Face to face with Jesus

by William C. Placher in the August 25, 1999 issue

Self and Salvation: Being Transformed, by David F. Ford

David Ford is one of the reasons why British theology has been getting more interesting lately. Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, Ford is one of a generation of British theologians now in midcareer (Rowan Williams and John Milbank also come immediately to mind) very much engaged with "postmodern" philosophy but also deeply committed to the life of the church and particularly interested in liturgy. Ford has written on Karl Barth, the theology of praise and the task of theology, as well as having edited *The Modern Theologians*, a fine survey of contemporary theology, and coauthoring a theological commentary on 2 Corinthians.

Christians are transformed, he argues in this book, by coming face to face with Jesus. He therefore begins—in dialogue with three contemporary thinkers, Emmanuel Levinas, Eberhard Jüngel and Paul Ricoeur—to explore what it means to *face* someone, to encounter a face. Subsequent chapters consider the idea of facing Jesus in scripture (with Ephesians as an example), the Eucharist and christological doctrine, and how such a pattern works itself out in exemplary Christian lives like those of Thérèse of Lisieux and Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

Levinas, a Jewish philosopher who died in 1995, addressed the theme of "face" most directly. He had lived through the Holocaust. Imagine watching a trainload of Jews traveling off to a death camp, he said. You don't need to begin with some metaphysics or theory of knowledge or political philosophy to justify a strong reaction in such a situation. What could be more basic than the ethical demand made by that human face staring at you? Philosophy should thus begin with ethics, not in a systematic way but with the immediate obligation imposed on us when we encounter the face of another. That obligation is to be "hospitable"—to make the other feel at home.

When Levinas turns from considering the human face to talking about God, the result, Ford admits, "is a dazzling and enigmatic mixture of eloquence, elusiveness

and polemic." Levinas suspects theology—any theology—of creating an idol that fits into its system. Yet he can talk about our "unquenchable Desire for Infinity" or say that his goal is "to hear a God uncontaminated by Being."

Ford interprets Levinas as a successor to the Hebrew prophets, always challenging overly simple pictures of God as idolatrous, and he proposes the contemporary German theologian Eberhard Jüngel as someone whose work is free of most of the flaws Levinas saw in theology. Jüngel, too, resists definitions of God. God is always a mystery we encounter only, paradoxically, in Christ dead on the cross and in a Word that does not describe or explain but addresses us, calling us to lives of responsibility.

The final conversation partner in the first half of this book is Paul Ricoeur, from whom Ford draws at least two points that move the discussion in the direction of Christian theology. First, the responsibility we feel to the other shouldn't be grudging and reluctant but joyful. Second, we can't keep rejecting idols if we're not willing to risk some commitment to that which isn't an idol. In other words, Christians will take on the responsibility to which Levinas calls humanity and will share his suspicion of idols, but we will be joyful about it and will find something beyond idols to worship. The properly transformed self is a worshiping self.

Ford sees the pattern of that kind of life presented in Ephesians, enacted in the Eucharist and conceptualized in Christology, where, seeing in the Gospels how Jesus faced God and others, we realize that to face Jesus is to face God. He also sees it in exemplary Christian lives.

Thérèse of Lisieux, living her short life in a late 19th-century French convent, found her vocation in a love of God and in the joyful hospitality she showed those around her even when she was in physical pain and spiritual desolation: "If she offers, as has been suggested, a spirituality for the third millennium, its secret perhaps lies in the simplicity of this compassionate face turned smiling to other faces, and able to inspire in them sensitive, daily improvisations on the theme of substitutionary joy united with substitutionary responsibility." Similarly, Dietrich Bonhoeffer showed us how to combine a strong sense of responsibility with joy.

Ford's book lies, by his own admission, somewhere between a single sustained argument and a collection of essays. Though it's sometimes hard going, it is a helpful introduction to a wide range of important contemporary religious thinkers,

and it can be marvelously suggestive. A more systematic book might have left fewer questions unanswered—but of course Ford could argue that it isn't always good to answer all the questions.

Let me focus on one question that remained unanswered for me. I'm clear on the kind of life Ford wants Christians to live—a life of hospitality, especially to the poor; a life of worship—to sum it up, a life of love. I'm also clear that Jesus, Thérèse and Bonhoeffer offer inspiring examples of such a life, and that Ford believes that Jesus offers more than just an example. But I'm unclear about the manner of that "more."

Is it that we can live the right kind of life only after we have come face to face with Jesus? But why? Or did Jesus do something to free us from the despair that would otherwise follow when we fail to live such a life? But what? I'm not sure. The dead face of Jesus, Ford writes,

> resists any notion of substitution which is about replacement of the one substituted for and which therefore sponsors irresponsibility. . . . Before this dead face one can recognize both someone who gave himself utterly for God and for us, and also the fact that being dead is not a matter of doing anything for us: it is being dead for us, absent for us, being one who creates by his death a limitless sphere of responsibility for us.

"The resurrection appearances," he adds, "are events of reconciling forgiveness"—but also "calls to joint, expanding responsibility in the Spirit of the crucified Jesus." We're welcomed to join the reconciled, but to join them in bearing limitless responsibility.

I believe that we can take on such responsibility joyfully only because we know that we will be forgiven our mistakes—in what Calvin called Christian freedom—and that it is Jesus's life, death and resurrection that makes that confidence possible. I think Ford believes that too. But, while he is suspicious of a good many traditional concepts of substitutionary atonement, I'm not sure what he has put in their place.

Early on, Ford says that he is "attempting . . . what must seem impossible . . . to argue for a substitutionary self, defined by radical responsibility, and also for Jesus Christ dying for all." I'm sure about the radical responsibility: he draws powerful implications from philosophy, scripture, sacrament and doctrine about our obligation to those we face. But for so many contemporary Christians that idea of Jesus dying for all comes hard, and it's there we particularly need theological help. I wish Ford

had given us more of that help. But without question he has given us a challenging and thoughtful book, and one that anyone interested in the conversation between theology and "postmodern" philosophy ought to read.