

Thoughts on the Teachings of Martin Buber

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Martin Buber (1878-1965), born in Vienna, was one of the great Jewish philosophers of his time. In 1938, with the rise of Nazism, Buber relocated to Jerusalem where he became a brilliant Israeli voice for a wiser and more understanding humanity.

In his famous book, *I and Thou*, Buber pointed out that human relationships, at their best, involve mutual knowledge and respect, treating self and others as valuable human beings. An I-Thou relationship is based on understanding, sympathy, love. Its goal is to experience the “other” as a meaningful and valuable person. In contrast, an I-It relationship treats the “other” as an object to be manipulated, controlled, or exploited. If I-Thou relationships are based on mutuality, I-It relationships are based on the desire to gain functional benefit from the other.

Buber wrote: “When a culture is no longer centered in a living and continually renewed relational process, it freezes into the It-world, which is broken only intermittently by the eruptive, glowing deeds of solitary spirits” (*I and Thou*, p. 103). As we dehumanize others, we also engage in the process of dehumanizing ourselves. We make our peace with living in an It-world, using others as things, and in turn being used by them for their purposes.

The line between I-Thou and I-It relationships is not always clear. Sometimes, people appear to be our friends, solicitous of our well-being; yet, their real goal is to manipulate us into buying their product, accepting their viewpoint, controlling us in various ways. Their goal isn’t mutual friendship and understanding; rather, they want to exert power and control, and they feign friendship as a tactic to achieve their goals.

Dehumanization is poisonous to proper human interactions and relationships. It is not only destructive to the victim, but equally or even more destructive to the one who does the dehumanizing. The dehumanizer becomes blinded by egotism and power-grabbing at any cost. Such a person may appear “successful” based on superficial standards but is really an immense failure as a human being.

I-It relationships are based on functionality. Once the function no longer yields results, the relationship breaks. I-Thou relationships are based on human understanding, loyalty and love. These relationships are the great joy of life. Buber is fully cognizant of the fact that human beings live with I-Thou and I-It realities. “No human being is pure person, and none is pure ego; none is entirely actual, none entirely lacking in actuality. Each lives in a twofold I. But some men are so person-oriented that one may call them persons, while others are so ego-oriented that one may call them egos. Between these and those true history takes place” (Ibid., p. 114).

Buber speaks of another relationship beyond I-Thou and I-It: the I-Eternal Thou. Human beings not only stand in relationship to each other, but to God. “One does not find God if one remains in the world; one does not find God if one leaves the world. Whoever goes forth to his You with his whole being and carries to it all the being of the world, finds him whom one cannot seek. Of course, God is the *mysterium tremendum* that appears and overwhelms; but he is also the mystery of the obvious that is closer to me than my own I” (Ibid., p. 127).

Buber views the relationship with God as a human yearning, an imperfect search for ultimate Perfection. Faith is a process; it fluctuates; it is not something that, once attained, can be safely deposited in the back of one’s mind. “Woe unto the possessed who fancy that they possess God!” (Ibid., p. 155). Elsewhere, Buber elaborates on this point: “All religious expression is only an intimation of its attainment....The meaning is found through the engagement of one’s own person; it only reveals itself as one takes part in its revelation” (The Way of Response, p. 64).

Buber was attracted to the spiritual lessons of the Hassidic masters who refused to draw a line of separation between the sacred and the profane. Religion at its best encompasses all of life and cannot be confined to a temple or set of rituals. “What is of greatest importance in Hasidism, today as then, is the powerful tendency, preserved in personal as well as in communal existence, to overcome the fundamental separation between the sacred and the profane” (Hasidism and Modern Man, p. 28). The goal of religion is to make us better, deeper human beings, to be cognizant of the presence of God at all times. “Man

cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human; he can approach Him through becoming human. To become human is what he, this individual man, has been created for. This, so it seems to me, is the eternal core of Hasidic life and of Hasidic teaching" (Ibid., pp. 42-43).

Buber finds inspiration in the Jewish religious tradition. The biblical heroes "do not dare confine God to a circumscribed space of division of life, to 'religion.' They have not the insolence to draw boundaries around God's commandments and say to Him: 'up to this point, You are sovereign, but beyond these bounds begins the sovereignty of science or society or the state'" (The Way of Response, p. 68). Israel's genius was not simply in teaching that there is one God, "but that this God can be addressed by man in reality, that man can say Thou to Him, that he can stand face to face with Him....Only Israel has understood, or rather actually lives, life as being addressed and answering, addressing and receiving answer....It taught, it showed, that the real God is the God who can be addressed because He is the God who addresses" (Ibid., p. 179).

