

Self and Salvation Being Transformed

This eagerly awaited book by David F. Ford makes a unique and important contribution to the debate about the Christian doctrine of salvation. Using the pivotal image of the face, Professor Ford offers a constructive and contemporary account of the self being transformed. He engages with three modern thinkers (Levinas, Jüngel and Ricoeur) in order to rethink and reimagine the meaning of self. Developing the concept of a worshipping self, he goes on to explore the dimensions of salvation through the lenses of scripture, worship practices, the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the lives of contemporary saints. He uses different genres and traditions to show how the self flourishes through engagement with God, other people, and the responsibilities and joys of ordinary living. The result is a habitable theology of salvation which is immersed in Christian faith, thought and practice while also being deeply involved with modern life in a pluralist world.

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Georges Rouault, *Ecce Homo*, 1953.

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Being Transformed

DAVID F. FORD



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To DEAREST DEBORAH

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I

**Dialogues: Levinas,
Jünger,
Ricoeur**

Facing

We live before the faces of others. Some are there physically, others in memory or anticipation. We have been formed face to face from our earliest days, deeper than conscious memory. A baby is welcomed – amazed gratitude, hugs and kisses, feeding, anxious oversight, eyes meeting, the first smile, accompanying singing and speaking, friends and relatives come to see. It is a face exactly like no other, mark of individuality and uniqueness, constantly moving and changing. But who is it like? It is part of genetic history, features formed by race and family, a one-off that constantly displays its origins, the very type of continuity with novelty.

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Already too it is part of cultural history, has been involuntarily taken into a particular family, society and period. What meanings are already played out in these first encounters? How is this particular baby received and understood? What are the habits and customs, the codes and influences, which are distilled into communication with this new person? What does it mean to be firstborn? Or female?

We may never unravel the dense weave of these early meetings and patterns of interaction, and the same is true for the other participants over the generations. We find ourselves in the midst of them, a nodal point where strands are entwined, where many dimensions of life (genetic, linguistic and cultural, psychological, religious and so on) converge in ordinary face to face behaviour. We are recognised and rejected, welcomed and ignored. Language is learnt here and facing others remains the main location of speech. All the emotions are registered – fear, anger, shame, scorn, joy and pain – or indifference. They show in smiles, tears, frowns and other endlessly nuanced expressions, accompanied by words and other gestures or not. We meet cold and hard faces,

faces that turn away, blush, laugh, and are attentively still. There are beauty and ugliness, compassion and hatred.

This is a 'micro-history' at the heart of our lives, but most of it is missed by any historian. Who can ever tell the full story of one good afternoon with an old friend? All accounts are abstractions from the intimate particularity, the layers of meaning, the look in the eyes. It is in such face to face meetings, deeply resistant to adequate description, that many of the most significant things in our lives happen, in love and enmity, in education, business, committee meetings, law courts, marriages, families, groups of all sorts. The dynamics of such meetings illustrate the contingencies of life as well as anything in nature. A word, a glance, an instantaneous interpretation, a confrontation, a dissimulation, a misconstrual, an indirectly conveyed attitude – these can be turning points, moments of insight, decision or shame.

No wonder this is the realm of life most usually rendered in the dominant media of our time – films, television programmes, magazines, cartoons, novels and other stories, songs and musicals. So we are continually in the midst of projections of face to face relationships that invite our responses and identifications. Hundreds of scenarios are presented, with characters, events and settings which offer images of self and others. Minds and homes are filled with the images of those who act, entertain, rule, suffer, fight, advertise, comment, and otherwise get publicity.

Our imaginations are therefore the scene of innumerable rehearsals of life with real or fictional characters. This is a major concern of our 'inner life'. Who are our own chief characters? What are our plots and sub-plots, settings and points of view? There are layers of memory, deposits and interweavings of narratives and more fragmentary images, and often the focus for memory is a face. A face is a distillation of time and memory. Think of the face of someone important to us and it conjures up past events, stories and associations, a world of meaning. It can reach into the future too, with plans, hopes and fears. Imaginatively, we rehearse our lives and intentions before the faces of those we respect, fear, love or otherwise take special notice of or want to impress. What faces do we have habitually in our hearts? Might that be one of the best clues to our identity? Pleasing our parents, bringing up a child, impressing our peers, asserting ourselves against those who threaten or compete, together with many more complex and nuanced motives and desires, are linked to people deeply imprinted on our memories. We perform our lives before them, consciously or not.

