

Dialogue and Difference: "I and Thou" or "We and They"?

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*In memory of Martin Buber (1878-1965),
master and friend.*

I DIRECT MY THOUGHTS AND YOURS to the I-Thou model of human relatedness as it is confirmed or denied in the all-too-human realm of ethnic, national, religious, and ideological differences. Any honest and wide treatment of how we behave in such circumstances is bound to cause some discomfort, since we may recognize ourselves in some of the horrible examples of non-dialogical relatedness. What I have to say here is not directed at someone else, at *them*, those other guys, whom we scan with a critical eye. I am talking about us, about you and me. Indeed what I have to say applies to Buberians as well as non-Buberians or anti-Buberians. We cannot enter the kingdom of dialogue by a rote recitation of phrases from Martin Buber's works while engaged in non-dialogical relations with our ideological adversaries in politics, religion, and philosophy.

Let us talk together about dialogue and difference, what the deep existential and phenomenological thinkers call "otherness." (Why not "others"?) One stance towards distinctive others is to consider them abnormal, inferior, alien, as say Orientals compared with us Occidentals, as Africans or blacks compared with us Euro-Americans or whites, as primitives compared with us civilized persons. It is "We" as versus "They," us good guys as versus those bad guys, we the advanced versus they the backward, we the developed versus they the undeveloped, we the dominant versus they the dominated. This imperialist view of other human beings is targeted in Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon

Books, 1978). Although his presentation may seem strident and exaggerated at times, on the whole it is a correct picture of Western attitudes towards the peoples, cultures, and religions of the Middle East, particularly the Arabs and Islam. Read it and weep or gnash your teeth, according to your respective allegiances.

There is a clear distinction, however, between what Said has to say and what Buber teaches. Said wants us to see the other as same not as other, in his generality as a human being, to see her in a sense as "one of us." Buber wants us to confirm the other in his particularity, in her difference, in his *haecceity*, if you'll pardon me that useful medieval Latin term, not in her partaking in a general, abstract humanity. For Buber the dialogical relation is one of "I" or "We-uns" in our own cultural and spiritual heritage to "Thou" or "You-all" in your particular culture and traditions. As opposed to the "We" versus "They" stance, which Said sees as the dominant response of Euro-American culture to the non-European peoples, the way of dialogue points to the meeting of two realities—two selves or two communities—each in its ownness, its concrete particularity.

Far from being unrealistic, as some anti-Buberians allege, this is the height of realism, insisting that we address real beings in their actual concrete situation, not treat them as ethnic stereotypes or remote abstractions—which are outside the realm of address and response. The dialogical stance does not foreclose the possibility of conflict or division. In fact it definitely includes that real possibility, which we see actualized almost every day. But it steers us away from the demonization of the other person, nation, religious community, or socio-political party, from the dehumanization of our adversaries, of those who differ with us.

That is the way of dialogue. The way of non-dialogue, the non-I-Thou stance is opposite. It says, "I'll affirm you and allow you to exist if you become like me, think like me, do as I do, are my mental-spiritual clone." Its motto is, "Nothing alien is human to me." This is not simply the stance adopted by uneducated, backward, unenlightened persons. It is the stance very often adopted by people like you and me, so-called liberal, tolerant, enlightened, cultivated persons. It plays a prominent role in intellectual circles, where people skewer one another with verbal swords. Many of us, intellectual or not, are imprisoned in ideological stances which act as iron maidens against any real human intercourse. Abstract reductionism prevails in the differences between liberal and conservative, socialist and free-marketeer, atheist and theist, right-to-lifer and free-choicer, feminist and patriarchalist, etc., etc. There is no interhuman meeting, no real dialogue between human beings, just barrages of abstract ideas or ideals, partisan slogans, condemnations and fanaticisms, which block off even the possibility of encounter. We sanctify ourselves as the repositories of right and virtue and demonize our adversaries as evil incarnate. Fanaticism and

bigotry are by no means the monopoly of organized religion and its adherents. They are universal human failings indulged in by disputants on all sides.

