Introduction

This book presents Emmanuel Levinas’ conceptual affinities with liberation theology—as represented by Gustavo Gutiérrez and Jon Sobrino. In this work I articulate a possibility to read Levinas’ transcendental ethics of responsibility as a revalidation of one of the truths of Christianity: the concern for humanity of every human person as expressed in Christian theology in general and liberation theology in particular. What is most essential for Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology is that they both bring forth one major point: the dimension of the divine opens forth in the human face. God’s transcendence emerges in love of one’s neighbor but not in the hatred of the human other. Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology can be read as a response to the tragic legacy of an unchecked twentieth century ill-treatment of the human other. They both view the turn to the other/neighbor, who is both God’s mystery and the face of the neighbor, as a power of genuine love, opening new avenues for the radical re-imagining of the world. They respond to the degradation of the human person’s life in history in a comparable way; search for the divine transcendence in a life of commitment to the other human person; find in the Judeo-Christian wisdom a distinct way of thinking of the subject-other relationship; and call for love of neighbor and justice. Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology emphasis on the turn to the other addresses the inadequacies of the modern philosophical turn to the subject to properly deal with the questions of poverty, violence, and oppression in today's world. They question modernity’s overemphasis on the human subject’s self-subsistent autonomy, and propose a redefinition of human subjectivity in terms of the human other. In Levinas’ philosophical project and liberation theology the human other is the possibility of the subject’s subjectivity. The emphasis here is on the ethical engagement or the turn to the other/neighbor that makes the subject fully human. Taking Levinas, Gutiérrez, and Sobrino seriously I attempt to explain how their resolute commitment to
exteriority, to otherness, to the other/neighbor reveals something of postmodern sensitivity defined, in this book, in terms of otherness and difference, relationality and interdependence.

In Descartes, Kant, Husserl and Heidegger, as well as in the philosophical tradition, the question has been almost entirely about how the human subject knows the existence of the other person and how the other person enters into the consciousness of the subject. This philosophical discourse, governed by the primacy of being, forces every other discourse to validate itself before philosophy. Thus, the turn to the subject, as well as the belief in sameness that characterizes the modern era, was embraced by modern thinkers as the “ideals in modernity’s working out of its unique history.” This was the beginning of an exceptional awareness about the self and the world around the self. Most twentieth century works in philosophy and theology have been based on the heritage of the eighteenth and nineteenth century transcendental and ontological tradition that privileged and celebrated the uniqueness of the thinking subject and the primacy of being: the development of the fundamental task of theology testifies to this fact.

Contrary to this trend, the examination of conceptual affinities between Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology shows that the turn to the other/neighbor, which runs through their respective work, emerges as “a resistance to

2 Emmanuel Levinas, “God and Philosophy,” in The Levinas Reader, edited by Sén Hand (Cam.
the same unquestioned sameness of the modern turn to the subject, the modern overbelief in the search for the perfect method, the modern social evolutionary narrative whereby all is finally and endlessly more of the selfsame.” Here the Cartesian ego that influenced the disciplines of philosophy and theology, which systematically incorporated numerous individual human beings in a process that consumed their individuality, seem unbearably inappropriate in the face of the extreme degradation of human dignity in history. This is a failure of thought to grasp or comprehend the other, a failure to see the unthought in the history of philosophy and theology—that knowing takes place always within the context of the intersubjective relation. Our “freethinking” culture is often suspicious of anything that might impose itself on our lives or threaten our individual freedom. We like to stay in “control” of the world as critical, independent, selfempowered subjects, and we refuse to reach out beyond ourselves toward the degradation of the dignity of the other in history. In this new trend of thought, the subjectivity and uniqueness of the subject is not about freethinking, selfempowerment, and individual freedom; it is rather a turn to an infinite responsibility for the other prior to being for oneself. In some sense, this issue of an authentic selfother relation provides an invaluable purpose for the present study. It suggests finding “some way to use rationality and reflection to take the Cartesian ego beyond rationality and reflection, leading it to register or recognize another, oscillating, enigmatic sort of ‘ethical’ truth” that constitutes a central response to the question of human existence and authenticity.

Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology, each in its own right, by positing the human other as the possibility of the subject’s subjectivity, invite humanity to situate the other/neighbor at the center of the definition of human subjectivity. To be human, therefore, is to act with love toward one’s neighbor. While not denying the suitability of the subject’s identity, unique conscience and sanctified dignity, it only finds its existential and fundamental meaning, Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology would argue, through love, relationship and solidarity with other humans. The Christian theological tradition has a long history of finding in some philosophers genuine valued dialogical partners. This book finds in Levinas a valued dialogical partner whose work could benefit Christian theology in general and liberation theology in particular.

