

Sobering Up To the Other: Levinas' Paradoxical View on Mystical Enthusiasm

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Abstract

In the thought of Levinas, we discover a double, apparently contradictory approach to mystical enthusiasm. Upon closer inspection, however, they do not annul each other but on the contrary need each other. In the period of his first major work, *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas is quite disapproving of 'mystical enthusiasm'. Later, in the period of his second major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, the idea of enthusiasm appears once again but the one-sided negative connotation has rather disappeared. Especially Levinas' movement of transDescendence offers possibilities for a Christian 'thorough reflection' on mysticism, starting from Spirit-theology.

The philosophical thought of Levinas can be described as a thinking 'unto-God', for which the face of the other, with its ethical appeal to responsibility, is held as the 'trace'. In this thought we discover a double, apparently contradictory approach to mystical enthusiasm. What is most known is his very critical stance towards mysticism, as it is found especially in the period of his first major work *Totality and Infinity* (1961). In a first movement we will describe the source and dynamics of this critique. What is less known is his positive attitude towards mysticism, which we encounter especially in the

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period of his second major work *Otherwise than Being* (1974). In a second movement we will then make more explicit the very unique modality of this positive approach so that it can be made clear how both approaches do not annul but on the contrary need each other. In a third movement we shall explore particularly the possibilities implied by Levinas' positive approach to mysticism for a Christian view, without neglecting his critical evaluation of a fusional mystical enthusiasm.¹

¹ The cited studies of Levinas are listed below in alphabetical order. Citations in our text are indicated with an abbreviation of the original French edition, along with the cited page(s). The cited page(s) from the available English translation is indicated after the forward slash (/). Abbreviations used: AE: *Autrement qu'Autre ou au-delà du Sujet*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1974. [English translation (ET): *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff (Kluwer), 1981.]; AV: *L'au-delà du verset. Lectures et discours talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1982. [ET: *Beyond the Verse. Talmudic Readings and Lectures*, translated by G.D. Moore, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994.]; CPP: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, translated by A. Lingis, Dordrecht/Boston/Lancaster, Kluwer/Nijhoff, 1987.]; DL: *Difficile Liberté. Essai sur le Judaïsme*, Paris, Albin Michel, 1963 (1st ed.), 1976 (2nd ed.). [ET: *Difficult Freedom. Essays on Judaism*, translated by S. Hand, Baltimore, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990.]; DV: *De Dieu qui vient à l'aide*, Paris, Vrin, 1982. [ET: *Of God Who Comes to Mind*, translated by K. Bergu, Stanford, University Press, 1988.]; EI: *De l'existence à l'essence*, Paris, Vrin, 1978 (2nd ed.). [ET: *Existence and Essence*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1978.]; EFP: "Existence", in F. Paré, Emmanuel Lévinas, *Qui êtes-vous?*, Lyon, La Manufacture, 1987, pp. 62-136. [ET: "Interview with François Paré," in DL, pp. 23-43.]; EN: *Tout autre, essai sur le penser à l'autre*, Paris, Grasset 1991. [ET: *Entre nous. Thinking-of-the-Other*, translated by M.B. Smith and B. Hardjav, London/New York, Continuum, 2006.]; HAH: *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1973. [ET: *Humanism of the Other*, translated by N. Butler, Urbana & Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 2003.]; HN: *A l'heure des nations*, Paris, Minuit, 1988. [ET: *In the Time of the Nations*, translated by M.B. Smith, Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1994.]; IR: *Is it Righteous to Be: Interviews with Emmanuel Lévinas*, edited by J. Robbins and translated by J. Robbins, M. Graham, with T. Luehe, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2001.]; NP: *Nous Proper*, Montpellier, Fata Morgana, 1976. [ET: *Proper Names*, translated by M.B. Smith, Stanford, University Press, 1996.]; PI: "La philosophie et l'idée de l'infini," in *En découvrant l'éternité avec Husserl et Heidegger*, Paris, Vrin, 1967, pp. 165-178. [ET: "Philosophy and the Idea of Infinity" in CPP, pp. 45-59.]; SdB: *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Paris, Minuit, 1977. [ET: in NTR, pp. 89-197, entitled "From the Sacred to the Holy: Five New Talmudic Readings".]; T: *Totale et infini. Essai sur l'extériorité*, La Haye, Nijhoff, 1961. [ET: *Totipotency and Infinity An Essay on Exteriority*, translated by A. Lingis, The Hague/Boston/London, Nijhoff, 1979.]; TRD: *Transcendance et intelligibilité (suivi d'un entretien)*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 1954, pp. 55-66 (Entretien avec Emmanuel Lévinas, 2 juin 1953, à Genève). [ET: "Discussion Following 'Transcendence and Intelligibility' (1984)" in IR 268-294.

1. Radical critique on mystical enthusiasm

In the period of his first major work, *Totality and Infinity* (1961) and of the compilation of his essays on Judaism of 1963, "Difficult Freedom", Levinas is quite disapproving of 'mystical enthusiasm'. Alongside an outspoken mistrust towards a cosmic religiosity, which starts from nature towards the divine (as if nature were only the transparency of the 'amazing' or 'wonderful' and were not, at the same time, marked by ruthlessness), he also criticises sharply the so-called 'religious enthusiasm' and a certain mysticism of emotional interiority that is coupled with it.

1.1. Mithnagdic background

This unambiguous critical approach – leading up from his Jewish background to a 'strict and demanding' form of an ethically oriented religiosity in and through the 'doing' (of the Torah) – can be better understood if it is linked with his particular Jewish Lithuanian background, namely the 'Mithnagdic' spirituality of the strict application to the Scripture and Talmud and to the writings of the great masters of the tradition. This spirituality stands in stark contrast to the 'Hasidic' spirituality, of which the *Tales of the Hasidim* (*Chassidische Erzählungen*, 1965) of Martin Buber are an eminent expression. Hasidism came into existence midway through the eighteenth century as a sort of devotional Judaism among the frequently illiterate rural Jews of the Ukrainian provinces of what were then Poland-Volhynia, Podolia, and Galicia. The main proponent was Israel Ben Elitzer (1700-1760), also known as Baal Shem Tov, meaning 'friendly Master of the Name (of God)', and 'possessor of the good name,' or 'entrusted with the people.' He taught that true religion consisted in a sincere and joyous love of God. The core of this living religiosity is 'enthusiasm' (*hitlahavut*) that expresses itself concretely in a heartfelt experience of and participation in God's omnipresence, both in fervent prayer and in daily life, with all its tasks and duties.