1.1 Faces and selves

How are you related to your face? Why does that sound a rather odd question? Partly because it does not ring true in separating face and self. Yet it would also seem odd to identify face and self. Obviously you are more than the outside of part of your head. Yet that last phrase is clearly inadequate as a description of the face. To meditate on the face is to find an approach to a range of key questions about the self. The face often seems to be a pivotal ‘interface’ between two aspects of the self.

We are given our faces. We have no choice about them, and inheritance together with social formation determines much about them. Yet we seem to have some freedom with them and perhaps in the long run significantly form them through our habits of living. Kierkegaard spoke of ‘historical beauty’ in faces shaped by a lifetime of good living.

Each face is uniquely individual yet it is also a primary locus for relating to others and the world. The face as relating, welcoming, incorporating others is fundamental to social life. It is possible to have a glimpse of the fact that individuality and sociality need not be in competition by thinking of the way in which faces can interanimate each other and at the same time each seem to become more fully and distinctively itself. This leads on to the relation of private to public spheres. Developed still further, it is possible to see the polarity of particularity and universality mediated through the face. The particular face has a capacity to relate to others that is in principle universal. This is clearly a principle appreciated as much by emperors and dictators as by religions.

All the senses are active through the face, or closely connected with it—smell, touch, taste, sight and hearing. It is also the site of speech. So it acts as the most intensive locus of human communication. But what of the interior side of all this communication, the processing of information, thinking, remembering and so on? Clearly there are complex neural networks and the phenomena variously called mind/brain, soul, psyche, ego, spirit, heart. If one does not subscribe to a dualistic (matter/spirit) account of these, then the terms in which they will be described are as matter organised on different levels in a dynamic order of energy and information. This links the dynamically ordered, communicating and responsive face much more intrinsically into the self than could happen in a dualistic account. There can be no simple picture of a mind, soul or will causing a face to be expressive in certain ways, but a much more complex open system of energy and information in which the face is a

vital aspect of the embodied self, crucially mediating between what is 'external' and 'internal'. It is especially vital to the 'punctuation' of self and world – those many ways in which the self shapes and is shaped by communication and other exchanges while maintaining a distinct identity. Those 'other exchanges' are not to be ignored. They include kissing, eating, drinking and breathing, and are a reminder that the embodied self is material, the face is flesh.

The uniqueness of each face does not conflict with it being describable within various categories. There are family resemblances and, perhaps most important in our culture, race and gender. What about race? Skin colour and other typical characteristics in faces allow easy identification of difference and therefore compartmentalisation, stereotyping and unjust discrimination. One way societies may respond is to level all the differences and affirm 'equal rights' for all human beings, making the human race into the inclusive compartment. But can that, if it is followed through consistently, avoid a destruction of 'good' differentiation? Is one root of unjust discrimination not the failure to recognise each person as transcending any of our overviews? Is there not a pluralism that is most clearly seen in faces? There is no synthesising of faces, they embody otherness and particularity. Might it even be that justice is rooted in the face to face, in what Levinas calls 'the appeal in the face of the other'?

What about gender? The face is a revealing indicator of gender formation, in which hormones and culture both participate. Is even to talk about 'the face' a way of ignoring gender differences? Should we not speak of male and female faces? But here the particularity invoked in relation to race is again significant. It is not that there are not differences along gender lines or major issues of inappropriate discrimination. The face can help to relativise the gender categories in ways which both intensify the challenge to injustice and also make sure that personhood is appropriately affirmed. The appeal in the face of the other is more fundamental than any identification of that face by gender.

1.2 Surface, depth and representation

But is all this about the face still too much on the surface, only skin deep, missing out on any significant engagement with the depths, too vulnerable to mere appearances? 'There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face' (Shakespeare). This is another interface, between surface and depth. There are many questions in current thought about the ways such

metaphors are used, their presuppositions about self and world. Why play down surfaces? Why make a sharp dichotomy between appearance and reality? We talk of gazing deeply into the face of another. There is a concept of depth that does not separate it from the face. There are faces in the memory, in the heart. In mutual joy or grief it is as if the whole self in its heights or depths strains to appear in the face and accompanying words and behaviour, and 'superficiality' would be a ridiculous description. It seems rather that face to face behaviour can embody depth or shallowness.