I recall the story about a meeting between Buber and T. S. Eliot that may exemplify my general point here. It seems that Buber and Eliot met and talked with one another at some length and with mutual respect. Later Maurice Friedman asked Buber, "How come you were able to have a friendly meeting with a man like T. S. Eliot, who is so opposed to you in his opinions?" (Eliot had once described himself as an Anglo-Catholic in religion, a classicist in literature, and a royalist in politics.) To which Buber replied pithily, "I met with another man, with another human being, not a set of opinions."¹

How many of us can say the same for our encounters with persons who have ideas and ideals opposed to our own? Do we open up to the other in his difference, take his views seriously, or rather seek to win an argument, substituting debate for dialogue, domination for meeting? Of course, you and I don't meet up with an Eliot every day, but how about someone on our own level? I am afraid many of us act badly most of the time when we meet persons with radically different commitments and allegiances. We seek to subdue rather than to understand. Often what most moves us are the intense passion, resentment and hatred evoked by dialectical differences. "How dare this other person believe utterly different than I do! Let's demonize the bastard!" That is our knee-jerk response to a radical difference in opinions. Recall that in the Christian tradition (which a lot of us tend to demonize) there is a doctrine that one should condemn the sin but not the sinner. Assuming that we view a radical difference in viewpoint from ours as a serious failing, do you or I make that salutary distinction?

By sheer chance while I was on a week's holiday in Vancouver, British Columbia, last year, I came across a newspaper column titled "Hatred of all the things we aren't." The author, Richard Wagamese, writing from an Indian reservation, cites a contemptuous letter from a Canadian Caucasian expressing his scorn for the primitiveness of the Indian aborigines, who he maintains have nothing of value to contribute. He is especially scornful of the alleged spirituality of their rituals and myths, which he attributes to bunk about the "noble savage," who he claims existed only in Rousseau's imagination. In rebuttal the columnist cites early missionaries as witnesses to the nobility and spirituality of the aborigines they encountered. He calls for the preservation and enhancement of the traditional spiritual culture to maintain the Indian essence and identity. He realizes that the man who wrote the contemptuous letter does not understand this and is not even

1. Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber* (New York: Paragon Books, 1991), 334, 419.

interested in trying. That man exemplifies the "Orientalist" vice, treating what is non-European or pre-modern as inferior, worthless, contemptible, bypassed in the progressive unrolling of history. He also exemplifies the failing highlighted by Buber of treating what is other as "It" rather than "Thou," as an object of disregard rather than a being to be met, of closing oneself off from the realm of the *Zwischenmenschlich*, the interhuman.

Let us turn our attention now to the always tensile topic of religious difference, which provides a good take-off point for analogies with other fields. What is involved here again is the relation to what is other—other basic beliefs, sacred acts, communal forms—what is unfamiliar to us, strange, sometimes abrasively so. Should any of you feel left out, I assure you that I am including naturalism and humanism among the basic stances towards reality and the attitudes developed in their support.

Let me suggest a typology of response to religious differences.² There have been three main historical responses: complete disregard, polemical attack or defense (apologetics), and syncretism. The first is the way of ignorance, of not-knowing, of shutting ourselves off in a sectarian enclave or ghetto, unstained by physical or mental contact with the awful, threatening others and their sinful, pagan ways and beliefs. "Ignore them" is the maxim about others: "Act as if they don't exist." This was a far more practicable alternative in former ages.

In addition to this passive, insulating reaction, there is the active, aggressive way of attack upon other religions as "untruth" or "unfaith" in comparison with our own religion, which we proclaim contains the whole and only truth. This polemical response may involve considerable study and knowledge of other faiths, but solely as a means to extol one's own faith while denigrating that of others and above all to become the victor in intellectual debates, *contra gentiles*, against the gentiles, the pagans, the unbelievers.

The third way, called variously "syncretism," "synthesis," or "eclecticism," has a great appeal to liberal humanists in religious communities. It seeks to open up to whatever is deemed holy and good in other religions and to incorporate it with one's own faith. This approach has been subjected to ridicule as well as praise. It risks a certain shallowness, inauthenticity, or irresponsibility when it tries to put things together that don't belong together or are clearly contradictory. It may also descend to a merely aesthetic appreciation, a non-existential spectator stance without engagement or commitment. Yet it points us to real contacts with other religions and their adherents, to real mutual influences, and to the effects

2. I have used this typology before in classes on "The Jewish Christian Encounter: Conflict and Dialogue" and in a published article carrying the same title in *FORUM: On the Jewish People, Zionism and Israel* (Jerusalem), Fall/Winter 1979.

of such contact on our religious attitudes, assuming that there can be growth and development in religious existence.

I should point out there has been a good deal of syncretism in Judaism and Christianity, however the orthodox may deny it. Ralph Marcus, the eminent scholar in Hellenistic Judaism, used to say that the Israelites stole far more than the jewels of the Egyptians from the ancient Near Eastern cultures. Similarly early Christianity was enriched by various patterns of Greek thought and culture, and Greek and Islamic philosophy had an enormous effect on medieval Jewish and Christian philosophical theology. The American philosopher of religion W. E. Hocking noted that the capacity to assimilate from other sources may be the sign of health and vitality in a religion. A religion already has to be something definite before it can assimilate anything from external sources.