Hasidism met with heavy resistance, especially among the Jews of Lithuania, the homeland of Levinas. In some cities of Lithuania and in Vilnius in particular, the Jewish communities developed not only their religious and social life, but also their multi-faceted intellectual life. Lithuania was the land where Judaism reached its spiritual peak (EFP 64/24). This intellectual Judaism was rooted in the hard discipline of studying the Talmud in the 'Yeshiva' or 'academy of higher study of the Talmud', where the Talmud was no longer studied privately but in a group and under the direction of a learned teacher or 'master' (Rabbi). Resistance against Hasidism was initiated by Elijah Ben Solomon (1720-1797), also called the Gaon of Vilna,² and carried on further by his disciple Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner (1749-1821)³ and the so-called Mithnagdim, literally 'opponents'.⁴ They played a key role in the resistance against the popular movement of Hasidism, "demanding more fervour than knowledge", denying Talmudic study its primary place in Jewish religious life (AV182-183/151). With a certain fierceness, the Lithuanian Mithnagdim precisely went against the excessive preference for enthusiasm, because they were convinced that "by grouping the communities around spiritual personalities with charismatic power the Tsadikim or the 'miraculous Rabbis', who did not refuse the adoration of the faithful, changed the true relations between disciple and master, and undermined the fundamental principles of Jewish monotheism" (AV 182-183/150-151). Fighting the excesses of the Hasidic movement, they attempted to safeguard and develop the essential importance of

² Cf. also J.-F. Malherbe, "Gaon de Vilna, 1720-1796," in Y. Flusser and H. Alshuler (eds.), *Lithuanic Jews 1918-1948. Mémoire d'un monde exilé*, Paris, Editions Autrement (Collection Mémoires n° 41), 1996, pp. 193-203.

³ In his Jewish writings, Levinas points several times to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner, the favorite student of the Gaon of Vilna. He even dedicates a detailed and penetrating study to him, which at the same time also throws considerable light on his own thinking: "In the Image of God", according to Rabbi Hayyim Volozhiner" (1977) (AV 182-200/151-167). In a much later study, "Judaism and Kenois" (1985), he explicitly retraces his thinking (JN 136-151/114-132).

⁴ Cf. also A. Nadler, *The Faith of the Mithnagdim. Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Kabbala*, Baltimore & London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

a persistent and thorough study of the holy Texts and commentaries as the primary Jewish form of religiosity.⁵

1.2. Religious enthusiasm called into question

Levinas was clearly influenced by Mithnagdic Judaism and its suspicion against religious enthusiasm.⁶ Levinas understands enthusiasm as the possibility of achieving a lived-through interwovenness with God or the divine. The Greek word 'entheos', the root of 'enthusiasm', literally means: 'having a god in oneself, to be possessed and taken up by a god'. This easily leads to a 'pan-entheistic' religiosity wherein the divine and the human thus become one that they are fused: all in God and God in all. Whatever the many forms of appearances may be, Levinas interprets 'enthusiasm' as an implanting and immersion into the godhead, just as a butterfly is sucked up in the fire: the fusion of the human with the divine. Out of a kind of 'spiritual' hunger for religious depth-experience, one strives for the self-surpassing of one's own 'I' up to the divine other, for a direct and pure union with the divine, for an intimate, comforting, sweet and encompassing nearness to, or rather in the

⁵ The numerous Talmudic readings and lectures of Levinas appear as a very unique incarnation of all that phenomena, and they have appealed to many generations of "enlightened" young Jews and has maintained its ties with Judaism: "Four Talmudic Readings", 1968; "From the Sacred to the Holy", 1977; "Beyond the Verse", 1982; "In the Time of the Nations", 1988; "New Talmudic Readings", 1996.

⁶ His first collection of essays on Judaism, *Difficult Freedom*, appearing first in 1963 and then again, reworked and expanded, in 1976, is a pregnant illustration of the basic Mithnagdic rationality from which Levinas interprets Judaism and calls for an intellectual and philosophical approach to the 'Jewish texts' which according to him 'give to think' – which is to say, represent a specific form of thinking by which they resist the taste of an instinctual and 'aesthetic' ethical intuition. And this Mithnagdic rationality not only influenced Levinas' interaction with Jewish texts and traditions, but also equally his philosophical thinking. His intellectual Judaism meets with the Western preference for thinking manifest in Greek thought and renewed in the Enlightenment. Both Jewish and Western, 'modern' intellectualism reinforces each other in his thinking, arriving at what he himself refers to as his "allegiance to the intellectualism of reason" (I, XVII/29).

divine presence. This 'sublimation' into the godhead takes place in and through ecstasy, rapture, 'top experience', where the boundaries and separations become 'annulled' as a consequence (DL, 29/14).

The path par excellence in order to reach this religious participation can be found in the feeling, as the common meaning of the term enthusiasm immediately suggests indeed. Levinas describes religious enthusiasm then as an "invasion of God across an inward emotion" (TI 186/211). Via the emotion of enthusiasm one searches for a lived-through experience of intense interiority and 'spirit', with the intention to take part directly in the 'intimate' divine presence in itself, or rather in the feeling that experiences and within which one feels oneself alive. One does not choose for the external detour of care for the world or for the other; or for the detour of the study of the 'exterior' text (Bible and Talmud), one opts resolutely for the 'short' and direct path to the inside, for the descent into one's own interiority, in order then to let go of oneself in the intensely felt interiority. One searches for an intense subjective experience of being grafted onto, or rather into the divine reality that is discovered and experienced not outside but inside the deepest self as the core of one's own true self. In religious enthusiasm there is no separation anymore, but an inextricable and direct 'in-presence' of the divine within the subjective, and vice-versa.

Insofar as religious enthusiasm leads to an absorption of the 'I' in a captive and alienating Ground, Levinas unrelentingly places this divine under criticism, however deeply moving the experienced 'One-All' may be. He moreover suspects religious enthusiasm of promoting – precisely on the basis of its inherent cult of feeling – a subjective, uncontrolled simmering of forces and passions. It can be the expression of an infantile yearning to return to the mother's womb, wherein one is redeemed by means of a fusing union from the calamity of separation. Then religious enthusiasm runs the risk of not being much more than a narcissistic projection of one's own unfulfilled dreams and wishes. Religious experience left to itself easily becomes shameless and immodest. Certain ambiguities and images simmer upwards unconsciously with the feeling out of our

'depths' and these make us so drunk that we lose our lucidness and thus our independence. And this then leads us to an 'apostasy' with regard to ourselves. Hence Levinas remains faithful to the Western intellectualism that sees reason as an important source of freedom and independence (DL 68/44). In order to safeguard the 'soul' against all possible tyrannies that lie lurking on its ground, it must be assisted by reason. It must see to it that the 'I' remains separated and independent: 'ab-solute' in the literal sense of the word, namely 'set free'. In this regard, just as Plato puts it, 'the dialogue of the soul with itself' is the very breath of freedom (TI 16/45).

