses.¹⁹

Christianity too is tempted by temptation, and in this it is profoundly Western. It proclaims a dramatic life and a struggle with the tempter, but also an affinity with this intimate enemy. After having heard yesterday’s talks, I

¹⁶Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, p. 87 (emphasis in original).

¹⁷Face (*Le Visage*): the most naked part of the human body, which reveals to us our guilt and responsibility; the locus wherein the Word of God is heard.

¹⁸Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929) was a German-Jewish philosopher whose life and work played an integral role in the development of Levinas’s philosophy. Rosenzweig’s major work combining philosophy and redemption is *The Star of Redemption*, focusing on the interrelationship of God, humanity, and the world. It holds that only Christianity and Judaism are the loci for the world’s redemption. Judaism’s stance to the world is the proclamation of its closeness to God; Christianity’s stance is its mission of evangelization in the world. See Emmanuel Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, tr. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press, 1993 [orig.: *Hors Sujet* (Saint Clement: Fata Morgana, 1987)]), pp. 61-63, for a discussion of Rosenzweig’s understanding of the roles of Christianity and Judaism—the “Messianic ‘theory of Knowledge’” (p. 63).

¹⁹Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 105.

think that the person of Christ still remains remote for us. Jews, or at least the vast majority of Jews, remain particularly indifferent to Jesus. This Jewish unresponsiveness to the person who is the most moving to Christians is undoubtedly a great scandal for them. But, on the other hand, all Western Jews are particularly drawn by the dramatic life, the life of temptations which the Christian life is. Christianity tempts us by the temptations, even if overcome, which fill the days and nights even of its saints. We are often repelled by the "flat calm" which reigns in the Judaism regulated by the Law and by ritual.²⁰

In the first quote, Levinas's bitterness and polemical stance against Christianity are hauntingly present. For him, the Jewish passion²¹ from 1933 to 1945 was an event wherein "Chapter 53 of Isaiah was drained of all meaning."²² We can see the extent of his torment when Is. 35:5 proclaims, "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped." During the *Shoah*, the ineffaceable memory of Hitlerism and all those who participated in the regime were of people blinded and deaf to the faces of the Jewish other,²³ proclaiming, "Thou shalt not Kill!" "Sorrow and sighing" did not "flee away" (Is. 35:10) during the Passion of Auschwitz. We see a piercing honesty in Levinas's feelings. For instance, he mentioned "we who are without hatred." This is another stinging challenge alerting how the church has failed to see its Jewish neighbor as a friend.

Levinas stated that friendship "remains far off." He was not speaking about his involvement of friendship with Christians in intellectual circles. Here, he was speaking profoundly of the Jewish spirit and people. The Jewish people and spirit—like every people and their spirit—represent the indestructible dignity of being made in the likeness and image of God. Friendship among different peoples is to hold in one's heart the sacredness of what we all possess: the life and dignity of God dwelling in us.

Let us turn to the second quote. We see Levinas's point that Western Jews especially are tempted by Christianity's life of temptations and spirituality. For him, the Christian existential and spiritual attentiveness to life before God was impressive. Therefore, this suggests that Jews are more responsive to Christians who bear, above all, ethical, philosophical, and theological knowledge. It was this same knowledge that tempted Rosenzweig in his near-conversion to Christianity. Attracted to Christianity, he naturally found Christianity revealing Judaism. Although on the verge of conversion in 1913 and deeply and profoundly affected by Christianity, he overcame the temptation to convert. Levinas explained the experience as follows: "After a dramatic night, he declined to take

²⁰Emmanuel Levinas, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, tr. and intro. Annette Aronowicz (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 33.

²¹Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, pp. 11-12. He described the experience of the Jews from 1933 to 1945 as an "experience of Passion," indirectly alluding to the fact that all those who suffered and perished were martyrs whose every face signified the Divine Word and Commandment, "Do not kill!"

²²*Ibid.*, p. 12.

