Article

Qualifying Religious Truth and Ecclesial Unity: The Soteriological Significance of Difference

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Abstract: The trans-phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas has helped expose the totalising dynamic that has marked much of Western philosophy. The quest for a unity of knowledge in the truth assimilates any hint of otherness into more of the same. Plurality becomes a source of violence and dissent regarded as decay. Levinasian perspectives, however, and recent developments in magisterial teaching in the Roman Catholic Church point to a more ethical approach that can begin to escape the dialectic binary of the same and the other and so help avoid static conceptions of truth and unity. Religious truth and ecclesial unity, in other words, are explored in this paper for their ethical–dialogical quality. Indeed, the asymmetrical priority of dissent within this dialogical approach offers positive soteriological significance for the church rather than seeing dissent as a threat. Such an approach can enable the church to take plurality and diversity seriously in the current context.

Keywords: dialogue; difference; dissent; religious truth; ecclesial unity; salvation; Levinas; dialogical; ethical; plurality

1. Introduction

The trans-phenomenology of Emmanuel Levinas has helped expose the totalising dynamic that has marked much of Western philosophy. From Parmenides to Heidegger, the quest to comprehend being within a unity of knowledge in the truth has only served to assimilate any hint of otherness into more of the same. The ontological binary within which "traditional" philosophical approaches have been trapped means that difference becomes a source of violence, and plurality is regarded as decay. Such a paradigm could be said to often characterise the Roman Catholic Church's approach to truth and unity. Dissent from the church's normative doctrine and practice leads to canonical sanction—in extreme cases, excommunication—given the soteriological threat it can pose to the wider faithful. A Levinasian approach, however, puts priority on otherness as an essential critique of any totalising perspective that would, in fact, regard traditional perspectives on unity and truth as sources of violence. Thus, difference and dissent can play a crucial role in avoiding static conceptions of truth and unity (truth as unambiguous or unity as uniformity, for example) and provide a critical function for the church's authentic faith and practice. This paper, therefore, sets out to qualify religious truth and ecclesial unity in a way that prioritises dissent as an ethical–dialogical principle. It will become clear that, rather than jeopardising the salvific mission of the church, this principle has positive soteriological significance.

The very structure of language, as well as recent developments in magisterial teaching, already points to a more ethical approach that seeks to escape the dialectic binary of the same and the other. Ethical here is meant in both its moral and descriptive senses. Language—best expressed in dialogue as a speech-act with the other—reveals what Levinas calls the "sociality" of the interhuman relation rather than an instrument to bring disparate voices back into some misconceived primordial unity. The importance of dialogue throughout the teaching of Pope Francis, moreover, suggests a certain priority on accompaniment and discernment over an exacting clarity that can all too quickly exclude and end further

discussion. Open dialogue, in other words, takes precedence over closed definitions. Such insights invite both religious truth and ecclesial unity to be understood dialogically.

The asymmetrical priority of dissent within this dialogical approach offers positive soteriological significance for the church. Not only can such an approach help save difference from, at best, being excluded or, at worse, being eradicated altogether, it opens space for God to be heard. The Hebrew word for salvation (*yāšaʿ*) can be equated with "wideness" or "spaciousness". Making space for difference allows people to live and think in freedom. Widening the concepts of truth and unity to allow dissenting voices reflects the complexity of life and offers opportunities for new insights and, as yet unheard, answers to seemingly intractable questions to emerge. Rather than a set of minimum requirements or a kind of lowest common denominator, the concepts of truth and unity can become wide, saving spaces for genuine dialogue in the contemporary context marked by plurality and diversity.