Chapter one focuses on the ethical relationship in Levinas’ transcendental ethics. It begins with an examination of the advent of Levinas on the scene of Western philosophy. It shows how Levinas takes issue with Husserlian and

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6 Tracy, “Theology and the Many Faces of Postmodernity,” 108.

Heideggerian phenomenology for not giving a satisfying account of intersubjectivity and responsibility for the other. Specifically, I examine why, for Levinas, ethics should replace metaphysics as first philosophy by analyzing the major concepts of his philosophy: the encounter with the other, the face, the trace, substitution, proximity, sensibility, responsibility, hostage, vulnerability, principle and anarchy, the Saying and the Said, and the third party. Since Levinas held that philosophical thought was rooted in prephilosophical experiences, and recognized the place of Jewish history as part of his life, I also analyze Jewish aspects in Levinas’ thought, especially the influence that the Torah, the Talmudic tradition, and the Holocaust had on his philosophy. In the end, this chapter point out some philosophical stirrings, subtle or overt, in his work, which serve to put his position in dialogue with liberation theology’s perspective.

The second chapter is in two parts. The first part provides core elements of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s theology of liberation. The second part addresses Jon Sobrino’s theological approach. This chapter examines both theologians’ social, cultural, and ecclesial background and theological perspectives. It also demonstrates that for Gutiérrez and Sobrino the human person, the poor, the stranger, the widow, the oppressed, the homeless, etc is the place for a possible revelation from God. Since Gutiérrez and Sobrino analyze the human person in the light of the Incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, this chapter discusses their anthropologies as inspired by their Christologies and the experience of their social locations. It is in the works of justice, in loving one’s neighbor, that transcendence is encountered.

The third chapter is the pivotal chapter as it focuses on the conceptual affinities between these two approaches. It establishes that Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology both view the turn to the other/neighbor as a power of genuine love, opening new avenues for the radical reimagining of the world. They respond to the degradation of the human person’s life in history in a comparable way; search for the divine transcendence in a life of commitment to the other human person; find in the JudeoChristian wisdom a distinct way of thinking of the subjectother relationship; and call for love of neighbor and justice. While calling for a redefinition of human subjectivity in terms of love of the other/neighbor, these two approaches present also some divergences, which I argue, offer an opportunity for dialogue. Levinas’ philosophy provides liberation theology with a viable philosophical framework that would enrich its theological anthropology. Liberation theology, on its part, bears witness and historicizes Levinas’ philosophy in terms of conversion to the neighbor. In the end, this chapter argues that the turn to the other/neighbor in Levinas and liberation theology is a precondition for peace, justice, and good social order.

The fourth chapter discusses how such similarities—the conceptual affinities
between these two approaches—hold up in the view of some Christian scholars who have dealt with Levinas’ philosophical project. Three respected contemporary scholars have been selected: Enrique Dussel, JeanLuc Marion, and Michael Purcell. These scholars, although interpreting the relevance of Levinas for theology along divergent lines, outline the basic themes of Levinas’ thought and the ways in which it might be deployed in fundamental, practical and philosophical theology of liberation. Dussel, Marion, and Purcell will helpfully serve the goal of this work because they see the importance of Levinas’ philosophy for theological anthropology.

As subSaharan African faces unparalleled sociopolitical and ethnic conflicts, in chapter five, I conclude by proposing Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology’s turn to the other/neighbor as significant for addressing contemporary subSaharan Africa sociopolitical and ethnic conflicts. Sociopolitical and ethnic conflicts in subSaharan Africa are mostly due to the struggle for political and economic power for one’s own self realization and/or one’s ethnic group. Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology’s redefinition of human subjectivity as the one for the other is pertinent to the issue of excesses of political power, poverty, and frequent ethnic conflicts in subSaharan Africa. It is an invitation to all sub-Saharan Africans to rise beyond sociopolitical and ethnic boundaries and build unified nations. For the purpose of fostering an appreciation of the potential that Levinas’ philosophy and liberation theology’s turn to the neighbor offer to sub-Saharan African society, this chapter also points out a couple of concrete historical examples of this turn to the other/neighbor in the sense of Purcell’s being otherwise or of what I describe in this book as affective responsibility. My hope is that both Levinas’ and liberation theology’s turn to the other/neighbor would advance the recognition of the other/neighbor, who is both God’s mystery and the human other, as the precondition for good sociopolitical and economic order in the world and more importantly in subSaharan Africa.