²³Other (*L'Autrui*): the human or personal other.

that step. At dawn he wrote to a friend who was waiting for the good news: 'It is not possible; it is no longer necessary.' . . . What counted from then on was Judaism, which his family was forgetting in that imperial Germany, so comfortable for the pre-war Jewish bourgeoisie."²⁴

Levinas further pointed out that Rosenzweig's "homage to Christianity consisted in his remaining Jewish."²⁵ Hence, as a Jew with a deep appreciation of Christianity, Rosenzweig proclaimed a "modern Jewish consciousness"²⁶ for the people of Israel, namely, to live in community with Christians after 2,000 years of separation.²⁷ Today, is this not the very same hope for Jewish-Christian relations? According to Levinas, despite the lack of intimacy and trust between Jews and Christians, a hope of mutual interaction and influence (symbiosis) exists in the State of Israel itself. Here, the State of Israel is a sign of reconciliation for both Christianity and Judaism: "Israel . . . aspires—on all levels of human relationships—to be a member of the family of nations."²⁸

Levinas also recognized the importance of Israel's achieving an intimacy and peace with its Arab neighbors: "Today, I will no longer say refugees, but Palestinians. Zionism is not at an end, for all that. It is not finished if Jews and Israelis recognize that if the State of Israel is to exist it needs the recognition of the Arab world and, for Israel, an entrance into the intimacy of this world."²⁹ What this evokes is a greater depth to Zionism, commanding a defining ethic of being responsible and accountable to Palestinians, its Arab neighbors, and the whole world. Entering into such "intimacy" with other nations, both belligerent and friendly, in the aftermath of a time when all was lost is for Jews to live in the hope of the world's redemption. In the following section we look at how Levinas's notions of creation, revelation, and redemption give an important foundation for re-thinking Jewish-Christian relations.

IV. Creation, Revelation, Redemption, and Jewish-Christian Relations

Levinas's ethical philosophy points to a very real possibility of understanding the problem of Jewish-Christian relations. It suggests that the key to unlocking the problem is proclaiming the type of ethical behavior required, namely, the

²⁴Levinas, *Outside the Subject*, p. 50.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 63.

²⁶Emmanuel Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, tr. Michael B. Smith (London: Athlone Press; Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994 [orig.: *A L'Heure des Nations* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1988)]), p. 154.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸*Ibid.*

²⁹Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse: Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, tr. Gary D. Mole (London: Athlone Press; Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994 [orig.: *L'Au-Delà du Verset: Lectures et Discours Talmudiques* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1982)]), pp. xvi-xvii.

life of *kenosis*³⁰, expiation,³¹ and hospitality.³² Implicitly, his thought contextualizes such vital behavior in light of the mysteries of creation, redemption, and revelation. First, let us explore with Levinas the mystery of creation.

A. Creation

The fact that we are created “in the likeness and image of God” (Gen. 1:26 or 5:1) is God’s first expression of *kenosis*. In the words of Rabbi Chaim of Volozhin,³³ each person “is the soul of all ‘the worlds,’ of all beings, all life, like the Creator himself.”³⁴ What does this mean for Jewish-Christian relations? Both Jews and Christians affirm the sacred teachings of Genesis that proclaim our human identity and dignity. With such a diachronic³⁵ trace of God in our souls, both Jews and Christians are called through their human behavior to be responsible for the whole universe in the same manner as God. Levinas states:

God associates with or withdraws from the worlds, depending upon human behavior. Man is answerable for the universe! Man is answerable for others. His faithfulness or unfaithfulness to the Torah is not just a way of winning or losing his salvation: the being, elevation and light of the worlds are dependent upon it. Only indirectly, by virtue of the salvation or downfall of the worlds, does his own destiny depend on it. As if through that responsibility, which constitutes man’s very identity, each one of us were similar to *Elohim*.³⁶

Re-reading this passage in light of Jewish-Christian relations suggests that the elevation of both Jews and Christians before God has its source in the act of Creation. Out of the formless void of evil in our own world, both Jews and Christians can forge a sacred destiny through being “answerable” to each other. Such grave responsibility is what Levinas termed being a hostage³⁷ and undertaking hospitality.