2. Moving beyond Totalising Paradigms

The thought of Levinas is emblematic of a postmodern philosophical tradition that puts priority on the "other" rather than the individualism of the "I" that had characterised much of modern philosophy since Descartes. Levinas's central concern for otherness, first articulated in his 1961 publication, *Totalité et infini*, could be said to have begun a kind of philosophical revolution where ontology is replaced by ethics as first philosophy (Treanor 2006). Indeed, to say that his approach upends many of the assumptions of the Western philosophical tradition risks understating how radical his thinking truly is. From Parmenides to Heidegger, the attempt to comprehend, or "totalise", being has dominated philosophy, according to Levinas, whereby any hint of otherness is absorbed by "the same" (Critchley 2002). In the words of Levinas (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 43), "Western philosophy has most often been an ontology: a reduction of the other to the same by interposition of a middle and neutral term that ensures the comprehension of being." Borrowed from Plato, "the same" (*le Même*) refers to the self, consciousness, or the "I", as well as the object of subjective thinking, so that "the same" becomes a self-sufficient domain of relation that includes otherness with any hint of alterity vanishing. Philosophy, in other words, has been trapped in an ontological binary of the self and the other that is always ultimately resolved by reducing the other to the same (Öztürk and Erdoğan-Öztürk 2023). Such philosophy can be summed up as "egology" (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 44). Ethics, defined by Levinas (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 43) as "[a] calling into question of my spontaneity [the same] by the presence of the Other [*Autrui*]", is the essential critique of philosophical egology. The other shatters, or interrupts, the solitude of the same (Morgan 2011). This ethic, or critique, completely reverses the traditional approach so that the existent comes before being, metaphysics before ontology, justice before freedom, obligation to the other before the same (Levinas [1961] 1969).

Ontology's totalising approach to reality cannot meaningfully account for otherness, which, to respect its alterity, must be understood as completely transcendent. Indeed, for Levinas, even the traditional understanding of transcendence is not radical enough: transcendence cannot be simply a mode of "being otherwise" (ontological transcendence) but is, in fact, "otherwise than being" (*autrement qu'être*). This distinction brings both tension and dynamism (Burggraeve 2021a).

> If transcendence has meaning, it can only signify the fact that the *event of being*, the *esse*, the *essence*, passes over to what is other than being... Transcendence is passing over to being's *other*, otherwise than being. Not *to be otherwise*, but *otherwise than being*.
>
> (Levinas [1974] 1998, p. 3)

Only an ethical metaphysics can take real transcendence, "exteriority" in Levinasian terminology, the other qua other, seriously. It is a distinct metaphysics that can encounter absolute alterity by a desire for the absolute other, a desire that cannot be satisfied. A metaphysics that precedes ontology, therefore, is "the relation with the other... a relationship

with the other that does not result in a divine or human totality, that is not a totalization of history but the idea of infinity" (Levinas [1961] 1969, p. 52). "Totality" describes an ontological relation to the other in terms of understanding, correlation, symmetry, reciprocity, and equality, while "infinity" (in the Cartesian sense) speaks of a metaphysical relation to the other that is always more than what can be thought, and it forever escapes comprehension (Burggraeve 2014). Infinity is a relation characterised by height, inequality, non-reciprocity, and asymmetry (Critchley 2002).

Levinas regards his approach as primarily one of transcendental phenomenology in the traditional sense: he sets out to describe the conditions of possibility for concepts such as subjectivity, language, and truth (Treanor 2006). Building upon and critiquing the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger (since they both fall into the ontological closed circle described above), he goes much further by embracing both transcendental and empirical perspectives. Let us take one of Levinas's central motifs: responsibility. As mentioned above, his primary concern for ethics—that is, the relation with absolute otherness, exteriority, or transcendence—puts responsibility for the other (justice) before freedom. This responsibility takes on concrete form in everyday life. I have a "[r]esponsibility for the Other, for the naked face of the first individual to come along" (Levinas [1984] 1989, p. 83). I cannot truly encounter otherness without recognising my responsibility, my ethical relation to the other. At the same time, it is the very condition of subjectivity for Levinas. Responsibility is not something I can choose to be. "Qua subject, I am responsible" (Treanor 2006, p. 36). In this regard, it cannot be reduced to any experiential, phenomenological description. Levinas, therefore, goes beyond phenomenology, what Burggraeve (2021b) describes as "trans-phenomenology": his philosophical method is both radically empirical and yet transcends any perception or description. The term "trans-phenomenology" helpfully qualifies Levinas's unique phenomenological method, with its particular understanding of transcendence, which is distinct from Husserl's classic transcendental phenomenological approach. Such an approach will occasion the charge that Levinas underhandedly introduces theology into phenomenology, as claimed by Dominique Janicaud (Janicaud et al. 2000). Clearly, Levinas goes beyond Husserlian transcendental phenomenology. It has been described as a transcendental phenomenology mixed with existential phenomenology (Evink 2015). Levinas "pushes beyond any phenomenological description that presumes to adequately map interpersonal responsibility as human experience" (Chase 2021, p. 147). The trans-phenomenology of Levinas, therefore, is at the same time deeply empirical and beyond perception; it is profoundly concrete yet reveals a transcendence beyond the horizon of immanence.