It is then not surprising that Levinas nurtures a huge distrust towards every religious revival, namely the loudly resounding cry time and again to return to interiority and spirituality, to religious experience and enthusiastic religiosity, in short to the 'true' religiosity of the 'soul' (DL 19/6). He discovers therein the ever returning threat of "the violence of the sacred" (TI 40/77). The divine transports and stupefies humans and extracts them from their *overs* capabilities and intentions. This exaltation leads to the loss of self or the fusion and the convergence with the great and comforting, divine Mystery, without there still being any sufficient distance and separation: "In the mystical participation the identity of the terms can be lost. They are then divested of what constituted their very substantiality. The participation of the one term in another does not consist in sharing an attribute; one term is the other. The private existence of each term, mastered by a subject that is, loses the private character and returns to an undifferentiated background; the resistance of one submerges the other, and is thus no longer an existence of the one. We recognize here the there is" (EE 99/61), the impersonal, a field of anonymous forces, absence of beings, 'begin in general, 'no-thing-ness', 'no-one-ness': the indeterminateness constitutes its acuteness. Rather than to a – human or divine – subject, the notion of the there is leads us to the absence of humans and God, the absence of any being, "before all Revelation, before the light comes" (EE 99/61); the situation of chaos, absolute darkness and indifference – without any kind of separation and differentiation,

In the enthusiastic participation in the divine, the 'I' disappears, it literally becomes 'consumed' and annulled. The 'I' is paralysed in its experience of identity. It is transported outside of its knowing and willing. True freedom, however, would feel insulted at such uncontrollable overwhelming. The immersed participation in the divine "annuls the link between persons by making beings participate, albeit ecstatically, in a drama not brought about willingly by them, an order in which they founder. This power of the Divine seems to offend human freedom and to be contrary to the education of man, which remains action on a free being. Not that liberty is an end in itself, but it does remain the condition for any value man may attain. The Sacred that envelops and transports me is a form of violence" (DL 29/14).

1.3. Religious atheism as condition for mature religiosity

Out of this consideration on the violence inflicted on the 'I', which is inherent in different forms of religious enthusiasm, Levinas stubbornly arrives at stating time and again that religious atheism is an essential condition for the unfolding of human independence. Whoever takes seriously the independence of the human shall reject that which endangers this independence. The independent will establishes itself precisely as will in and through this religious atheism or through this refusal of a god who, from the inside out, would inhabit or direct it (TI 61/88-89, 202/226). For those who see God as a "fairly primary sort of God, who dishes out prizes, inflicts punishment or pardons sins" (DL 190/143) this atheism is most normal and healthy, and actually a necessary reaction. Levinas speaks in this regard about "the legitimate demands of atheism" (DL 190/143) or stronger still about the unassailable position of atheism. This implies that religious atheism should not be conceived of as "equivalent to a diabolical pride" (TI 52/79) or as disobedience, but only as a happy affirmation of one's own independence.

There is more, however, for this religious atheism is not only the condition for the growth towards independence of the 'I', but also for a mature religiosity, or better still for a 'religion of adults', i.e. of

free and responsible beings (DL 25/11). The relationship with God must be such that the independence of humans is not annulled but, on the contrary, is promoted. As long as humans are not seen as autonomous beings in religion but are, on the contrary, absorbed into the divine, there can be no talk of a mature religion. Hence, monotheism according to Levinas obliges itself to run the risk of religious atheism: "The path that leads to the one God must be walked in part without God" (DL 190/143). It must accept that the 'I' that becomes aware of its autonomy and thereby arrives at a rejection of all reducing religious participation, can get stuck in this atheism. Only through this religious atheism can the mature 'I' climb up to a full understanding of the Transcendent. Only a radically separated and independent being can stand open to a possible revelation from God, without it being brought out of itself through the contact with God and lose its separation. Only an independent 'atheistic' being can be a full fledged conversation partner (DL 31/15). The mature religious person, namely the one who acknowledges and affirms God, wants to know what he does and why; such a person wants to judge and take part in full lucidity as a true partner in the relationship. That is why it is for Levinas "a great glory for the Creator to have set up a being who affirms Him after having contested and denied Him in the glamorous areas of myth and enthusiasm; it is a great glory for God to have created a being capable of seeking Him or hearing Him from afar, having experienced separation and atheism" (DL 31/15-16).

Finally, we would like to point out how religious atheism is not of a temporary or passing nature. It is not so that humans must become atheist in a first phase in order to give up atheism in a second phase. They must, on the contrary, remain atheist in order to be able to enter into a relationship with God in an authentic way. If religion, to be understood as the relationship with the Transcendent, is not to be degraded into a reducing participation then humans must time and again integrate their independence and thus their 'religious atheism' in that relationship itself. Monotheism conquers, in other words, religious atheism by taking it up in itself and retaining it as the condition for religion itself; an authentic human relationship with the Transcendent (II 50/78). With this, Levinas confirms and

surpasses at the same time the thesis of the 'enlightened' or modern, *axiological humanism*, that often brings along in its tracks *axiological atheism*. In order to safeguard human dignity and freedom, this atheism radically rejects all theological and religious views that stand in the way of human emancipation and unfolding. Levinas sees in this, however, only a first and not a definitive step. While axiological atheism denies God *in order* to promote the human, the affirmation of the irreducible value and dignity of the human does not lead for Levinas to a total negation of God but, on the contrary, to a purification of the concept of God.

1.4. Religious atheism affirms God's transcendence

This purification implies a qualified confirmation of God's radical and irreducible transcendence or 'holiness'. Levinas makes a sharp distinction between "the sacred" ("le sacré") and "the Holy" ("le Saint") (SaS 88/140). He describes the Holy in its literal sense as the pure, the separateness, the beingness without mixture, that is fundamentally applicable to God as the Transcendent One (think of the Latin 'sanctus', that refers back to 'sancire', to separate). Over and against that he describes the sacred as the "anonymous divinity": "faceless gods", "impersonal gods to whom one does not speak" (TI 115/142). "The sacred is neither an object nor a person who speaks" (EN 60/39). "being-without-beings", the "neuter" or the 'there is' (EE 93-94/57-58); the impersonal process of being that depersonalises beings – and humans in particular – through 'immersed participation' or 'reductive fusion' (TI 202/226).