The Shakespearean dictum in its context in *Macbeth* raises the related question of simulation and dissimulation, deceit and masking. Besides the 'bright mystery' of the inexhaustibility of the face of the beloved and the infinity of hiddenness and revelation glimpsed through the amazement of adoration (Dante and Beatrice are perhaps the supreme example in literature), there is the 'dark mystery' of the lying face, deceptive communication. The possibility of this (and it is sometimes desirable) also says something important about the self in its capacities for differentiation, many-levelled communication, ambiguity, ambivalence and contradiction. There are of course many modes of being deceptive, but the role of the face in both sincerity and deceit lets it be a suggestive way into these fundamental matters.

The truthfulness of communication leads into two questions of representation. First, there is the representation of the self through the face. The self is far too complex and multidimensional to be adequately represented in face to face communication. The notion that it is a presentation that corresponds to some internal state is inadequate – that oversimplifies the interplay of 'inner' and 'outer', 'body' and 'mind'. All the dimensions of the face already discussed could be gathered here to conceive the self more adequately – through early and later face to face relationships, input from the media and other cultural sources, our inner life performed before significant others, our inherited physical features and their shaping over time, the significance of family, race and gender. Once we have rejected a correspondence theory of face and self we can let it play its part in a more adequate social, communicational and ethical understanding. It is only a part, but one which is pervasively important in the 'ecology of self'. It is also one which has been ignored, neglected or suppressed in much modern Western thought or culture. Indeed, one might argue that the Enlightenment and its aftermath tended towards a 'faceless self' and that many of the challenges to the Enlightenment suffer

from the same defacing of people. Yet there are many resources for a recovery of the face and for conceiving a more adequate notion of self.

The second question about representation is closely linked to the previous one. In a complex communicational ecology of self the modes of representation are vital, in words, symbols, pictures, sounds, gestures and other behaviour. Words have their primary context in faces. They can also try to describe them, evoke them, reflect on them. The resonances of the notion of face are wide-ranging. It enters into countless tropes. Objects and buildings have faces or façades; we face the future; we lose face, save face, outface, aboutface, deface, surface, interface; we countenance and discountenance; bureaucracies can be faceless. Not only that but every part of the face generates metaphors – of nose and smell, eyes and sight, lip, mouth, ear and sound, cheek, brow, chin, beard and complexion. From the concrete particularity of your face, for which the appropriate word is your name, the resonances spread out through metaphor, analogy, synecdoche, metonymy.

What about the visual representation of the face? Art surrounds us with faces of other centuries and our own. Artists might be seen as tutors in seeing each other and ourselves. There is no ‘innocent eye’: our seeing has a history and representation has a history. Seeing is a complex process of recognition, attention, interaction and integration. To be just in our seeing requires a long apprenticeship, learning from those with practised eyes, and alert to the ways in which our vision is laden with interests, theories and many-levelled associations. Artists can draw us into the complexities of this apprenticeship. We can begin to appreciate the diverse interrelationships of ‘finding’ and ‘fashioning’, ‘matching’ and ‘making’. How does a Cézanne portrait relate to its subject? Any notion of copying or exact likeness is inadequate, but so is sheer invention. It is a witness to the sitter that innovates on a long tradition of portrait painting and in doing so can be an event in our own seeing that affects how we see faces. Its testimony becomes embedded in our habitual seeing and no face is ever quite the same again because each is now somehow in relation to this portrait. It is one of our ‘faces in the heart’. But caricatures too, humorous or malicious, can enter the heart. And much twentieth-century art has been iconoclastic – defacing, distorting or fragmenting the human face. We see each other through those images too.

The number of represented faces that the history of art offers is as nothing compared to the inundation of faces encountered today through image technologies – photography, cinema, television, video, computer.

We are overwhelmed with images mediated by various instruments. No civilisation has ever been through anything like this before. In an average day we can see hundreds of people from around the world and from various periods of history, participants in events and entertainments. We may view far more actors than 'real' people. Always it is viewing edited by those who select programmes, finance films, point cameras, decide on the day's headlines for newspapers or television, write scripts, publish CD-ROMs, magazines and books and advertise products. It is also often optional viewing, with an endless variety of choices. Our meetings with people in our daily life are interwoven with these 'quasi-meetings' within a global horizon. Our sense of time and space is formed in relation to all this material. How do we cope? How can our habits of 'facing' and 'being faced' be shaped appropriately? How can we habitually discern among the abundance of testimonies through which reality is probed, constructed, enhanced, ironised, distorted, caricatured, manipulated and so on? Is it possible to find or enable 'communities of the face' which do not succumb to confusion or distraction and do more than just cope with all this?