The same totalising dynamic with which Levinas and others have diagnosed Western philosophy can also be found in how the Roman Catholic Church has traditionally approached two closely related concepts: truth and unity. This is perhaps unsurprising in the light of Levinas's critique, given Christianity's weddedness to Greek philosophy over the centuries. Oneness and catholicity, two marks of the church, can be understood as "neutral" concepts that facilitate a synthesising of all propositions and counterpropositions within an all-embracing narrative. Described by Lyotard ([1979] 1984) as "metanarratives", of which Christianity is perhaps the best example, these grand or master schemas purport to frame all knowledge and experience, including transcendence, within a single totalising model. Such an approach saps the very concept of transcendence of its force, its otherness. Within such a paradigm, God, the *locus* of truth and unity, "became the keystone of a narrative that offered truth and certainty, and legitimized structures of power and control: the other was enclosed as something to be converted, or excluded as diabolic or damned" (Boeve 2016, p. 50). Within a profoundly conflict-averse institution like the church, any hint of dissent needs to be quickly resolved (Ott 2023). Dissent from the church's normative faith and practice, in other words, leads to canonical sanction—including excommunication—given the soteriological threat it poses. The axiom "*extra ecclesiam nulla salus*" easily becomes the yardstick of a clearly marked-out institution that holds a monopoly on what is ultimately

true and meaningful. The definition of *ecclesia* and those who enjoy being in unity with it, of course, being safely guarded by the church's own magisterium.

Such a seemingly uncompromising image of church teaching, however, does not do justice to the paradigm shift brought about by the Second Vatican Council and the ongoing development of this shift represented by the diverse theologies that have emerged since then, as well as the recent repositioning evident in magisterial teaching. Indeed, "dialogue" first entered the ecclesial lexicon in 1964 with Paul VI's encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* to describe a new approach for the church, both *ad intra* and *ad extra* (McInerney 2013). Elsewhere, I have charted the emergence and development of the concept of dialogue in the magisterium's fundamental theology, an importance that goes much deeper than its mere utility for engagement with other religions and denominations (McAleer 2024). The International Theological Commission's (2011, §5) document *Theology Today*, for example, recognises that "The sheer fulness and richness of that revelation is too great to be grasped by any one theology, and in fact gives rise to multiple theologies as it is received in diverse ways by human beings." These theologies must dialogue and communicate with each other. This broad invitation for theological diversity, however, is quickly qualified by the priority of unity and the aversion to any dissent. The one universal, saving truth of God—that which is accepted by the church's faith—is the final arbitrator.

The social teaching of Pope Francis, it must be noted, goes further and is particularly significant for the embracing of a more profound dialogical principle at the heart of church teaching. The image of the polyhedron, "whose different sides form a variegated unity" and where "differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations", has been used by Francis (2020, §215) to provide direction for a culture of dialogue within the church. Difference and disagreement are acknowledged as having a place. His flagship project of synodality promises to widen and, potentially more significantly, institutionalise such a culture of dialogue. The fact that no theologian has been sanctioned for their research during the current papacy to date is not without import. Francis's approach to dialogue, nevertheless, meets its limits in the dialectical model—rather than being underpinned by genuinely dialogical principles—within which it is restrained (McAleer 2023). Otherness remains something to be resolved and brought into synthesis, that is, more of the same. While some might point to the ongoing difficult reception of Francis's synodal project, not least the seemingly irreconcilable experiences of synodality between Germany and Rome, as a clarion call for a return to traditional concepts of truth and unity, it can rather be seen as an opportunity to explore means by which religious truth and ecclesial unity can be qualified in a way that respects difference and gives a positive role to disagreement.