The possibility of mutual influence between religious communities and cultures brings us to a fourth way beyond the traditional three ways: the way of dialogue. Here we assume a real difference, which cannot be ignored or blotted out, and a real relation, a mutual address and response. A real dialogue openly and unreservedly engaged in (and I don't mean just talking together) may lead to actual understanding and to self-realization. In coming to understand and appreciate the other in his particular religious existence, we may come to realize what we are in ours. This is the way to do away with the dividing, distorting stereotypes which proclaim the defects and shortcomings of other faiths and extol the virtues and perfections of our own. There is a religious term for this, *idolatry*, and it takes many forms: idolatry of ourselves, our nation, our "race," our political ideology, our religious community.

Let us take the example of the encounter or misencounter between Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity. The two movements arose out of the same historic situation in first-century Palestine and soon went on their separate paths, each claiming lineal descent from the biblical patriarchs and prophets, from the religion of Israel. While the "elder brother" proclaimed itself to be the true Israel, entrusted with the one and only Torah, the "younger brother" proclaimed itself to be the new Israel with a new Word to be preached to all the peoples of the world. The old Israel looked down on the new Israel as at best an inferior imitation fit only for the uncircumcised gentiles and considered the incarnational theology that developed as sheer blasphemy. The new Israel looked down on the old Israel as superseded and made obsolete by the new dispensation through Jesus Christ. The seeds for conflict, anger, and resentment were present from the beginning. The struggle for domination or survival, physical or spiritual, went on for the next 1,900 years. The war of Christendom against Judaism, a living alternative in its midst, became a cruel and horrible one, inevitably directed against the Jewish people, who were the bearers of the targeted

religion, and was one of the main contributors to the European anti-Semitism which culminated in the Holocaust.

"With these senseless exterminations something quite different has begun," declared Hans Joachim Schoeps, a mourner for parents and a brother murdered in the Nazi death camps. He saw genuine, open dialogue as made possible by the Holocaust, not only because it shocked the civilized world but because it was the product of twentieth-century totalitarianism and racism, not of the religious conflict between Judaism and Christianity.³ Certainly there have been all kinds of institutional attempts, going as high as the Vatican, in which the term "dialogue" has been copiously used. I myself attended a conference at Loyola University in Chicago celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Vatican declaration on the opening of dialogue with Judaism. Rather than examining in detail and depth the work of these rabbinical and priestly representatives, let us try to map out what real dialogue would consist of between Christian and Jew, as for the members of any two faiths.

First, each must accept the whole historical sweep of the other's faith. Christians must not limit their view of Judaism to what is recorded in the Hebrew Bible but must understand that it has had a 2,000-year post-biblical history, is a living faith, not superseded by Christianity in actual reality. They should have at least a dim awareness of the Talmud, the rule of the Oral Law, the development of mysticism, messianic movements, philosophical theology, the Jewish Enlightenment, and latter-day Reform, Conservatism, and Neo-Orthodoxy. And they should not view the religion of the Jews on an ecclesiastical model like their own.

Similarly Jews must view Christianity in all its forms from the primitive Palestinian church to Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Protestant, and independent communities. They should not make similarity to Judaism the norm of authentic Christianity, a requirement for acceptance and dialogue. Christianity is what it became in the whole world through 1,900 years, not what it was in first-century Palestine, in the Jewish-Christian church. My old classmate, Schubert Ogden, the eminent Protestant theologian, once said to me that Judaism and Christianity are historically bound together but theologically distinct, an observation to remember.

What is required for Jewish-Christian dialogue is that the two peoples (I use the term "peoples" advisedly) deal with each other as they really are, not as the cardboard figures and stereotypes that have so long prevailed. Judaism must be understood as it really is, not as a preparatory, inadequate stage superseded by Christianity. Nor can the latter be taken merely as an

3. Hans Joachim Schoeps, *The Jewish-Christian Argument: A History of Theologies in Conflict*, trans. David E. Green (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1963), xi.

adulterated form of Judaism for the inferior, lax, indulgent gentiles. These concoctions lead only to self-satisfaction not to dialogue.