1.3 Facing, community and God

The main focus of this meditation so far has been on the face, but the dynamics of 'facing' has been perhaps even more fundamental. 'Facing' helps to avoid the wrong sort of fixations on the face as an 'object'. It embraces the face in activity and passivity, purpose and temporality, loneliness and reciprocity. It can be a joint conception – facing something together. Or it can refer to interiority, facing oneself, one's past, present and future. At its most general it can refer to environments, institutions, nations or even civilisations 'facing' situations, challenges or possibilities.

It is in such extended uses that the connection with a human face may seem most tenuous, to the point of being dead metaphor. Yet might it be helpful, on the analogy with the 'quasi-meeting' mentioned above, to think of 'quasi-facing' in such a way that the force of the earlier part of this meditation is significant in distributed ways? The links to particular human faces might be indirect and mediated through institutional polity and policy, vast political, economic, cultural or environmental forces and many levels of abstraction. Yet it might be the most crucial thing of all to recognise and strengthen those links. 'Communities of the

face' might be the niche in this vast ecology whose flourishing is intrinsic to the flourishing of all the others in just and sustainable ways, and which act as the best test for the health of institutions, trends and policies. To have a primary concern with such communities and the quality of facing is by no means to be unconcerned about quasi-facings at other levels. On the contrary, it is to be passionately motivated to deal with them in their demanding complexity and to travel often long and dangerous detours in order to get their 'ecology' right. To see a new baby is to be accountable before a face whose future is bound up with that flourishing. Each face is an interrupting summons to justice and peace, with endless ramifications for economics, politics, institutions and other structures.

Communities of the face are vital but they can hardly be described in general terms. Like the face itself they cry out for content in particular ways. Above all, the quality of facing is inseparable from who is facing and being faced, and from the complex history of that over time. And because 'the corruption of the best is the worst' the deformations of facing are likely to be most terrible where the fullest facing is risked. That has certainly been so in the community which is mainly at issue in this book, the Christian church. It might be described as being concerned with the transformation of facing before the face of Christ. If there is a key text for this book it is Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and it is worth meditating on two verses from that.

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding [*or reflecting*] the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit. (2 Cor. 3:18)

For it is the God who said, 'Light will shine out of darkness', who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. (2 Cor. 4:6)

Those verses describe being faced by God. There is the ultimate 'quasi-facing' of God's word which creates light as the environment of facing and warns us against ever finally disconnecting anything from such facing. The scope is universal. There is the focussing of the light, knowledge and glory of God through one particular face, that of Jesus Christ. This face 'has shone in our hearts', fundamental to our identity in community. All of that might be seen as the 'transformational grammar' of what is said in 3:18: the dynamics of salvation in a community of the face.

Christianity is characterised by the simplicity and complexity of

facing: being faced by God, embodied in the face of Christ; turning to face Jesus Christ in faith; being members of a community of the face; seeing the face of God reflected in creation and especially in each human face, with all the faces in our heart related to the presence of the face of Christ; having an ethic of gentleness (*praütes*) towards each face; disclaiming any overview of others and being content with massive agnosticism about how God is dealing with them; and having a vision of transformation before the face of Christ ‘from glory to glory’ that is cosmic in scope, with endless surprises for both Christians and others.

This salvation, or health, is about full hospitality and full worship. The facing is fulfilled in feasting, and that is the movement from this opening meditation to the one which concludes this book. But for the joy of that celebration to be holy it needs to have come by way of sharing food with the hungry and being liberated from the idols that distort the dynamics of our praising, knowing and desiring.