Although the theological shifts already evident in the church are an inevitable effect of the changing critical consciousness of the present age, perhaps more precisely the dialogical turn in Western philosophy of which Levinasian thought is just one example, historical–critical research makes clear that theological claims of what is normative have always been fluid throughout the history of Christianity (Gruber 2020). Indeed, it has been argued that the current postmodern context has enabled the church only now to relearn a lesson it had for a long time forgotten: "that it takes *many* interpreters to hear the *one* word of God in all the fullness of its glory and truth" (Vanhoozer 2003, p. 169). Debates and disagreements on synodality—the clash between dreams for the future and nostalgia for past ideals—open up space for theology to examine afresh fundamental categories like truth and unity. The need to move beyond totalising paradigms such as static conceptions of unity as uniformity or conformity becomes ever more pressing in the current context. Recent developments in magisterial teaching and practice suggest that this movement has already begun from the perspective of the institutional church. Ethical–dialogical insights from Levinas may offer some helpful perspectives with which to provide a solely needed, alternative approach to the present fracturing between the hierarchical church, theology, and the faithful.

3. The Ethical–Dialogical Approach of Levinas

While Levinas did not develop a systematic philosophy of dialogue per se, his philosophy can certainly be described as dialogical. Dialogue takes on important significance. To simply describe his philosophy as dialogical, nonetheless, requires some qualification. In fact, some have argued that transcendental philosophy and dialogical philosophy are completely incompatible (Theunissen 1965). For Levinas ([1982] 1998), dialogue understood as a mere vocative acknowledgement of, or even reciprocity with, the other is insufficient. A much more radical, more fundamental approach to dialogue is required. It rather can be understood as the "transcendental framework for the intentional relation to the world" (de Boer 1997, pp. 1–2). In other words, dialogue is not some "event" removed from ontology but the very metaphysical foundation for ontology itself. To use the terminology of Levinas, the same (knowledge, objectification, immanence, etc.) *requires* the other: the face of the other interrupts the dogmatism of the same to bring about responsible rationality and critical consciousness (de Boer 1997). According to de Boer (1997), for whom Levinas is undoubtedly more dialogical than transcendental, much of the originality of his thought lies in this integration of phenomenological ontology into an "emancipated" dialogical thinking.

One place where Levinas ([1982] 1998) reflects directly on his philosophy of dialogue is in his essay "Dialogue: Self-Consciousness and Proximity of the Neighbor" in *Of God Who Comes to Mind*. It is to this important text that we turn for an understanding of Levinas's approach to dialogue, which, unsurprisingly, is also key to appreciating the broader dialogical approach in his philosophy. In view of what has been noted above, it is fitting that this reflection on dialogue is found in Part III of the collection of texts "The Meaning of Being". Dialogue, for Levinas, is more fundamental than some kind of technical or methodological process. It is a metaphysical dynamic preceding any ontology. Perhaps it would be more accurate to describe a "dialogical principle" at the heart of being to better capture this dynamic rather than simply "dialogue". As will become clear, Levinasian "dialogue" is a rich concept that goes beyond the simple dictionary definition of "conversation" or "discussion". It is based on a double asymmetry, both a "natural" (dialogue of immanence) and an "ethical" (dialogue of transcendence) asymmetry (Burggraeve 2014).