B. Revelation

In the process of discovering the nature of this “grave responsibility,” we

³⁰*Kenosis (La Kénose)*: emptying oneself even to the hyperbolic state of being like God, responsible for the whole universe; truly to live out the grace of being made in the likeness and image of God.

³¹*Expiation (L’Expiation)*: making up for the fault of another; to be responsible for the other’s suffering.

³²*Hospitality (L’Hospitalité)*: the welcoming of the other; the life of justice that makes one near to God.

³³The Lithuanian Rabbi, Chaim of Volozhin (1759-1821), above all with his posthumously published work, “The Soul of Life” (*Nefesh Hahaim*), integrally influenced Levinas’s philosophy.

³⁴Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, p. 125.

³⁵*Diachrony (Diachronie)*: awakening to responsibility in time.

³⁶Levinas, *In the Time of the Nations*, p. 125.

³⁷*Hostage (L’Otage)*: to be disturbed, reduced to silence, condemned, and persecuted by the other’s look of destitution and suffering; the vocation to a substitution and sacrifice for another. It is an archetypal experience of being responsible; further, it is an experience of absolute passivity whereby one cannot escape the Word of God in the other.

are faced with the mystery of revelation. For Levinas, revelation began with the face of the other. To extend his analysis further, it is the epiphany of the Jewish other that reveals the life of expiation. The Jew in Christian history has been the persecuted one. Paradoxically, it is as if every persecuted Jew is like Christ's expiating for all Christians and the world. Levinas explained in the context of his messianic eschatology how the profound responsibility of the people of Israel was one of expiation:

Of course, we do not owe Judaism to anti-semitism, no matter what Sartre may say. But perhaps the ultimate essence of Israel, its carnal essence prior to the freedom that will mark its history, this manifestly universal history, this history *for all*, visible to all, perhaps the ultimate essence of Israel, derives from its innate predisposition to involuntary sacrifice, its exposure to persecution. Not that we need think of the mystical expiation that it would fulfil like a host. To be persecuted, to be guilty without having committed any crime, is not an original sin, but the obverse of a universal responsibility—a responsibility for the Other [*l'Autre*]*—that is more ancient than any sin. It is an invisible universality! It is the reverse of a choosing that puts forward the self [moi] before it is even free to accept being chosen. It is for the others to see if they wish to take advantage of it. It is for the free self to fix the limits of this responsibility or to claim entire responsibility. But it can do so only in the name of that original responsibility, in the name of this Judaism.*³⁸

Here Levinas underlines that Judaism is the experience of expiating responsibility that substitutes evil with hope. At the very moment where all is lost, Judaism gives hope to the world through a responsibility that cries for justice amid Antisemitism, murder, and genocide. The haunting experience of persecution and expiation continued for Levinas. Even the creation of the State of Israel could not “silence the cries of Auschwitz which will echo until the end of time.”³⁹ Being chosen by God is for every Jew to seek “justice, which defies suffering.”⁴⁰ This is the Jewish passion of life. In terms of Jewish-Christian relations it is to face the Christian other and demand justice in a spirit of expiation and *kenosis*. This means telling and sharing with the Christian one's sacred feelings of suffering and persecution. It is even, slowly, through time and generations, to forgive and, above all, to command again and again the Word of God, “Thou shalt not kill”! The philosophy of Levinas helps to underscore the revelation of the Jewish other in Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Let us now rethink who the Jewish other is for the Christian. Is he or she simply a stranger or a prodigal son or daughter or perhaps a forgotten trace in the history of Christianity? Might not the face of the Jewish other bear the revelation of God who inhabits our souls with the inner secret of responsibility? Who is this neighbor who disturbs and reproaches like a sacrificial lamb? For

³⁸Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 225 (emphases in original).