A central goal of religion is to place a human being in relationship with the Eternal Thou. Yet, Buber notes with disappointment: "The historical religions have the tendency to become ends in themselves and, as it were, to put themselves in God's place, and, in fact, there is nothing that is so apt to obscure the face of God as a religion" (A Believing Humanism, p. 115). The "establishment" has become so engaged in perpetuating its institutional existence that it has lost its central focus on God. "Real faith...begins when the dictionary is put down, when you are done with it" (The Way of Response, p. 61). The call of faith must be a call for immediacy. When faith is reduced to a set of formulae and rituals, it moves further from face to face relationship with God.

People are greatly in need of a liberating religious message. We yearn for relationship with our fellow human beings; we reach out for a spiritual direction to the Eternal Thou. Our dialogues are too often superficial, inauthentic. It is not easy to be a strong, whole and self-confident I; it is not easy to relate to others as genuine Thous; it is a challenge to reach out to the Eternal Thou. Yet, without these proper relationships, neither we nor our society can flourish properly.

Buber's writings had a powerful impact on many thousands of readers, including the Swedish diplomat, Dag Hammarskjöld (1905-1961), who served as the second Secretary General of the United Nations, from April 1953 until his death in a plane crash in September 1961. These two remarkable men met at the United Nations not long after Buber had given a guest lecture at Princeton University in 1958. Hammarskjöld had written to tell Buber "how strongly I have

responded to what you write about our age of distrust.”

Buber described his meeting with the Secretary General of the U.N. where both men shared a deep concern about the future of humanity. Will the nations of the world actually unite in mutual respect and understanding? Or will they sink into a quagmire of antagonisms, political infighting...and ultimately, the possible destruction of humanity through catastrophic wars?

Buber noted: “We were both pained in the same way by the pseudo-speaking of representatives of states and groups of states who, permeated by a fundamental reciprocal mistrust, talked past one another out the windows. We both hoped, we both believed that....faithful representatives of the people, faithful to their mission, would enter into a genuine dialogue, a genuine dealing with one another out of which would emerge in all clarity the fact that the common interests of the peoples were stronger still than those which kept them in opposition to one another” (A Believing Humanism, pp. 57-59).

It was this dream that linked Buber and Hammarskjöld—a dream that diplomats would focus on the needs of humanity as a whole, and not simply hew to their own self-serving agendas. Indeed, this was the founding dream of the United Nations: to be an organization that would bring together the nations of the world to work in common cause for the greater good of humanity.

In January 1959, Hammarskjöld visited Buber in Jerusalem. Again, their conversation focused on the failure of world diplomacy to create an atmosphere of trust and mutual cooperation. There were some steps forward, to be sure; but by and large, the harmony of the nations had not come to pass. “Pseudo-speaking” and “fundamental reciprocal mistrust” continued unabated. The representatives continued to “talk past one another out the windows.”

Hammarskjöld believed that Buber’s teachings on the importance of dialogue needed as wide a following as possible. After Hammarskjöld was killed in a plane accident, Buber was informed that the Secretary General of the U. N. was working on a Swedish translation of I and Thou on the plane. His last thoughts were about dialogue, mutual understanding, sympathetic interrelationships among human beings.

Hammarskjöld died in 1961. Buber died in 1965. Did their dreams for the United Nations and for humanity also die with them? Has the United Nations become a beacon of hope for genuine human dialogue? Do the diplomats work harmoniously for the good of humanity? It would appear that instead of being a

bastion of human idealism, the United Nations has become a political battleground where the fires of hatred and bigotry burn brightly.

We justly lament the viciously unfair treatment of Israel at the U.N. We justly deplore the anti-Americanism that festers within the United Nations. But these ugly manifestations of anti-Israel and anti-American venom are symptoms of the real problem: the United Nations has become a central agency for hatred, political maneuvering, and international discord. It has not lived up to the ideals of its founders; it has betrayed the dreams of Buber and Hammarskjöld; it has become a symbol of so much that is wrong in our world.