Neither is it accidental that this text on dialogue should be placed among a collection of texts that seek to understand the significance of the word "God". For Levinas ([1982] 1998), one's relation to God, what he describes in Cartesian terms as the "idea-of-the-Infinite-in-me," is found precisely in one's concrete, dialogical relation to the other. Moreover, as will be explored below, what Levinas says about questions related to God could equally be said of dialogue: "[they] are not resolved by answers in which the interrogation ceases to resonate or is wholly pacified" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. xi). Pointing to the harrowing history of the century just passed, Levinas sees a possible explanation for the dialogical turn towards the other in Western philosophy—epitomised by the works of Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig—which is opposed to the traditional philosophy of the same, and in which his own philosophy can be placed (Levinas [1982] 1998).

It is precisely in language where a different approach to dialogue is perceived. Rather than seeing language as a way of bringing disparate voices back to a unity that had existed from the beginning, an entirely different dimension of meaning is revealed by language in the interhuman relation: sociality. Not a type of knowledge or experience, the sociality of language has meaning by itself as both the very condition of authentic dialogue and being produced by such dialogue. This irreducible meaning is found in the summoning of a "You" by the "I", the calling of the other by the same, without being dependent on any (prior) knowledge of the "You". Since it does not depend on the experience of the other, authentic dialogue becomes a nonobjectifiable, unthematisable "event of spirit", "the opening of transcendence" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 143). The "You", as absolutely other, is approached in dialogue but never known. In fact, dialogue is the *only* way to be in relation with the other that respects otherness and arguably the only way to approach

transcendence. Dialogue is "the proper place and concrete circumstance of transcendence" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 149). Levinas outlines two conditions for such a dialogue: (i) the alterity of the unique other and (ii) the self (same) as the necessary starting point but, unlike a dialogue of immanence, is not the endpoint. In other words, dialogue does not simply offer a phenomenological perspective on otherness (i) but is the ethical way in which the same relates with and approaches the other (ii) (Burggraeve 2014).

Beginning with the first condition, Levinas states that there exists an absolute distance between the same and the other, the "I" and the "You". This distance, the absolute alterity of transcendence, is not to be understood as a logical distinction (e.g., P and ¬P), but alterity itself signifies the difference between "I" and "You". This distance cannot be overcome or objectified: "there is no *and* possible between them" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 145). This has both positive and negative implications: negatively, the other can never be known, but positively, dialogue reveals "the surplus or the *better* of a beyond oneself" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 147). It offers insight into transcendence that is always more, always better: the gift of the otherness of the other. Burggraeve (2014) explains how the alterity of the other surpasses and breaks through the differences of the other, allowing the "I" to understand these differences while the other's alterity is never reduced to them. One can never know the other but can phenomenologically observe and understand differences in the other. However, the absolute distance between the same and the other can be transcended by "the extraordinary and immediate relation of dia-logue" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 144). Paradoxically, it transcends this distance without suppressing it in a way that enables the "I" to be truly the same and the "You" to be truly other. In other words, the absolute distance *is* the relation of dialogue and permits no totalisation of the other by the same.

This maintenance of the absolute distance between the same and the other, resisting any hint of totality, already touches upon the second condition for authentic dialogue: an *ethical* relationship with the other. In the words of Levinas: "Ethics begins in the I-You of dialogue insofar as the I-You signifies the worth of the other man [sic]" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 150). Trying to capture the paradox of dialogue, the term "proximity" is used to describe this distant, dialogical relation between the same and the other. It is a proximity that deepens and enhances the distance, a bond where partners remain separate, protecting the otherness of the other from being totalised by the "I". Moreover, the immediacy of the dialogical relation brings with it an "urgency" with which the "I" should be at the service of the "You" (Levinas [1982] 1998). There exists, then, a priority or mastery of the other: the other is my superior who teaches me (Burggraeve 2014). The other does not teach me knowledge in the immanent sense but something beyond the horizon of the world. It is precisely because the other is utterly transcendent and different that it takes priority. Dialogue, therefore, begins with listening, a complete passivity before the face of the other (Levinas [1982] 1998). Levinas states clearly that there is "an inequality, a dissymmetry" in the dialogue of transcendence (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 150). This completely reverses the natural asymmetry that is at play within the dialogue of immanence.