It is precisely against this anonymous and depersonalising divinity that Levinas stubbornly lodges protest by affirming the radical transcendence of the Infinite, literally 'non-limite', non-identical and irreducible to the separated human subject. Levinas also refers back to an idea from the Jewish Kabala, retaken by the already mentioned and by him admired Haïm Volozhiner, namely the "Tzimsum" or 'originary contraction of the Divine', God's withdrawal or 'anachoresis' (AV 200/166). This idea was developed for the first time by Luria (1594-1572), the founder of the 16th century

renewal movement in the Jewish Kabala mysticism. The core of the 'tsimtsum' is the concept of divine self-limitation. We can best translate 'tsimtsum' with 'self-contraction' or concentration of the divine. By means of contracting into Himself, God wants to liberate space outside of Himself for something other than Himself. By means of withdrawing into His fathomless depth and, as it were, disappearing, He makes place for humans as independent and free creatures. In this manner, Kabala mysticism attempts to resolve the antinomy between God's omnipresence and the existence of free creatures outside of God. Or rather it transforms the contradiction into a paradox: the perfection of God consists precisely in that He hides Himself of the perfection of His omnipresence until He becomes, as it were, 'Nothing' (Rosenzweig), and thus makes place for humans as radically separated and independent beings (II 76/103). This implies that the self-emptying or 'anachoresis' (contraction) of the Infinite is essential for God's transcendence. Levinas expresses this in a philosophical manner as follows: "The Infinite realises itself by withstanding the invasion of a totality, in a contraction that leaves place for the separated being. Thus relationships that open up the way outside of being take form. An infinity that does not close in upon itself in a circle but withdraws from the ontological extension so as to leave a place for the separated being exists divinely. Over and beyond the totality it inaugurates a society. The relations that are established between the separated being and Infinity redeem what diminution there was in the contraction creative of Infinity. Man redeems creation. Society with God is not an addition to God nor a disappearance of the interval that separates God from the creature. By contrast with totalisation we call it religion. Multiplicity and the limitation of the Infinite, creator, are compatible with the perfection of the Infinite; they articulate the meaning of this perfection" (II 77/104).

We can conclude our first movement by stating that for Levinas religious atheism is indispensable to safeguard the independence and autonomy of the human as well as the radical transcendence of God. Both indeed create the conditions for a non-fusing bond between God and humans, and thus for a religious experience that does justice to

both God's alterity as well as our own human freedom, without the one coming at the expense of the other.

2. Ethical and 'religious' re-assessment of mystical enthusiasm

In the period of Levinas' second major work *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* (1974), preceded by a few essays compiled in *Humanism of the Other* (1972), and further developed in *Of God Who Comes to Mind* (1982) and *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other* (1991), the idea of enthusiasm appears once again but the one-sided negative connotation has rather disappeared. In 1975, I posed a question to him in a letter concerning the bond between his Mithraic background and his critical approach to enthusiasm and his answer was short but clear: "Distrust towards mysticism? Without doubt, certainly! For enthusiasm (emphasis by Levinas) = possession by God – as it doesn't mean ecstasy and drunkenness, but awakening and sobering up".⁷ This reflection has led me to nuance and reconsider Levinas' view on mysticism, namely in his second major work and the writings preparing and elaborating it, and to discover a quite unique mystical dimension. The validity of this interpretation is confirmed by two articles: (1) "From Consciousness to Wakefulness" (1974), taken up in "Of God Who Comes to Mind" (DVI 34-61/15-42); (2) "Philosophy and Awakening" (1976), taken up in "Entre Nous" (EN 93-106/66-77).

2.1. Outward movement toward the wholly Other

Levinas directly links his later reevaluation of mysticism with the ethical relationship to the other. We can call it a form of 'ethical

⁷ "Correspondance Roger Burggraeve – Emmanuel Levinas (du 10 juillet – le 4 août 1975), in: R. Burggraeve, *Emmanuel Levinas et la spiritualité de l'origine*, Leuven, Peeters, 1997, pp. 87-98, in: p. 97: "Mélange à l'égard de la mystique? Sans doute, certes! Mais l'enthousiasme = possession par Dieu – dans la mesure où il signifie non pas extase et ivresse, mais éveil et dégrèvement".

mysticism'. In the period of his first major work *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, he starts from the self as the same *par excellence*, to explicate – as aforesaid – the radical separation and structural autonomy of the human subject, being also the basis for his suspicion against mystical enthusiasm. We can discover in this affirmation of the self as 'the same' a continuation of the 'enlightened thought', which he of course develops in his own unique way by his phenomenology of enjoyment, labour, possession, habitation and knowledge as representation (TI 107-183). What is really new to his thought 'beyond enlightenment' is that he searches for the wholly other rather than the same. Concretely, he discovers and makes explicit that 'metaphysical alterity' on the basis of a phenomenology of the face of the other that by means of its essential exteriority transcends the same (the self) irreducibly. Inspired by his teacher and the promoter of his *Doctorat d'état* or habilitation, Jean Wahl (1888-1974), he qualifies this as the movement of transAAscendence (outward and upward) (TI 5/35, 12/41).⁸ Metaphysics directs itself towards the absolute as a term, on the basis of a desire that is and remains not only factual but also in principle inadequate and disproportional: "The term of this movement, the elsewhere or the other, is called *other* in an eminent sense. (...) The metaphysical desire tends toward *something else entirely*, toward the *absolutely other*" (TI 3/33). In concretising the metaphysical desire for the wholly other, Levinas discovers the deformalisation of this alterity in the face of the other as the immediate expression of its otherness through its gaze and word (TI 37/66) and as ethical appeal to responsibility for the other as other (TI 172-175/197-201). Levinas likewise calls this "the 'curvature' of the intersubjective space" (TI 267/291).

By means of its metaphysical and ethical expression the face brings about a de-levelling in being, literally a 'trans ascendence' of the other. This leads Levinas to speak about the 'height' and 'inliness' (TI 169/190), or even about the 'divinity' of the face (TI 273/297): "The dimension of the divine opens forth from the human face" (TI

⁸ Cf. also "Jean Wahl: Neither Having nor Being," in HS 110/74, 119/81.

50/78). The metaphysical and ethical otherness of the face introduces in me the idea of the Infinite – it is literally an ‘infused idea’, coming from elsewhere, as also Descartes suggests (PI 171-172/53-54): “The face of the other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me, the idea to my own measure – the adequate idea” (TI 21/51). I discover God as the wholly other in and through the face that awakens within me an idea that is never adequate with the alterity of the face: the idea of the Infinite that ‘infiniteises’ itself. And the appeal that proceeds from the face of the other summons me to a responsibility that is never ever sufficient, meaning to say to a responsibility that likewise ‘infiniteises’ itself (TI 30-31/76-79). In that way “the other is closer to God than I” (PI 174/56) and God remains the radically transcendent, the wholly Other, notwithstanding God’s proximity through His trace in the face that touches me ethically. In this way “any sort of evasion of God across an inward emotion” becomes impossible (TI 186/11). By means linking the idea of God as the idea of the Infinite with the alterity of the face, Levinas affirms his critique on mystical enthusiasm to the extent that – as aforesaid – it not only swallows up the autonomous subject but also assails the transcendence and holiness of God.

2.2. Inward movement toward the ‘other in me’

The movement of transcendence towards the o/Other prepares the later positive appreciation of mysticism. It will be made clear how this re-appreciation is only possible thanks to a re-interpretation of mysticism no longer as enthusiasm but as a sobering up, or rather as enthusiasm in and through sobering up.

