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Martin Buber's Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue

A person can try with all his or her strength to resist the presence of "God", and yet one tastes God in the strict sacrament of dialogue. -Martin Buber¹

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ABSTRACT

Martin Buber (1878-1965) stands among the most significant philosophers of the 20th century. While many studies have attempted to summarize the scope of Buber's writings, here I will highlight some key implications of Buber's basic insight that there exists a deeply reciprocal bond between genuine interhuman dialogue and the divine-human relationship. Buber characterized authentic dialogue as sacramental, and he suggested that it included four elemental aspects: turning, addressing, listening, and responding. Every genuine dialogue opens out toward transcendence insofar as God's presence can be glimpsed as "absolute Person," can be tasted as the spirit of elemental togetherness. The fundamental result of engaging in sacramental dialogue, both with others and with God, both in public discourse and private prayer, is the renewal of the entire person. As Buber repeatedly described it, to become who we are created to be—dialogical partners with God—it is the responsibility of every person to participate in God's creative, revealing, and redemptive presence in that part of the world where we stand.**

(Note: Part I may be found in Bulletin No. 1 of the Association of the Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House - January 2016)

PART II

GLIMPING GOD'S REFRACTED PRESENCE

Theological language about God—whether rationalistic, naturalistic, materialistic, or mystical—usually attempts to express something about the being, nature, perception, or experience of God.

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Theologians in various traditions have amassed a set of supernatural truths that, at times, take on an independent reality. As a result, the infinitely limitless God is often inadvertently imprisoned in a particular theology. Buber does not speak about God in theological ways, as an “It” or a thing known. We cannot, he suggested, know God through the mind, or as a being who exists dualistically over-against the world, or as a being contained in dogma or ritual. Indeed, Buber held, even a mystical merging into oneness with God at the highest level of relation can impede one from encountering God.

In place of offering an interpretive description of who God is, Buber posits that the relational *presence* of God can be glimpsed through the interhuman and natural events of our lives. According to Buber, we glimpse God not with our “mind’s eye” but with our “being’s” eye.” Indeed, throughout his writings on genuine dialogue, Buber stressed that what makes dialogue sacramental is the refracted presence of God. That is, in genuine dialogue we not only address and are addressed by our most immediate partner but also by the “eternal Thou.” “The extended lines of relation,” Buber wrote, “meet in the eternal *Thou*,” and “Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse [*Durchblick*] through to the eternal *Thou*.”ⁱⁱ Reinforcing this point, Buber writes in *Eclipse of God* that “this glance of the being exists, wholly unillusory, yielding no images yet first making possible all images...”ⁱⁱⁱ That is, God cannot be spoken of in the third person, is not an idea, is not even a mystical experience, but can only be addressed in the second person.

In May of 1914 before the outbreak of the First World War, Buber was asked by an old friend, Reverend Heschler, “Do you believe in God?” Buber had a difficult time offering a genuine reply since he did not reflect on God as a thing known and believed in. Later, as he reflected on Heschler’s question, suddenly “in my spirit,” he wrote, “there where speech again and again forms itself, there arose without having been formulated by me, word for word distinct:”

If to believe in God means to be able to speak about him in the third person, then I certainly do not believe in God, or at least I do not know whether I may say that I believe in God. For I know well that if I speak of him in the third person, when that again and again happens, and it cannot at all be otherwise than that again and again happens, then my tongue is so quickly lamed that one cannot at all call that a speaking.^{iv}

When Buber says he does not *believe* in God, he means that he rejects the ideational God who is conditioned by his own perceptions and projections. Instead, believing in God meant being able to talk to God. Buber, in fact, would rather speak *to* God than *of* God.

Although he tried to be as clear as he could about the living presence of God in *I and Thou*, Buber noticed that many readers and interpreters of that book tended to reduce the “eternal *Thou*” to a philosophical or theological concept. So, almost 40 years after writing *I and Thou*, Buber added a Postscript in which he spoke more exactly of God as “absolute Person.” Herein lies one of Buber’s most significant contributions to theological thought. In describing God as a “Person,” more precisely, as a being who is also personal, Buber was suggesting the dynamics of how God communicates with humans. As a “Person,” the original Godhead enters into direct relationship with us in creative, revealing, and redeeming acts, making it possible for us, in turn, to enter into direct relationships with God and with others. Not a person in any finite way, as “absolute Person” the God of unconditional love takes on “the servant’s garment” as a person in order to love and be loved by humankind. This new, admittedly paradoxical, way to designate the “eternal *Thou*” underscored Buber’s view that God should not be reduced to a metaphysical statement or conceptual understanding. Nor does the metaphor of God as “absolute Person,” according to Buber, reduce the Absolute to the personal.^v By shifting his emphasis from the “eternal *Thou*,” which he described in *I and Thou* as “the *mysterium tremendum* that appears and overthrows,”^{vi} to the “absolute Person” who enters into relationship, Buber was shining a light, in his Postscript, on God’s immanent presence.