Levinas sums up his reflections on the dialogue of transcendence with what he regards as its most important aspect: "dialogue—contrary to *knowledge* and contrary to certain descriptions of the philosophers of dialogue—is a thinking of the *unequal*, a thought thinking *beyond* the given" (Levinas [1982] 1998, p. 151). Such a radical passivity before the other is not without its detractors. In his *Adieu* to Levinas, Derrida (1999) lays bare the consequences of the self as "hostage" (Levinas's word) to the other. The debt I owe to the other, before any borrowing or commitment, is, in actual fact—according to Derrida— a violent and traumatising concept that precedes the innocuous passivity described by Levinas. Moreover, while Levinasian dialogue maintains, nay, augments the distance between the same and the other, it is difficult to conceptualise how meaningful a dialogue contrary to knowledge and beyond the given could be. Critchley (2015, p. 26) sums up the problem with Levinas thus: "how does the self escape the tragedy of finitude?" As Zimmermann (2013) notes, an uncritical partnership between Levinas and theology is difficult to conceive. While Levinas can be a valuable interlocutor for theology, his

mistrust of anything that tries to make transcendence comprehendible—the very task of theology—requires the theologian to approach Levinas with vigilance (Purcell 2006). A certain "balance", therefore, is required. Regarding the asymmetry in Levinas's ethical approach, it is worth noting that *I am also the other's other*. Far from advocating a tidy, symmetrical vision of dialogue (in the vein of Buber), it becomes marked by shifting asymmetries. It must also be added that a balanced approach to dialogue includes both the natural asymmetry of the dialogue of immanence (the identity formation of the self) and the ethical asymmetry of the dialogue of transcendence (the priority of the other *qua* other); thus, a double asymmetry is always at play (Burggraeve 2014). This balance is vital for the church, whose identity, or sameness, is necessarily meaningful and unifying for a community of believers while at the same time allowing otherness, or difference, to play a critical role in the face of any totalising conceptions of ecclesial identity.

4. The Soteriological Significance of Difference

In many ways, at the crux of this paper is the theme addressed by Plato in *Philebus* and his counsel to resist finding assurance in either the one or the many all too quickly. How can we find a balance between the many and the one in a way that avoids any totalising theologies of truth or unity, concepts that remain essential marks of the church, and at the same time prevent a hollow and relativist pluralism? Of course, this paper does not propose an easy answer to this age-old philosophical(–theological) problem, but perspectives from Levinas's dialogical thinking help put a certain priority on difference, which also carries a soteriological significance from a Christian perspective. Truth and unity are qualified in a way that cannot be ignored. At the heart of the Christian faith, its purpose, if you like, is the salvation it promises. Concepts like truth and unity *serve* this *raison d'être*. As we have already noted above, for example, the intention underlying canonical sanctions is medicinal, with the salvation of the person and the wider faithful always in mind (cf. 1 Cor 5:5). Soteriology, in other words, is what is most fundamental when doing theology, not ecclesiology or epistemology (Bauer 2023). What is ultimately at stake is one's salvation. Such an approach puts the concepts of truth and unity into proper perspective. The Hebrew word for salvation (*yāšaʿ*) can be rendered to "be capacious", to "make wide" or "spacious" (Brown et al. 1959, p. 446). Its antonym, "narrowness of space", is often used to describe danger (Gesenius 2012, p. 374). Putting a theological priority on salvation can widen the concepts of truth and unity to include difference. Truth and unity become dialogical realities. This can save difference from being excluded or being eradicated altogether, opening up a critical space for God to be heard.