Before we sketch this reassessment of mysticism, we must first reflect on the re-orientation or ‘turn’ that takes place in the thought of Levinas in the period of his second major work. After sketching phenomenologically the surpassing of the ‘I’ by the epiphany of the face in the period that culminates in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas poses a new question. We can call this a Kantian question in the sense that he goes in search of the condition of possibility of the ethical relationship between the other and me. What makes it possible for that which

happens to indeed happen? By posing this question Levinas expresses inadvertently a doubt about his first description of the 'I' as 'the same par excellence' or as a 'being' that is interested in the persistence and unfolding of its own being. He describes this being 'at first sight' as follows: "The natural tension of being on itself that I have alluded as egoism. Egoism is not an ugly vice of the subject's, but its ontology, as we find in the sixth proposition of Part III of Spinoza's *Ethics*: 'Every being makes every effort insofar as it is in to persevere in its being'; and in Heidegger's expression about existence existing in such a way that its being has this very being as an issue" (NP 104/70-71). The question is whether there was not something essential that escaped his attention or rather was unconsciously overlooked. Is the first, spontaneous description of the 'I' as sameness and energy, realisation and expression of its own being correct? Is that which at first sight is given indeed the true nature of that which presents itself? May we trust our first impression? Should we not retrace our steps in order to discover, under the surface of that which so eagerly unveils itself as sameness and (interested) being, a more original but hidden – or even repressed – dynamism? Concretely: has everything truly been said about the 'I' when it is labelled as the same and as being interested in its own attempt at being? Is 'being by and for itself' the alpha and omega of the human 'I'? To answer this question Levinas, as a true blooded phenomenologist, in line with Edmund Husserl, is convinced that he has to return 'to the real thing' ('zur Sache selbst'), that means to the forgotten and overlooked dimension of the 'I', namely the true 'soul' of the 'I'.

For the deformatalisation or the concretization of this return – this way backward – he appeals on his promoter and philosophical mentor, Jean Wahl, who in metaphysics introduced not only the transascendence but also the transcascendence movement. This downward and inward movement consists in descending into the subject, into the 'under-ground' of the subject, beneath its consciousness and self-determination, in order to discover there that by which the subject is already marked even before it comes to consciousness and activity.

The ethical encounter with the other is the event – a form of radical empiricism – of being touched by the *vulnerable face of the other*. We are literally ‘moved’ and affected by the epiphany or appearance of the other. In spite of ourselves we are appealed to by the nakedness-desitute of the other, that menas we are called to responsibility. The question now is what has to be presupposed in the ‘I’ so that the ‘I’ can be appealed: what is the condition of possibility of this being appealed? The answer is that in order to be touched by the other, we must be touchable! The ‘hetero-affectation’ by the face is only possible if the subject, the ‘I’, is ‘affectable’. Even before I take up my responsibility for the other, I must in my being already be responsible. I don’t make myself responsible but I discover myself as put in the ‘situation’ – being ‘created’ – to be responsible: that’s my ‘human condition’ which precedes every form of option, decision making and activity. This is my ‘original state’, or better my ‘pre-original’ state, in the sense that I’m not by myself – by my choice – the origin of my ‘being-responsible-for-the-other’: my condition of being responsible precedes my being the ‘origin’ or the active and dynamic source of my acting responsibly. Therefore we have to redefine the subject as ‘otherwise than being’: the being of the ‘I’ is not simply ‘to be’, but in its ‘being’ the I is already ‘beyond being’: “being’s other; not to be otherwise, but otherwise than being (AE 3/3). As a being that is concerned with its own being and its own identity (*sumensse*), the ‘I’ in its being is already marked by ‘the other than its own being’. Even before I attune myself actively to the well-being of the other, I am already – in spite of myself, thus in my very being – attuned to the other. I am engaged to the other, before my initiative to engage for the other. I discover myself as already marked by an event that radically precedes me as a conscious ‘origin’ of meaning, choice and activity. Levinas qualifies this heteronomous being-made-responsible-for-the-other as the human condition of ‘fraternity prior to freedom’: “I am bound to the other before any liaison contracted. Here there is a relation of kinship outside of all biology. The community with him begins in my obligation to him. The neighbour is a brother. A fraternity that cannot be abrogated, an unimpeachable assignation, proximity” (AE 109-110/87).

To indicate this further Levinas uses the terms that evoke directly the idea of an ethical mysticism, namely animation and inspiration. My passive being affected by the fate of the other is the very intrigue of my subjectivity, namely being 'animated' and 'inspired' in the sense of 'being enraptured and enthused' by the other than myself (AE 84/67); "The proximity of the neighbour in its trauma does not only strike up against me, but exalts and elevates me, and, in the literal sense of the term, inspires me. Inspiration, heteronomy, is the very *pneuma* of the psyche" (AE 160/124). This leads Levinas to the idea of 'soul', in the sense that the other is the soul – the heteronomous principle of life and meaning – of the self. And note well, soul should not be equated here with consciousness, since it precisely concerns the opposite of consciousness, knowledge and act. The one who is irreducibly different – the other – has made itself in such a way master of the same – the self – and this in an immemorial past, that it becomes the driving force that propels the self forward. Levinas rightly labels the soul conceived of thus as 'the depth of the psychical' or as the '*de profundis*' of the spirit. This concerns a radical and irreducible passivity, which is laid under one's own 'inner depth'. Hence Levinas, in his iterative and emphatic language, speaks about the infinitely withdrawing transcendence into "the soul within the soul" (DVI 47/24). Hence Levinas also speaks, not coincidentally, about "the other in the same" (AE 147/116), "transcendence in the immanence" (DVI 47-48/24-25). We can also rightly qualify this as 'transcendence': the 'extra-ordinary' that has nestled itself in the 'ordinary'; the higher that has withdrawn into the lower, in an inaccessible and immemorial depth.

In a paradoxical manner Levinas qualifies the 'animation' or 'encasement' by the other as the 'incarnation' of the subject. Another word for this ethical incarnation is 'sensibility', literally 'being sensible' through the bodylines of the subject: "Animation can be understood as an exposure to the other, the for-the-other, which refers to maternity, which sensibility signifies" (AE 89/71). "Here the psyche is the maternal body" (AE 85/67). In my sensibility, both emotion as 'shock and shivering due to the other' as well as bodily tangibility and vulnerability, are contained. My body is,

