

Martin Buber (1878 - 1965)

"All real living is meeting (11)."

"If you hallow this life you meet the living God (79)"

"He who loves a woman, and brings her life to present realization in his, is able to look in the Thou of her eyes into a beam of the eternal Thou (86)."

"A Few Thoughts on Martin Buber's I and Thou" by John Barich

How does one relate to God? How does one relate to other people and to nature? The great Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, sought to answer these questions in his famous essay *I and Thou*. Buber, in this seminal work, provides a framework centered on the concepts of relation and the personhood of God. Through authentic relationships with our fellow men and women, we come to know the eternal Thou -- God. What Buber means by this will be brought out in what follows.

Buber begins his essay by establishing a typology to describe two types of relationships into which human beings enter. According to Buber, human beings possess a two-fold attitude towards the world indicated by the primary words (i.e., I-It; I-Thou). The first type of attitude Buber terms the I-It relationship. This type of relationship is characterized by the objectification and control of nature and people. The "I" in this relationship seeks to acquire and possess as much as it can and perceives itself as being an individual, who is set over against the subjects of its perception. But this "I" pays a price for such selfishness and will to dominate because it is isolated and alienated from the source of life. What also characterizes the I-It relationship is that it is embedded in space-and time and determined by causality. This relationship includes mundane acts such as mass consumption, industrial production, and societal organization. I infer from Buber's text that the world of technical mechanization and scientific objectification and control results from the I-It way of apprehending reality.

Now, Buber did not consider the world of "I-It" to be evil in and of itself. He observes that we all live in this world. We all relate to that which is outside of us, even to ourselves, as objects. We could not live unless we, to some extent, manipulated nature to meet our basic needs. The problem has to do with proportion. If we allow the "I-It" way

of viewing the world to dominate our thinking and actions, we will be spiritually emaciated and pauperized, and live lives of "quiet desperation."

There is an authentic way or a deeper way of relating to world, which Buber calls the I-Thou relationship. This is the place where people come together and encounter one other on the deepest level possible. Buber writes: "The Thou meets me through grace -- it is not found by seeking. By my speaking of the primary word [thou] to it is an act of my being, is indeed the act of my being (11)." We can see from this observation that Buber was not talking about a casual conversation at the local pub or a heated negotiation to resolve a labor dispute. Buber is describing a meeting not only of minds but of souls, of wills, of that which resides at the core of one's being. When you say Thou to another person, you are sharing the mystery of your being, you are responding with the totality of self to the Thou who is addressing you, you are meeting one another on the level of spirit. Buber defines spirit as that which arises between two people who meet one another on the I-Thou level. You become a person (as opposed to an alienated and isolated individual) when you enter into relation with people.

According to Buber, to enter the I-Thou relation is to perceive reality from a new and higher vantage point. I am able, in relation, to extricate myself from the closed world of I-It. I see that I am a free person, possessing a unique destiny. In the presence of my Thou, I am able to make a decision, out of the depths of my being, a decision which permits me to discern my destiny, the "grand-will" guiding my life. My life becomes a perpetual series of decisions where I consciously choose to live out that which has been ordained by God. Through my relationships, in which I give of myself, I become real, alive: I am able to turn my being towards the center of reality -- I approach the Face.

This turning is nothing less than our redemption in God -- the eternal Thou, the Absolute Person. By turning towards God, we enter into a life-altering relationship. Something happens to us. We receive the presence of God as power, as gift, as revelation. Our lives become laden with meaning, a meaning, which, while heavy to bear, is nonetheless real, palpable, reassuring. And neither synagogue nor church nor mosque nor university can determine what this meaning is for us. Thus, meaning -- the meaning of my life in the context of my meeting with God -- is specific to the circumstances of my life. Buber here is neither advocating an arrogant solipsism nor a vapid quietism. Nor is he asserting that transpersonal meaning takes us out of the world. Rather, it gives us the strength and courage to confront the problems of our lives, of our communities, of our world. When we enter into relation with God, we perceive we are responsible for those whom we consider to be strangers, even enemies. Buber profoundly observes that the man or woman who has turned to God has "abolished moral judgment for ever; the 'evil' man is simply one who is commended to him [or her] for greater responsibility, one even more needy of love....(109)."

I think it is important to note that Buber possesses a tremendous respect for the dignity of the human person. He believes that truth, meaning, and redemption are found in solidarity with other people. Buber, however, lacks the ambition of the organizational

religious man who needs to uphold the verities of a particular religious outlook, coerce people to accept this outlook as normative and absolute, and work to perpetuate the existence of a specific institutional structure. Instead, Buber demands authenticity -- in our relationships with other people, in our relationship with God. His ideas point the way towards such authenticity, but are not prescriptive. He does not provide a formula or an incantation for possessing God. He challenges us to live, to establish meaningful relationships, to hear God amidst the din of the world.

Some people might find Buber's religious philosophy dangerous because it assumes that people are mature enough, even adult enough, to orient their lives towards God. Such a supposition -- that people are incapable of arriving at the Truth without a regimented structure imposed by an external institution -- is mistaken. I would argue that for one to be authentically religious, regardless of one's faith tradition, one needs to be capable of living as a free, mature, and interdependent adult. Religious faith does not result from the mindless recitations of religious formulas or from the adherence to unintelligible liturgical routines but from the total commitment of one's being and one's life to the eternal Thou.

Being able to commit one's life, though, presupposes that one has a life to commit, that one has created one's life through meaningful I-Thou relationships. You can not give away what you do not already have. As an adult, you can not expect to meet God as a child. You must meet Him in the maturity of your personhood. You speak "Thou" on your lips. You wait patiently. In silence, you listen for the God who is. Out of the silence you hear a whisper, ever so softly: "I am who am." And you respond with the totality of your life. Person to person. God to man and man to God. There is no more pretending. This is the real. Because if you take life seriously, if you ceaselessly praise the Creator for your existence, for the existence of others, for the creation of the world, you "meet the living God."