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 141.

the Christian, to be faced with the Jewish other is to be faced with the suffering of God. What remains essential for Jewish-Christian relations is for Christians to acknowledge the eternal sacredness of Judaism before God. Levinas explained:

Until this point, friendship between Jews and Christians seemed to be based on their both belonging to humanity, the modern world, the West. Of course, from the Jewish point of view, Christianity was justified: it brought monotheism to the Gentiles. But what, then, was Judaism in Christian eyes? A prophecy that outlived its fulfilment. The testimony incarnate of a failure. A blindfolded virgin. A residue. A remnant. An anachronism. A fossil. A relic. An exhibit. But now [Jacques] Madaule shows Christians that we are significant to the future and to life. This significance can transform the very meaning of Judaeo-Christian relations.⁴¹

Hospitality is the key for the Christian to proclaim to the Jew a reverent understanding and love for Judaism. It is the everyday social experiences between Jews and Christians that give life to academic studies and dialogue. Hospitality must transcend culture that seeks to totalize⁴² and persecute. The apostolate for the Christian is to understand the Jew.

C. Redemption

Living in the third millennium offers us an opportunity to create a lasting hope for reconciliation between Christians and Jews. Could there be a future hope wherein Jews and Christians strive together for justice and do not differentiate between each other negatively? The passage that leads to unity in diversity between Jews and Christians is enlightened by the mystery of redemption. To behold this messianic vision is to accept earnestly and to live with all one's heart, mind, soul, and strength "the human vocation to saintliness."⁴³ Levinas asserted that Pope John Paul II is an archetype for such a vocation:

I also think the trials humanity has passed through in the course of the twentieth century are, in their horror, not only a measure of human depravity, but a renewed call back to our vocation. I have the impression they have altered something in us. I think specifically that the Passion of Israel at Auschwitz has profoundly marked Christianity itself and that a Judeo-Christian friendship is an element of peace, in which the person of Jean-Paul II represents hope.⁴⁴

Having lived through the horrors of Hitlerism and Communism, John-Paul II—a phenomenologist like Levinas himself—knows throughout his life the meaning of "at the very moment when all is lost, everything is possible." The

⁴¹Ibid., p. 202.

⁴²Totality (*Totalité*): to enforce an ideology and set of values without consideration of one's dignity.

⁴³Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence*, p. 180.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 181.

vocation to saintliness is the life of *kenosis*. The life of a pontiff is, by its very nature, other-centered. Living the life of the spirit, John Paul II has concretely sought the path of redemption and justice, especially in his diplomatic work of ending political violence and oppression.

For Levinas, redemption and justice were intimately connected: “To speak of Redemption in a world that remains without justice is to forget that the soul is not the demand for immortality but the impossibility of assassinating, and that consequently the spirit is the proper concern of a just society.”⁴⁵ During every religious service, the life of the spirit is lived through the actions of prayer, adoration, and thanksgiving. However, liturgy does not remain in the domain of the sacred buildings of the temple or church themselves. For Levinas, liturgy “is ethics itself.”⁴⁶ Following this original Greek meaning of liturgy, his vision of a future world began with discerning the Word of God through proximity⁴⁷ to the other. In dialogue with Christianity, Levinas underscored Matthew 25 as the key to the world’s redemption:

When I speak to a Christian, I always quote Matthew 25; the relation to God is presented there as a relation to another person. It is not a metaphor: in the other, there is a real presence of God. In my relation to the other, I hear the Word of God. It is not a metaphor; it is not only extremely important, it is literally true. I’m not saying that the other is God, but that in his or her Face I hear the Word of God.⁴⁸

Applied to Jewish-Christian relations, both Jewish and Christian faces reveal a divine dialogue. The difficulty lies in being present to this “divine dialogue” and responding. We hear God’s Word when the other hungers, needs shelter, or fears death. Therefore, in what ways are the Jewish other and the Christian other hungry, needing shelter, and fearful of death? In the spirit of Matthew 25, this question awakens Jewish-Christian relations to seek “the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt. 25:1). We—both Christians and Jews—“know neither the day nor the hour” (Mt. 25:13) when the Messiah will come. However, the very act of seeking fellowship between Christians and Jews is the path of witnessing to the glory of God’s Reign.