Dialogue, therefore, becomes the transcendental framework for the church's theology so that normative claims—that which meet the standard of truth and rest within the narrow confines of visible ecclesial unity—*need* the other, not least dissenting voices. We have explored how the very structure of language reveals an interhuman relation, a "sociality" to use Levinas's terminology, that is, the condition for an obligation to respond to the other. Language testifies against any notion of a primordial unity that needs to be recovered but rather the relationality and alterity that has always endured among people. There exists in each of us a desire to go beyond the unity of the same, to break through our present horizons, to open up to transcendence, for which we rely on the other's perspective. Indeed, the history of ecumenical councils demonstrates that the process by which doctrines are defined (a crucial element of tradition) is often the result of drawn-out and difficult theological debates that are rarely concluded once the anathemas are pronounced. Many passages of scripture are also the result of disagreement: one only needs to think of issues that prompted interventions from the Old Testament prophets or the growing pains of the nascent church that occasioned many of the New Testament letters. Such "pains" continue to play a role in ecclesial life as the church grows in its understanding of divine revelation (cf. *Dei verbum*, §8). The church needs both scripture and tradition precisely *because* we disagree. There has always existed an intricate relationship between "heresy" and "orthodoxy".

From a Levinasian perspective, dissent can be seen as having a function of continually interrupting any dogmatism or totalising concepts that would assimilate or exclude difference. Dissent is not something that needs to be immediately "solved". Such an approach provides insights into the way God reveals Godself, as well as having ethical and soteriological significance. Otherness, after all, has a quality of transcendence. For Levinas, otherness *is* transcendence. In the context of the theological role of conflict in the church, Gruber (2020) highlights the anonymity God often takes on in the dynamic of revelation as exemplified in Matthew 25. Time and again, God is found in the face of the other, unbeknownst to us, so that we are left asking, "Lord, when did we see you?" (Matt 25:44). Those who remain invisible, in other words, those who apparently enjoy "no part" in the church's visible unity, become possible and as yet untapped *loci theologici*. The risk of ignoring or missing the voice of God in such places is too great. There is enormous potential for the church to (re-)learn aspects of God's revelation that have perhaps been forgotten, overlooked, or yet to be fully understood when confronted with difference.

Ethically, this becomes a responsible rationality, a truly critical consciousness that recognises that the other has something to teach me. The importance of this ethical principle for a theology of revelation, therefore, affords dissent a certain priority. Difference and dissent can play a crucial role in avoiding stale understandings of truth (as something conclusive or unambiguous) and unity (as uniformity or conformity) and provide a critical function for the church's authentic faith and practice. Dissent should be afforded a certain asymmetrical recognition for ethical–moral reasons, too. For too long, the Christian metanarrative, in its relentless effort to master everything, has created countless victims in the name of the truth and for the sake of unity (Boeve 2016). Unity, in this respect, becomes a type of violence. Recognising the dignity of every individual encourages each person to speak their conscience without fear. Moreover, by clearly embracing a dialogical approach since the Second Vatican Council, the church has a responsibility to *mean what it says*. "Dialogue" cannot be used as an attractive new public relations policy on the part of the church that would hide an underhand intention of simply continuing to master the narrative. To use the language of dialogue to *merely* suit the contemporary temperament would be incredibly disingenuous. Perspectives from Levinas present us with what authentic dialogue looks like. The church must always be an *ecclesia discens* before it is an *ecclesia docens*, and thus, not only is there an asymmetrical priority owed to the ultimate "Other", God, but all "others" who potentially bear the voice of God.

In many ways, Pope Francis has led the way with his preference for placing "priority on accompaniment, discernment, and conscience over the definition and application of rules. Openness is preferred over clarity" (Kelly 2016, pp. 928–29). This provides space for dialogue to take place. After all, the need to always "define" can literally put premature limits to realities and close the discussion. The biblical refrain for the church's *Working Document for the Continental Stage* (General Secretariat of the Synod 2022) of its ongoing synodal project also captures this new dialogical openness: "Enlarge the space of your tent" (Is 54:2). Enlarging theological problems, rather than shrinking them, facilitates a respectful appreciation of the other. Indeed, disagreement—what is too often but erroneously seen as the opposite of unity—plays an essential role in the church, with synodality *inviting* a theology of conflict (Gruber 2020). In the words of Ott (2023, p. 254): "'Unity' does not equal agreement, and members of the same church should be understood as united without removing disagreement, difference, and contestation from the equation." The church is big enough for many, even if seemingly irreconcilable, voices. Widening the space of the church to include difference also qualifies truth as a dialogical reality. Burggraeve's (2007) argument for the need to complement, surpass even, the theory of coherentism and immanent truth with the idea of "communicability" touches upon this point. In a world of incredible pluralism and diversity, there is a temptation for the church to develop a coherent network of internally consistent truth claims that remain closed to what the other has to say. The crossing of boundaries and widening of horizons becomes impossible.