The truth is that there has been very little dialogue between Jews as Jews and Christians as Christians. To a large extent the relationship has been one of mutual not-knowing and not-caring, of not taking the other seriously in his religio-ethnic particularity, of the opposite of dialogue. This is not to say that there have not been friendly relations between Jews and Christians. This has been true even in medieval times. But it has most often occurred with disregard for the other's faith, for his religious existence, the presumed center of his being. We approach the way of ignorance that I first enumerated but now without the physical restriction of a sectarian enclave or ghetto. I have heard from religious Jews this comment on dialogue. "Who needs it?" Who indeed? I have heard similar remarks from Protestants opposed to ecumenical ties even among themselves. Whether real dialogue is possible between the Christian as Christian and the Jew as Jew (not those who merely list themselves as such on informational forms) remains an open question.

Dialogue, open encounter, is not only a problem between religions but also within religions. European history is full of the intramural conflicts that have often resulted in bloody warfare between adherents of the Prince of Peace. Such hostility and undialogical stances exist flagrantly in present-day Israel between secular and Orthodox Jews as well as between Reform and Orthodox Jews.

An article in the *Jerusalem Post International Edition* (14 Sept. 1991) tells us of the existence of an organization called Geshet ("Bridge") that works to establish a meeting between secular and Orthodox high-school students that will open them to an understanding of their varying humanistic and theistic approaches to the Judaic tradition. An effort is made through mixed secular-Orthodox seminars to divest the two groups of the facile stereotypes they have about one another, such as that the Orthodox are simply narrow, repressive, and draft-dodgers, or that the seculars are merely pleasure-seekers without any ethical values or knowledge of Judaism. This divestiture of stereotypes is done through ingenious exercises, such as cooperation in building a model city and making decisions affecting secular and religious needs, including tough ones as to which project must be scrapped in a budgetary crisis. If one side is not sensitive to the other's needs, the seminar leader switches the advocacy roles, the seculars acting as religious spokesmen and vice versa. Other ingenious paideutic devices are used to make the two groups see how things look from the other side and to avoid demonizing one another. The director of Geshet, Daniel Tropper, aims not at mere tolerance, leaving the two sides in separate enclaves, but at closing the gap between the secular and religious in an

increasingly polarized and politicized society. His basic assumption is that both the theistic and humanistic stances are part of the Judaic tradition.

Coincidentally a *New York Times* report on 14 September 1991 uses the term "bridges" (Geshar again) about the endeavor to bring about mutual understanding between conflicting Orthodox Jews and African-Americans in Teaneck, New Jersey. This supposedly model integrated suburb erupted into a white-black conflict in 1990 at the killing of a black youth by a white police officer. The building of "bridges" between blacks and whites following that tragedy, through the efforts of the Teaneck Clergy Council, is credited with coping with the crisis caused eighteen months later by the anti-Jewish remarks of Leonard Jeffries, a black New York City College professor and resident of Teaneck. Threats of demonstrations and counter-demonstrations by Jewish and black groups ensued. Ugly confrontations seemed imminent. A meeting between African Council and Jewish Community Council representatives reached a mutual understanding of good will, and a planned black march past local synagogues to counter a threatened militant Jewish march past Professor Jeffries's house was canceled. The possibly incendiary marches did not take place. The "bridges" stayed intact.

"A year ago," said the head of the Teaneck Clergy Council, "it wouldn't have been possible *because the level of trust was not there*" (my italics). An official of the African Council noted that they had never spoken directly before with the Jewish Community Council. Hitherto the state of relations between Orthodox Jews and blacks had been one of mutual disregard and ignorance. Now they got together to talk about ways in which to reach mutual understanding of their differing cultures and religions and further to share the joys and problems of bringing up children, their common experience. I need not belabor the point I have made previously on the potential of dialogue between differing and even conflicting groups. This is by no means a magic once-for-all nostrum, for in Teaneck as elsewhere in the world mutual suspicion, distrust, and demonization may arise again. As in Camus's *Oran*, "the plague" may come again and again.⁴ Hence the price of dialogue is eternal vigilance and flexibility in the concrete situation.

Buber's own dialogue with Christianity, Zen Buddhism, Taoism, and other non-Judaic religions is well known. His attitude can be summed up in a remark he once made, that he stood on the threshold of his "ancestral house" and faced the world outside that house in openness to what was there.⁵ This is not the stance of a Mr. Zero at Point Nowhere, but of a proud son of Israel, an "arch-Jew" (his own designation) ready to meet persons

4. Albert Camus, *The Plague* (Hammondsworth, Eng.: Penguin Books, 1960).

5. Martin Buber, *Hasidism and Modern Man* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), 42.

from others houses—from other peoples, cultures, religions—ready to listen and to respond.