How pleasant it is when both Jews and Christians dwell together in unity! Most of us at some time in life are familiar with friendship, with having someone whom we can love and trust with our whole hearts. True friendship is pure joy and life. It produces mercy, fosters forgiveness, and blesses one with healing

⁴⁵Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 101.

⁴⁶Emmanuel Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, tr. Alphonso Lingis (Dordrecht: M. Nijhof, 1987; E.T.: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1987; repr.: Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998), p. 93.

⁴⁷Proximity (*La Proximité*): a direct, extreme, radical, ethical consciousness of the other in response to being affected by the trace of the Infinite in this neighbor’s face; the experience of responsibility for the other.

⁴⁸Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, tr. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998 [orig.: *Entre Nous: Essais sur le penser-à-l’autre* (Paris: Editions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1991)]), p. 110.

and steadfast love. We all possess unique talents to give to the furthering of Jewish-Christian relations. For Levinas, the greatest "talent" was the love of one's neighbor with all of one's uniqueness. Desiring the neighbor in a spirit of disinterested love is to live the life of infinite⁴⁹ responsibility. It is to realize that "the more I face my responsibilities the more I am responsible."⁵⁰ Simply burying our "talent" of responsibility is to live a life of pagan existence⁵¹ without truly being an existent.⁵² The more loving we are, the more God expects of us, for God is infinite love. Are we not made in the likeness and image of God's infinite love?

Levinas's thought suggests that Jewish-Christian relations will remain an insoluble problem if the wisdom and eschatological vision of Matthew 25 are not taken to heart and applied. Especially for Christians, the ethics of Mt. 25:40—"Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my family, you did it to me"—is a starting point for Jewish-Christian relations. The turning point is the realization that Jews and Christians are both of God's family.

How glorious it would be if, when a Jew suffers persecution, a Christian would compassionately feel this same suffering in his or her heart and respond to this suffering responsibly. How deeply touching it would be if, when a Christian is suffering hunger, a Jew would give the very food out of his or her mouth to the Christian. This is the vision out of which Jewish-Christian relations are truly forged in the hope of waiting for the Messiah. In Levinasian terms, such waiting is the coming to responsibility through time, overcoming our *conatus essendi*⁵³ and being accountable for all forms of Antisemitism, anti-Judaism, anti-Christianity, and anti-humanity. In the following section we perceive how Levinas's phenomenology of evil gives both the Christian and the Jew an insightful awareness of how evil begets evil, dehumanizes, and anonymously seeks one out, making all suffering useless.

V. Understanding Evil

Anonymous and depersonalizing existence, which was central to Levinas's understanding of evil, was his notion of the "there is" [*il y a*]. The "there is" is understood as anonymous and depersonalizing evil that destroys the "human" out of "human existence." Levinas described the "there is" as "existence without existents."⁵⁴ In the context of the *Shoah*, this is exemplified by the Nationalist Socialist use of serial numbers on the victims as a way to destroy everything

⁴⁹Infinite (*Infini*): God's demand for us to be responsible for the other continually.

⁵⁰Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 98.

⁵¹Existence (*L'Existence*): our human essence and the present event of being concerned for one's destiny.

⁵²Existent (*L'Existant*): an existing human person who has faced and overcome the challenge of transcending his or her self-caring existence; one who is an authentic human person.

⁵³*Conatus essendi*: trying to be; the violence of seeking one's own destiny, emphasizing the verbal aspect of being.

⁵⁴Levinas, *Existence and Existents*, p. 57.

personal about them. Humanity was stripped away to the extent that the death of the victim was itself nonexistent in the eyes of Nazism.⁵⁵ Here, the sheer fact of impersonal and anonymous being is left for every Jewish victim awaiting extermination.