Perhaps the greatest poem of Western Christianity is Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. In its final canto a long journey of face to face encounters culminates in a vision of God. At the heart of the vision is the face of Christ. It is the ultimate transformation, as imagination is overwhelmed and desire and will are moved by

the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.¹

In the linguistic home of Jesus nearly a millennium earlier, St Ephrem the Syrian – perhaps the greatest theologian poet before Dante – led communities in worship with his Hymns on Paradise, daringly evoking an intensity of transfigured existence. He constantly prompts questions that are likely to be suggested by the following chapters of this book. Is this too much? Might God be this generous? Dare we be so joyful? Is such delight the open secret of life? Here is a taste of his feast:

Such is the flowing brook of delights
 that, as one tree takes leave of you,
 the next one beckons to you;
 all of them rejoice
 that you should partake of the fruit of one
 and suck the juice of another,
 wash and cleanse yourself
 in the dew of a third;

1. Dante Alighieri, *Paradiso*, translated with an Introduction by Allen Mandelbaum (Bantam Books, New York 1986), Canto XXXIII, line 145, p. 303.

anoint yourself with the resin of one
 and breathe another's fragrance,
 listen to the song of still another.
 Blessed is He who gave joy to Adam! . . .

Breezes full of discernment
 nourish the discerning;
 this breeze provides you with nourishment in abundance,
 that one delights you as it blows,
 one causes your countenance to shine,
 while another gives you enjoyment.
 Who has ever experienced
 delight in this way,
 eating, without employing his hands,
 drinking, without using his mouth?
 As both cupbearer and baker
 do these delightful breezes act . . .

Instead of bread, it is the very fragrance of Paradise
 that gives nourishment;
 instead of liquid,
 this life-giving breeze does service:
 the senses delight
 in its luxuriant waves
 which surge up
 in endless variety,
 with joyous intensity.
 Being unburdened,
 the senses stand in awe and delight
 before the divine Majesty . . .

But if you are greedy
 Moses will reproach you;
 he took no provisions
 as he ascended to the mountain summit;
 he was richly sustained because he hungered,
 he shone with much beauty because he thirsted.
 Who has ever beheld
 a famished man
 devour a vision and grow beautiful,
 imbibe a voice and be sustained?
 Nourished with the divine glory
 he grew and shone forth.

All that we eat
 the body eventually expels
 in a form that disgusts us;
 we are repelled by its smell.
 The burden of food debilitates us,
 in excess it proves harmful,
 but if it be joy
 which inebriates and sustains,
 how greatly will the soul be sustained
 on the waves of joy
 as its faculties suck
 the breast of wisdom.

Torrents of delight
 flow down through the First Born
 from the radiance of the Father
 upon the gathering of seers:
 they indulge themselves there
 upon the pasture of divine visions.
 Who has ever beheld the hungry
 find satisfaction,
 fare sumptuously and become inebriated
 on waves of glory
 flowing from the beauty
 of that sublime Beauty?

The Lord of all
 is the treasure store of all things:
 upon each according to his capacity
 He bestows a glimpse
 of the beauty of His hiddenness,
 of the splendour of His majesty.
 He is the radiance who, in His love,
 makes everyone shine
 – the small, with flashes of light from Him,
 the perfect, with rays more intense,
 but only His Child is sufficient
 for the might of His glory.

Accordingly as each here on earth
 purifies his eye for Him,
 so does he become more able to behold
 His incomparable glory;

accordingly as each here on earth
 opens his ear to Him,
 so does he become more able to grasp
 His wisdom;
 accordingly as each here on earth
 prepares a receptacle for Him,
 so is he enabled to carry
 a small portion of His riches.

The Lord who is beyond measure
 measures out nourishment to all,
 adapting to our eyes the sight of Himself,
 to our hearing His voice,
 His blessing to our appetite,
 His wisdom to our tongue.
 At His gift
 blessings swarm,
 for this is always new in its savour,
 wonderfully fragrant,
 adaptable in its strength,
 resplendent in its colours.

Who has ever beheld gatherings of people
 whose sustenance is the giving of praise?
 Their raiment is light,
 their countenance full of radiance;
 as they ruminant
 on the abundance of His gift
 there burst forth from their mouths
 springs of wisdom;
 tranquillity reigns over their thought,
 truth over their knowledge,
 reverence over their enquiry,
 and love over their offering of praise.

Grant, Lord, that I and those dear to me
 may together there
 find the last remnants
 of Your gift!
 Just the sight of Your Dear One
 is a fountain of delight;
 whoever is worthy
 to be ravished thereby

will despise ordinary food;
all who look upon You
will be sustained by Your beauty.
Praises be to Your splendour!²

2. St Ephrem the Syrian, *Hymns on Paradise*, Introduction and translation by Sebastian Brock (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press; Crestwood, NY 1990), Hymn IX, pp. 138ff.
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