on the basis of its sensoriness, my ethical directedness: eyes, ears, nose, hands are of the nature that they present themselves as the 'antennae' of my 'soul', or better of my being ensouled for the other. In this sense my body is my soul, I already bear the other in my body: through my 'lived body' (*body subject*) I am sensible for the other's vulnerability, manifesting itself to us through the other's body. My 'own body' (*corps propre*) is ethically ensouled in the sense that it bears an ethical signature or 'tattoo' in itself: the other has been etched indelibly in my body, in the sense that my bodily being subject in its 'being' stays directed and 'exposed' to the other. That again reveals my human condition, my 'creaturality' or 'creature status', as Levinas also calls it (AE 117/92). I am, in and through my exposed and vulnerable – sensible – body, already connected with the other, even before I can actively link and identify myself with my body as 'my body' (AE 96/76-77). This bodily sensibility is the condition of possibility of the above-mentioned brotherhood. Being an ensouled body here means "being-in-one's-skin, having-the-other-in-one's-skin" (AE 146/115): I am able to be 'occupied' with the other because the other already 'occupies' me, in the sense that the directedness towards the other marks and ensouls my bodylines and precisely in so doing makes it 'sensible' for the other. Through my body I can suffer of the other's suffering and therefore I am for-the-other (AE 114/90). And this creatural sensibility is not only corporeal but also 'passive' in the literal sense of the word: the bearing of the other is 'passion', that means bearing the passion and suffering of the other. That's why Levinas describes this bodily sensibility as 'compassion' (AE 150/117): "suffering of the other, my pity for his suffering, his pain over my pity, my pain over his pain, etc." (AE 150/196). Compassion, what etymologically means 'suffer with the other', has an ethical meaning, because it is anchored in our bodily ensoulment by the other, in our 'being-for-the-other'. My sensibility by-and-for-the-other implies the 'birth pangs' that it entails, precisely because it is a bodily bearing: "groaning of the entrails" (11A1194/114).

This bodily sensibility as ethical animation reveals finally the 'extra-verse' meaning of the 'the other in the same'. The 'I' is awakened out of itself and is driven outwards – out of itself: "the awaking of

the same by the other, sobering up from its identity and its being' (DVI 57/30). The 'through the other, despite oneself' is radically and irreversibly 'for the other': "explosion of the other in the same" (DVI 55/29). The 'I' is awakened as such by the other, that it is moved to vigilance. It is turned inside-out: despite itself it is turned away from itself towards the other than itself, the vulnerable other. The ethical animation does not revert back to its own self, but to the other than itself. In this regard the animation remains heteronomous. As inspiration it is enthusiasm, meaning to say a driving force and a 'being-inspired' (in the passive sense of the word). This enthusiasm, however, is never ecstasy and intoxication but on the contrary a sobering up. By means of 'the other in the self', the self is brought 'outside itself' towards the other, for the sake of the other. The animation results in 'ex-ternality', to be understood dynamically as an 'externalisation' or rather as an externalisation that never stops, an externalisation that *infiniteises* itself: "*triuma, not thauma*" (EN 103/75). No mystical ecstasy therefore, but a sober and lucid dedication to the being and the well-being of the other, an incessant bursting and restlessness, ethical insomnia, 'ex-cess' in the literal sense of the term: "The Same, disturbed by the Other who exalts him. To live is not an ecstasy, it is an erthusiasm. Erthusiasm is not drunkenness, it is a sobering up. A sobering up always yet to be further sobered, a wakefulness watchful for a new awakening" (DVI 57/30).

2.3. Inward movement toward the Infinite in me

Levinas, however, still takes a step further, through which we arrive at a religious transcendence, leading us to a religious understanding of ethical mysticism. He discovers in the ethical movedness by and solidarity with the fate of the other – pre-original, trans-biological, ethical fraternity – a 'divine affection', namely the human subject's being affected and marked in spite of itself by the Infinite. The term 'Infinite' has to be understood literally as 'In-finite', namely as the Infinite 'in' the finite and as the 'non-finite' that is radically separate and distinct from the finite. The subject thinks more than it thinks when it thinks the idea of the Infinite. Thereby the more is situated

in the less, without this more is absorbed in and by the less – and without the less is absorbed by the more! Insofar as the 'I' is in its being – in its createdness – attuned to the other, and thus bears the other in itself despite itself, it actually bears something that it neither can conceive of nor contain, which is precisely the radically other and thus the Infinite. In this regard the Infinite is the denial of the finite: radical and irreducible difference, making impossible mystical fusion and participative identification. But this denial does not place the Infinite outside of the finite, for the Infinite is located in the finite. With the already mentioned word-play, Levinas states that "the *in* of the Infinite signifies at once the *non-* and the *within*" (DVI 107/63). At this we come across the divine transcendence in the human immanence, or the immanence of God's infinite transcendence. The idea of the Infinite in me, that in no way whatsoever coincides with me as finite, can only be understood as the radical passivity of the consciousness, in the sense that my consciousness is 'touched' or 'affected' by something that is radically different from itself. And this non-assimilable alterity, that is situated in, or rather under the consciousness, awakens the consciousness to the other, in an unending, sobering up and extra-versive movement as well: pure goodness. In this regard, the consciousness is that which in its underground bears the Infinite, a consciousness aroused by the other: in spite of itself, driven from its underground out of and above itself towards the other. In this regard, the radical difference between the Infinite and the finite 'I' is at the same time a radical non-indifference for the one different from itself, meaning to say for the other. The intimate and transcendent infinity of God should thus not to be understood in a neutral but, on the contrary, in an ethically qualified manner.

This means that the idea of the Infinite for Levinas is at the same time the idea of the Good – the Good beyond the self-interested being – or better the idea of 'the Good in me', the idea of the indwelling God. Even before I come to myself via the acts of my own self-consciousness I am already awakened by God to myself. God is the intrigue of my soul, or better still the soul of my soul. This likewise leads Levinas to describe the subject as a theological being, whereby

'theological' has no confessional but only a strictly philosophical meaning. In an almost shocking manner he states: "the psychical is originally theological" (TrID 39/271), whereby he not only puts behind him the current Western definition of the human as *animal rationale* but also brings it into a radical crisis (TrID 40/271). He also speaks about the essential "religiosity of the self" (AE 150/117), in the sense that the subject, insofar as it is driven by that which is different than itself - the other - *aut* thus stands directed towards the other, is likewise affected and moved by God as the Good. The human is of a divine signature, or to put it with a biblical metaphor: the human is the image of God, even before the human is a reasonable, conscious and free being (AV 120-121/96-97).