The following example⁵⁶ is a way to step phenomenologically into the world of anonymous and depersonalizing evil that pierces the human soul with useless suffering:

Imagine yourself waiting to die—"to be exterminated"—at Auschwitz. Do you see the gas chamber that would mercilessly end your life, or perhaps the violent eyes of the guard seeking to crush your spirit? You are the persecuted one. Your silence is your death, and your death is nothing. Your suffering is useless. Take a deep breath. How do you feel? Helpless? Abandoned? Terrified? Your whole consciousness is pain itself. This is the evil of suffering, and your consciousness has been poisoned by the evil of pain. There is no way out. Perhaps your mouth half opens with a moan or a cry or a groan or a sigh in the hope of calling for help. Upon your face are the haunting reality of pure suffering and the explosive expression of absurdity. Suffering is meaningless and "for nothing."⁵⁷

For Levinas, the mystery of evil could not be explained. Developing a theodicy in a world of human barbarism negates human responsibility. He wrote: "The disproportion between suffering and every theodicy was shown at Auschwitz with a glaring, obvious clarity."⁵⁸ All Jewish and Christian attempts at trying to form a theodicy have failed. This is why Levinas approached the notion of evil phenomenologically. He described evil as "an excess"⁵⁹ that awakens "our waiting on the good—the love of God."⁶⁰ This is the very experience of being faced with the other's prayerful lament: "Why are you making me suffer; why are you not rather reserving for me an eternal beatitude?"⁶¹ Approaching the notion of evil phenomenologically allowed Levinas to describe it in light of our responsibility for each other.

In contrast to the evils of Antisemitism and of Jews' and Christians' being strangers to one another, the heart of Jewish-Christian relations is blessing each

⁵⁵Elisabeth Weber, "The Notion of Persecution in Levinas's *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*," tr. Mark Saattjian, in Adriaan Peperzak, ed., *Ethics as First Philosophy: The Significance of Emmanuel Levinas for Philosophy, Literature, and Religion* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), p. 73. Weber quotes Lyotard here: "This death must therefore be killed, and that is what is worse than death. For, if death can be exterminated, it is because there is nothing to kill. Not even the name Jew" (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend*, tr. George Van Den Abbeele [Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988], p. 101).

⁵⁶This example is my adaptation of Levinas's phenomenology of evil and suffering to evoke in the reader the reality of what is depersonalizing and anonymous evil.

⁵⁷Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 93.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, p. 97.

⁵⁹Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 183. Levinas's understanding of the phenomenology of evil is particularly colored by the writings of Philippe Nemo. See Philippe Nemo, *Job and the Excess of Evil*, postface Emmanuel Levinas, tr. and postscript Michael Kigel (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1998).

⁶⁰Levinas, *Collected Philosophical Papers*, p. 183.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 181.

other with good will and responsibility. This is a legacy of Levinas's vision of hope against death, destruction, and war when all appeared lost. In terms of death, destruction, and war, he reflected how monstrous or even apocalyptic the twentieth century was. This is why he sought to disassociate himself from the totality of such a violent history to an eschatological sacred history. Every human event is part of sacred history, including all the forms of suffering and evil that unfolded during the twentieth century. Death, destruction, and war—betrayers of the human spirit—have portrayed human wickedness in its darkest time:

This is the century that in thirty years has known two world wars, the totalitarianisms of right and left, Hitlerism and Stalinism, Hiroshima, the Gulag, and the genocides of Auschwitz and Cambodia. This is the century that is drawing to a close in the obsessive fear of the return of everything these barbaric names stood for: suffering and evil inflicted deliberately, but in a manner no reason sets limits to, in the exasperation of a reason become political and detached from all ethics.⁶²