Perhaps the most important application of Buber's philosophy of dialogue to group relations was to the conflict between the Jewish resettlers of Palestine and the resident Arab population. Buber insisted on just and sensitive consideration of the claims and aspirations of the long-time Arab residents of the land (there were also long-time Jewish residents). He held that the Jewish resettlement must ultimately be judged by moral norms, not by the purely pragmatic standards of power politics. Mainline Zionist leaders on the contrary, though they were reluctant to act unjustly towards the Arab residents, decided that the interests of resettlement were of higher ethical priority. They opted for what Max Weber called the "ethics of responsibility" over the "ethics of conscience." (It was my friend, the late Ernst Simon, who called Weber's dichotomy to my attention.⁶)

Buber along with a minority of irenic Zionists rejected both the morality and the practical wisdom of this position. He held that the main task was to gain the trust of the Palestinian Arabs, who were alarmed by the incursion of European newcomers under the aegis of the British Crown, a long-time imperialist opponent of Arab interests. Only if the Arabs were assured that the Zionists were not aiming for dominance in Palestine and eventually a Jewish national state would they drop their mistrust and be inclined to compromise—this was the thesis of Buber and his friends in the Brit Shalom (Covenant of Peace) group. This would require restriction of *aliyah* (Jewish immigration) and giving up the idea of a Jewish national state, requirements that were anathema to majority Zionists. The alternative, Buber held, would be continual conflict with the local Arabs and the surrounding Arab world. Judah Magnes, a co-worker with Buber for Jewish-Arab amity, warned that if the Zionists established a national state against the will of the people of the region, it would tie a Gordian knot that would inaugurate fifty years of intense Arab-Jewish conflict. These predictions seem to have been confirmed by the ensuing events in the past four decades.⁷

Buber's advocacy of these views incurred great disfavor among the leaders of the Yishuv (Jewish settlement) and their supporters abroad, exposing him to intense criticism as a traitor to Zionism or an impractical

6. See Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, eds. Hans H. Garth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 77-128.

7. For Buber's views, see Martin Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples: Martin Buber on Jews and Arabs*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (Oxford, Eng.: Oxford University Press, 1983). For Magnes's views, see Arthur A. Cohen, ed., *Dissenter in Zion: From the Writings of Judah H. Magnes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

idealist. Granted that Buber's vision of a bi-national Jewish-Arab entity, shared with some illustrious Zionists, never had a real chance of being fulfilled since it depended on unusual imagination and flexibility from Arab and Jewish leaders and their followers. Yet it is inaccurate to dismiss him as a mere moral idealist, devoid of practical realism. He understood that some injustice was to be expected in intergroup conflicts. What he advocated was doing as little injustice as possible in the concrete situation as against the amoral idolatry of *Machtpolitik*. It is important to recall that Buber was no absolute pacifist. On the contrary he held that in some cases it is necessary to resort to armed violence—for the survival of a community or to resist greater evil.⁸

I am one of those who believes that Ben-Gurion, the practical statesman, was right in advocating a national state for the Yishuv in 1947-48. It was a moment of opportunity and decision that probably would never come again to save a part of Palestine as a refuge for the survivors of the Holocaust. This assured a much different kind of community than that envisioned by the humanistic, cultural Zionism of Buber and Ahad Ha-Am, eventuating in a state like other states and an eating once again of the apple of state power with all the consequences flowing therefrom. That it did not solve the problem of Jewish-Arab conflict is obvious.

It is interesting to note that while accepting the existence of the state of Israel after 1948, Buber envisioned a confederation of Israel and the Arab states of the Middle East.⁹ An impossibility now? Of course, but maybe a possibility by the year 2048. What we require of prophets is far-reaching vision not immediate satisfaction. Buber once remarked to a critical younger scholar that while the young man's thought aimed at today, his own thought aimed at the day after tomorrow. (It was the younger scholar who told me the story.)

That the way of dialogue between different religious and ethnic groups is not an airy philosophical speculation somewhere up in the heavens is indicated by the two news stories I have noted. The impulse to engage in dialogue is a fairly common one, impeded though it may be by contemporary society, culture, and ideology. Human life—a really human life—demands it. One need not know what Buber taught in order to do it. But after we do it, intercourse with Buber's writings may lead to an understanding of the meaning and importance of what we have been engaged in.

Now Buber belongs to the ages. He is no longer with us in the flesh. But just as the way of dialogue preceded his life and works, it remains after him, leaving us ready to walk that path—or to go the other way.

8. See Buber, *A Land of Two Peoples*, 125.

9. *Ibid.*, 292f.

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