This religiously founded awakening by the Infinite is manifested in the trace of the ethical awakening as an extraversive movement that always sobering up the subject: "A sobering up always yet to be further sobered, a wakefulness watchful for a new awakening" (DVI 57/30), "the awakening from which the vigil lives" (DVI 56/29), "permanent revolution of sobering up as concrete life; the vivacity of life as ecstasis; ecstasis of life; a sobering up always in need of sobering up, a wakefulness on the eve of a new awakening" (EN 105/76). To synthesise: "Transcendence or awakening that is the very life of the human, already troubled by the Infinite" (EN 106/77); God as thorn in the flesh. This uneasy, extraversive movement of 'the awakening of the awakening' means that the human subject cannot resign itself to itself nor close itself up in itself, to rest in itself and to be able to fall asleep. It is driven out of its own being by the Good as the Infinite in its soul towards the other than itself. The paradox of this movement of sobering up is that it is at the same time a *dynamics of longing*: overflowing desire, not based on need and search for satisfaction but feeding itself with an ever-new hunger: the fullness of a desire, never full enough, "unquenchable desire" (HAH 46/94), leading to a "proximity to the other, never close enough" (*un proximité jamais assez proche*), thus without any form of reductive or seductive and violent fusion (AE 140/90). The Infinite in the finite, the Good in me, is a fire that burns in the depths of the soul: the flame of the desire by and for the other. A flame whereby the 'I' reaches from underneath,

from its underground that lies deeper than all capability and all activity of the consciousness, *for the other* – above the grasping and comprehending consciousness: desire leading towards the good, out of the Good, whereby the consciousness is already ‘brandmarked’ pre-originally. And precisely because God as the Infinite is also the Good, this desire is inspired, literally blown and propelled by the Good – God – in me. And this drivenness by God brings me as well to ecstasy, literally to a coming to stand outside, in a movement towards God as the Good, thanks to a *highest and infinite non-indifference for the other* (DVI 110-111/66-67). An ecstasy is thus not of drunkenness but as ethical and divine sobering up to the other. Levinas qualifies this “entering into the Beyond by ecstasy that remains relationship.” And to corroborate this idea he refers to Plato who “affirms the value of the delirium that comes from God, ‘winged thought.’ Delirium here does not have an irrationalist significance. The fourth type of delirium is reason itself, rising to the ideas, thought in the highest sense. Possession by a god, enthusiasm, is not the irrational, but the end of the solitary or inward thought, the beginning of a true experience of the *new* [the other] – already desire” (TI 18/48, 20/49-50).

We can conclude our reflections on the second movement, namely the movement of transcendence, by stating that the mystical view of God as the Infinite and the Good in me – ‘entheos’ or enthusiasm, where the difference between possessing and possessed doesn’t disappear (HAH 80/55) – finally brings Levinas to the strong conclusion that this ‘religious enthusiasm’ – this being *osculed* by the Infinite as the Good beyond being – is likewise the *conditio sine qua non* of our ethical movedness by-and-for-the-other, of our ethical destiny that precedes every consciousness and every free choice. I can only be ethical, that is to say, called in spite of myself to responsibility for the other, if I am inspired by God as the Good beyond being, that means as the Infinite who is more intimate than I am intimate with myself. Hence my religiosity, my being animated by the Infinite as the Good, my ‘divine signature’, counts as the condition of possibility of my ethical ‘otherwise than being’, i.e. my non-indifferent directedness towards the other because of the other. “the Infinite awakens me to vigilance, to watchfulness over the neighbour” (DVI 57/30). It is

the divine goodness in me that makes possible my ethical goodness that inspires me and appeals to me towards it, without forcing me or without any form of necessity. God as the Infinite in me, who rouses me to the good, neither denies nor alienates my freedom but invests it with an 'extra-ordinary' election and thus unicity. In that way, the 'inspired I' becomes by means of its ethical being and acting a prophet of the Infinite: "Here I am", or more correct in French: "me voici", an accusative form without nominative (AE 14/11, 159/124), like the biblical, Hebrew 'Hineni' (104/97).

*With this, Levinas returns to a thought that he has encountered in his own Jewish Mithnagdic tradition, namely the thought of Rabbi Hayyim of Volozhin in his book *Nefesh ha'Hayyim (The Soul of Life)* (AV/151/167). Notwithstanding his rejection of mysticism, or at least in its Hassidic excesses, he himself develops a mystical view: God is the soul of the universe and of all the worlds. And the human being, not understood in the light of the rational animality of the Greeks but in the light of the biblical notion of being created in the image of God, is the soul of the world(s) because God is not only the soul of the world but also of the human. Man is responsible for the world because he is ensouled by God. This shows a mystical vision on the inspiration of the lower by the higher and of the higher by the lower, the lower being for the higher. "It is not through substantiality - through an in-itself and a for-itself - that man and his interiority are defined, but through the 'for-the-other': for that which is above self, for the worlds (but also, by interpreting 'world' broadly, for spiritual collectivities, people and structures)" (AV 104/161).*

3. Christian perspective on 'sobering enthusiasm'

Finally, we would like to pose the question what Levinas' paradoxical view on mysticism can mean for a Christian view on God and humans and their relationship?

3.1. Created in God's image, not in God's likeness

Firstly, his critical suspicion against mystical enthusiasm offers the possibility of getting rid of a certain concept of Divine Providence. And this in favour of a view of the human as the image of God, whereby God's transcendence as well as human freedom and responsibility are done justice. Divine Providence can be understood as an all-disposing and arbitrarily ruling by an omnipotent and omniscient God, in whose abiding mystery and impenetrable dispensations one can only share by unconditionally subjecting oneself to 'God's will'. But then one literally gets ensnared "in the invisible meshes" of God (TI 49/77). In such a conception, human life is reduced to nothing else than the enactment of a drama that has begun without our knowing and willing, and the unravelling of which an invisible and ungraspable other – God alone – knows before we do. A drama, therefore, that proceeds towards its goal without our being able to hinder this process or to determine or change ultimately its direction and outcome. Our existence has no meaning of itself, but only insofar as it is an exponent of this "drama of salvation or of damnation that would be enacted in spite of me and that would make game of me" (TI 52/79). The shadow of a certain fate is being outlined, as it were, which does not come from ourselves but which infiltrates unnoticed in our intentions in order to steer it and make it serve an encompassing 'master plan' that is only accessible to God who surpasses all and oversees all things. In such an experience of Providence the human is ultimately enfolded by a totality wherein all takes place in the way that the 'Principle' of that totality has weighed and disposed of from the beginning.

In so doing, however, the separateness and structural independence of the 'I' is simply denied and destroyed. We can label this concept of the history of salvation as an interpretation of a theatre play, which intends to force through with all violence a certain thesis, and which – even though it is still so transcendent – brings no articulation of a real life through freedom. The human being as a person, as an agent of history, seems less real than the human being as a figure or statue. The freedom of conscious humans is enveloped by a kind of sublime

and sacred *fitum* in which, instead of *being*, humans *figure*. God the Director effaces God the Creator. He commands actors rather than freedoms (DL 163/121-122)