Levinas died on Christmas Day, 1995, still five years from the end of the century and from the end of the second millennium. His prophecy in view of Rwanda, Bosnia, Chechnya, East Timor, Kosovo, and the terrible events of September 11, 2001, appears more real than reality itself. The prophecy is a wisdom and knowledge filled with trauma and heartache: "For in much wisdom is much vexation, and those who increase knowledge increase sorrow" (Eccl. 1:18). It was with earnestness that Levinas proclaimed a messianic life of *kenosis* and infinite responsibility. Attending to the reality of evil, both Jews and Christians can create a new path of hope, revealing a future world free of political violence and economic injustice. Could not the world's redemption, stirring as mercy and kenotic love, be witnessed first as the reconciliation between Jews and Christians? Would not such reconciliation then be a testimony of glory and the very moment where everything is possible?

VI. Conclusion: Everything Is Possible

Kenosis is a key to unlock the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas and the insoluble problem of Jewish-Christian relations. Both Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity have journeyed along different paths in the search for truth and goodness. The fact that the Talmud has been largely unknown to Christianity bears witness to this poignant fact. However, there have been inroads of hope when the paths of Christianity and Judaism have met. Particularly, the work of Levinas is a sign of this hope. Following in the wake of Rosenzweig, Levinas embodied the richness of his Jewish heritage and Christian civilization. His thought is a crucial opening for Christians and Jews to embody maturity and patience with each other. For Christians, it begins with acknowledging that Jews are of the utmost importance for the world's future.⁶³

⁶²Levinas, *Entre Nous*, p. 97.

⁶³Levinas, *Difficult Freedom*, p. 202.

Such transformation can lead to a new model for interreligious dialogue: that of nonindifference between Judaism and Christianity, such that one is infinitely responsible for the other. Today, Jews and Christian have the opportunity to transform their relationship from that of strangers to taking on the dignity of being together as a family blessed in God's love. When there is great injustice, feelings of despair and anxiety seek to destroy hope. It is at this moment when all appears lost that everything is possible—above all, when a Judeo-Christian friendship molds hope into the life of faith and love. God is revealed not only in either the Christian or the Jewish face yearning for justice but also in both faces' revealing a way out of violence, hatred, and war.

Levinas's ethical philosophy asserts a loving, personal responsibility for the individual. It is attentive to the danger of superficially loving humanity in general. The following passage from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers* underlines this very danger:

'That's exactly what a doctor said to me once, a long time ago though,' observed the starets. 'He was already elderly and unquestionably a wise man. He spoke just as frankly as you have done, but with humour, bitter humour. I love mankind, he said, but I'm surprised at myself; the more I love mankind in general, the less I love men in particular, that is, separately, as individuals. In my thoughts, he said to me, I've often had a passionate desire to serve humanity, and would perhaps have actually gone to the cross for mankind if I had ever been required to do so, and yet at the same time, as I well know from my personal experience, I'm incapable of enduring two days in the same room with any other person. The moment anybody comes close to me, his personality begins to overpower my self-esteem and intrude upon my freedom. Within one day I can end up hating the very best of men, some because they take too long over their dinner, others because they've caught a cold and keep blowing their noses. I become a misanthrope, he said, the minute I come into contact with people. And it has always been the same with me; the more I have detested people individually, the more passionately I have loved humanity in general.'⁶⁴

Dostoevsky's writings, especially *The Karamazov Brothers*, profoundly enriched Levinas's thought.⁶⁵ The power of this passage gives an important caveat for Jewish-Christian relations. For Christians and Jews, "loving" each other in general does not mean loving each other separately as individuals. We must love one another with all our heart, talents, and wealth. Jewish-Christian relations need all these human resources. Finding and nurturing a friendship—face-to-face—with the Jewish or Christian other produces the hope that "everything is possible."

⁶⁴Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Karamazov Brothers*, tr. with intro. and notes Ignat Avsey, *The World's Classics* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 72.

⁶⁵Throughout his writings, Levinas was fond of quoting Dostoevsky's *The Karamazov Brothers*: "Each of us is guilty before everyone for everyone, and I more than the others" (see Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, p. 146).

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