Communicability—what I would prefer to call a "dialogical principle"—ensures that truth claims are accessible to the other and can enter into dialogue with other truth claims.

Before concluding, a note of caution is required so as to avoid—on the other extreme of a "violent" unity—a meaningless pluralism. Qualifying the concepts of truth and unity as dialogical categories involves a double asymmetry: not only the ethical asymmetry of the dialogue of transcendence, explored here at length, but also the natural asymmetry of the dialogue of immanence. There remains a shared language, a basic narrative within Christian revelation wherein every Christian finds their core identity. The church has the responsibility of safeguarding the central tenets of faith in a meaningful and unifying way. The Creed, for example, the Symbol of Faith, while being the fruit of theological disagreement, articulates the central faith of every Christian. This enjoys an asymmetrical priority—"the rules of the game", if you like—for Christians when engaging with dissent. Nonetheless, truth and unity are aspects of transcendence, identified with the very Godhead in the Christian tradition. Jesus declares himself as "the way and the truth and the life" (Jn 14:6). They are personal qualities of an Other who cannot be fully experienced or known in the here and now. They are marks of a complex organism—the body of Christ—that is more than a visible institution and whose life finds its source in God, not definitions or agreement. The eschatological deferral that this necessitates amplifies the need to widen such concepts, not least for the salvation that is at stake.

5. Conclusions

In Greek mythology, the goddess Strife (*Eris*; translated as *Discordia* in the Roman pantheon) is a daughter of Night and mother to many unpleasant children, including Conflict and Pain. There is very little to arouse any devotion to such a divinity. However, there is another, lesser acknowledged divinity of the same name and heritage whom Hesiod (2017) mentions in his classic poem *Works and Days* (20, 24): "She rouses even the shiftless to toil!. . . *this* Strife profits all mortals!" It is this side to conflict, a striving that motivates one's struggle and aspiration for betterment, that we touch upon in this paper.

It should be noted that Levinas is certainly not the only thinker whose critique can challenge the church to reconsider its conceptions of truth and unity by giving due regard to the place of dissent. He is one representative of a wider dialogical turn in contemporary philosophy, which has been developed by several others. It is worth mentioning the work of Raimon Panikkar, for example, which can also offer insights into a more dynamic understanding of religious truth and a recognition of the plasticity of ecclesial unity. A philosopher of religion with a particular focus on inter-religious themes, Panikkar's (2010) trinitarian ontology sees "unity" as utterly differentiated. Neither one nor many, reality is "non-dual" in a way that unity is seen as both substantiating differences and arising through them (Panikkar 2010). Such an ontology necessitates a dialogical approach. Levinas, however, as I have tried to outline here, offers a uniquely ethical flavour to dialogue that is worth highlighting in the present contribution, not least for its salvific value.

The trans-phenomenology of Levinas can help stir up previously static theologies of truth and unity that give a certain ethical priority to dissenting voices that provide a critical function for a more authentic ecclesial life. Soteriology becomes a rich theological resource for a reappraisal of these two essential marks of the church. Rather than leading to chaos, dialogical approaches to truth and unity can create wide, saving spaces that take plurality and diversity seriously. Further exploration is clearly needed on the praxeological implications of such an approach, but, suffice to say, making space for difference can allow people to live their Christian vocation in freedom and help the church resist polarisation and premature closure of dialogue. As long as the dialogue continues with patience and respect for each other, solutions can emerge for issues that seemed impossible to resolve before. It can make audible the anonymous voice of God who wills all people to be saved and come to knowledge of the truth (cf. 1 Tim 2:4).

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