A Christian view is faced time and again with the challenge to do justice both to God as Creator as well as to humans as free and responsible creatures. For that purpose, a dynamic interpretation of the human as 'image of God' offers a possibility. In the first creation story God says: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness" (Gen 1, 16). But when we read further how God really creates the human, it only says: "So God created humankind in his image; in the image of God he created them" (Gen 1, 27). God creates the human therefore only according to God's image, but not in God's likeness. Is it a memory lapse by the author? Should image and likeness actually be seen as synonyms? Or is there more to this than that? The finding that God creates the human according to God's image, not according to God's likeness, is quite important. By creating the human according to His image, God sets His signature in the human. God lays the divine in the human: the Infinite in the finite. In other words, the human is marked by divine Love. Like a musical instrument, the human is divinely disposed and thus attuned to love, to the other. But it also stops there. God creates the human according to God's image as possibility and condition. In the human there lies only a divine sensitivity or 'seed'. It is then up to the human to substantiate fully for himself or herself one's likeness with God, starting from the seed of love that God has poured into his or her heart. That divine seed should then germinate. That is the task of humans. On the one hand, there is the gift, the Infinite in the human: the divine that, as the good, is planted in the human like a seed. On the other hand, everything else should still take place. If the human does not nourish that seed and does not create the correct conditions so that it can germinate and grow, nothing will happen. It is thus entirely up to human freedom, creativity and responsibility to substantiate concretely that divine love that has been planted, in and through love for others and the world. It is a task that is entrusted to every human. Thanks to God, we as human beings are marked by the divine; thanks to ourselves we substantiate this divine

signature. Orthodox theology calls this 'theosis', divinization. In this way, the irreducible uniqueness of both God as well as humans is safeguarded and at the same time a bond of cooperation is made possible: a human independence that is based on dependence on God, or stronger still a reciprocity, the reciprocity of a covenant, that is based on asymmetry.

3.2. Ensouled by the Holy Spirit

Also Levinas' movement of transcendence offers possibilities for a Christian 'thorough reflection' starting from Spirit theology, which has been all too often neglected, although it is an essential ground of Christian mysticism. We can link Levinas' idea of God as the 'Good in me' to the idea of the 'Spirit': God infused in us, the immanence of God's ethically qualified transcendence. According to the Biblical tradition God is not a supreme, neutral being or 'unmoved Mover' (Aristotle): God is moved by and for his creation, the world and humankind. The Infinite is always qualified in ethical terms, being the Righteous and the Merciful, the Loving One. Throughout the history of Israel, in a historico-dynamic way, God reveals Himself slowly but surely as a God who associates with people. Think of the God-revelation on Sinai where the Lord reveals Himself as 'I will be with you' and this promise suffices to let Moses liberate his oppressed people from the house of slavery. Likewise, in the Torah (Law), and even more strongly in the prophets, it is clear that God's association with people develops a well-defined preference: he associates himself especially with the misery of the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger who stays in the land. In Israel, they were symbolic of the one who suffers, or rather; they acted as the concrete forms in which the vulnerable nakedness of people appears. It is far from accidental that God associates Himself with the destitute. God conforms to them so that He becomes, as it were, a suffering God. This could be called *the passion of God*. He descends from upon high; He relinquishes His glorious majesty in order to empty Himself and to make Himself small, by conforming to, or stronger still, by identifying with, the

miserable of the ones who suffer. In other words, what we are faced with here is a very specific self-emptying of God. It reveals itself not as a masochistic self-destruction, but rather as an ethically qualified self-emptying, as a profound alliance with all who are forgotten, disenfranchised and oppressed in this world. God makes Himself small along with the small; he is an associating God. That is not only what Jesus announces through his message of the coming Kingdom, but what he also realises in flesh and blood. Through Jesus' words and life, to the extreme of his suffering and dying on the cross, we discover and receive the ethical being of the loving God as our grace: God's ethics of love is our 'given and received love'. In and through Christ, 'God-man', the 'persecuted truth' (Kierkegaard) of the One allied with the vanquished, the poor, the persecuted is revealed and incarnated: a radical kenosis or self-emptying of God, the humility of the Infinite. This 'defeatism' of the Infinite, this divine timidity that does not dare to dare - the non-audacity of the Good beyond being in and through the humankind of Jesus, can be called 'the transubstantiation of the Creator into the creature': in Jesus, a true historical being, *the Infinite or "the Word became flesh and lived among us" (Jn 1:14a)*.

In contrast to, or better as fulfilment of this Christological approach to God, whereby Jesus as the Christ still remains 'outside the human', the pneumatological approach to God as 'Holy Spirit' introduces the infinite that is Love 'inside us'. Think of the affirmation of Paul in the letter to the Romans: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Rom 5, 5). The ethically qualified God does not remain external but becomes internal, intimate. Through the Spirit 'dwelling' in us we are animated and ensoled by the divine love, not to coincide with God but to be inspired beyond ourselves by the Infinite. As revealed by Jesus, God's Christ, we are inspired and called to be the bearers and witnesses of the Infinite. This 'interiorisation of God' seems to make meaningful Jesus' remark in the gospel of John: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Advocate will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (Jn 16, 7).

And there is still more, because the radical passivity of the grace of intimate divine love provokes – calls to – the radical activity of ethical engagement. In other words, the ‘in-dwelling’ of God as Spirit in us not only means a gift of grace but also a dynamics of ethical inspiration: ‘a gift that gives to give’. The love of God in us through the Spirit makes us literally ‘ec-static’: exposed to the other, being for-the-other, dedicated to the other, despite ourselves but not without ourselves. Because through the infused Spirit God’s love became our soul, or rather the soul of our soul, we are appealed and made able to love the other. “We love because he first loved us” (1Jn 4, 29). By means of the Spirit, who is nothing else than God’s love, in our spirit – up to our very flesh – we are borne and moved, literally ‘in-spired’ or ‘en-souled,’ to an infinitising love just like the ‘agapè’ of God Himself. In this regard, my love for the other than myself, the other and the whole of creation, does not spring forth from myself. It is rather a kind of irradiation of God’s love in and through me, despite myself. Not I, but the Spirit of God in me, loves the other – as Augustine would have put it. Thanks to the Infinite, I as a finite being am love for the other and the world. We can also call this a divine ‘vitality’ that awakens us as such and sobers us up that we are stirred towards the other or rather stirred time and again – up to infinity: the life of God in this world.

Conclusion

It is apparent from all this that mysticism does not stand at the margins in Christianity, but takes on or rather deserves a central place. It likewise means that an authentic mysticism cannot be separated from ethics: the divine gift of love in our soul, poured out by the Spirit, awakens us and sobers us up, drives us out of ourselves, at the service of the other: ‘extra-ver-sive spirituality of responsibility’. Likewise, we should not forget the lesson of Levinas’ initial critical stance towards mysticism. Indeed the danger remains real – even on the level of transcendence, and of the Christian spirituality of ‘ensoulment by the Spirit of love’ – that enthusiasm transports us as such that we end up in a fusing ecstasy and drunkenness – a

drunkenness that sucks us down into the depersonalised darkness of the 'there is': at the cost of God, at the cost of ourselves and at the cost of the other. We accentuated therefore the recurrence of awakening, or the vigilance as the waking up in awakening, which one also can describe as the "shiver of incarnation", through which giving takes on meaning, as the original dative of the *for the other*, in which the subject becomes heart and sensitiveness and hands that give incessant solicitude for solicitude, the *glory of a long desire*, not a proof but a prophetic witnessing of the Infinite (DVI 20/73).