The understanding of God as “absolute Person” is indispensable for anyone who emphasizes God’s immediacy and “inclusiveness.” For Buber, God is the nearest One, the always ready, supreme partner in dialogue. God addresses us by standing with us directly, nearly, and lastingly as the eternal partner who is always ready to become dialogically present. In describing God as a “Person,” Buber was signifying the empowerment God gives to interhuman relationships. He was underscoring his view that that God speaks to us personally through the language of everyday interhuman exchanges:

God's speech to [us] penetrates what happens in the life of each one of us, and all that happens in the world around us, biographical and historical, and makes it for you and me into instruction, message, demand. Happening upon happening, situation upon situation, are enabled and empowered by the personal speech of God to demand of the human person that [I] take [a] stand and make [a] decision. Often enough we think there is nothing to hear, but long before we have ourselves put wax in our ears.^{vii}

According to Buber, God's speaking penetrates through things and especially through every genuine interhuman relationship when the words of others seize attention and stand out as "instruction, message, demand." As the "absolute Person," God speaks to us personally through the language of everyday interhuman exchanges.

When turning to God with unreserved spontaneity, I bring all other relationships before God, to be transformed in God's presence. Our conversations with God and God's conversations with us do not happen primarily in experiences of the sacred set aside from the everyday, as Buber learned at the outset of World War I, but penetrate into our lived reality. As a "Person," God enters into direct relationship with us and makes it possible for us to, in turn, enter into direct relationships with God and with others. In contrast to the individual (who Buber saw as neither the starting point nor the goal of human existence), God speaks to the whole person who turns body and soul—honestly, attentively, withholding nothing—to another. As Mendes-Flohr indicated, for Buber, "God's voice is actually neither sounded orally nor heard aurally; it is rather refracted through an 'event' that 'addresses' us." God's presence "beckons" one to dialogically respond to "the specifics of that situation"^{viii} in which another speaks. In event-upon-event, happening-upon-happening, when the words of others stand out for us as instruction, message, and demand, God's penetrating address challenges us to take a responsible stand in the world.

In a work that, more than others, expresses Buber's own spiritual attitudes, *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism*, Buber relates several tales from the Hasidic tradition that illustrate the way that God speaks to us. Once, the story goes, Rabbi Pinhas was told of the great misery among the needy. He listened in grief. Then, he responded: "Let us draw God into the world and all need will be quenched."^{ix} But is it possible, Buber wondered, to bring God down to earth? By way of an

answer to this pertinent question, Buber referred to another story in which the same rabbi poses the question to his community, “Where is the dwelling of God?” This question surprised a number of learned men who happened to be visiting the rabbi. They laughed. “What a thing to ask! Is not the whole world full of God’s glory?” Then, the Rabbi of Kotzk answered his own question: “God dwells wherever man lets him in.”^x Shining through the Rabbi’s words, God’s voice was sensed.

Buber’s Secret: Praying Alone Dialogically

If what makes dialogue sacramental is God’s presence refracted through every genuine dialogue between person and person, it follows for Buber that genuine prayer with God is also a sacramental dialogue. Maurice Friedman, biographer, translator, and pre-eminent scholar of Buber in the United States, tells how his chief advisor for his doctoral dissertation on Buber, Professor Arnold Bergstraesser, once amazed him when he asked, rhetorically, “Do you know Buber’s secret? It is prayer.”^{xi} Buber, however, did not spend hours during the day praying in a conventional manner. Rather, he brought himself to everything he did in a spirit of real openness. In a powerfully evocative remark, Buber wrote that prayer “in the pregnant sense of the term” is that speech to God that “ultimately asks for the manifestation of the divine Presence, for this Presence’s becoming *dialogically perceivable*.”^{xii} God’s presence, for Buber, is not like the atmosphere, equally present everywhere, but instead is like the spirit of a mother’s unconditional love responding to the voice of her child. The single presupposition of prayer is that the whole person “turns toward” God in unreserved and relational spontaneity. To this turning, God responds.

For Buber, when I am not fully present in prayer, I am unable to perceive God’s Presence. It is not surprising, therefore, that Buber would write that when “you pray you do not thereby remove yourself from this life of yours but in your praying refer your thought to it, even though it may be in order to yield it; so too in the unprecedented and surprising, when you are called upon from above, required, chosen, empowered, sent, you with this your mortal bit of life are meant.”^{xiii} For Buber, prayer is

dialogical. But how can one participate in a seemingly impossible mutual dialogue with God? How does the infinitely invisible presence of God speak? And how is God’s “speaking” dialogically perceivable?

While it might seem that prayer and dialogue function differently because they take place in different contexts—prayer in a place of worship and dialogue in everyday life—it is important to keep in mind that the word “dialogue,” for Buber, does not simply mean two or more persons speaking to each other. When dialogue with others and with God is genuine—direct, mutual, open-minded, and open-hearted—it embodies and evokes our most uniquely human birthright: communion with God. At its deepest level, the practice of praying alone dialogically penetrates our being; it is a life-orientation that is brought into the stream of living. Even when praying “enters into a direct, ‘world-free’ relation to God... ‘the alone to the Alone,’” it does not shut out the world.^{xiv} Rather, prayer, in Buber’s sense of the word, means wholeheartedly entering into dialogue with the eternal Partner, who is unconditional Love, and with those whom I engage in the physical world. Genuine human dialogue is integral to prayerful dialogue with God. Entering into dialogue with God helps us to recollect and refocus our encounters in the world. These dialogues cannot be separated. One is a reflection of the other.

Praying dialogically enables us to notice God’s spirit becoming manifest. As with dialogue between person and person, dialogue with God demands reciprocal and reciprocating habits of the spirit: the habits of turning, addressing, listening, and responding.

Praying Dialogically

Outer Dialogue With Others	Inner Dialogue With God
<p>TURNING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wholly away from self-absorption by giving yourself to relationship • Toward encountering the unique other as a dialogical partner 	<p>TURNING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wholly away from self-absorption by giving yourself to relationship • Toward encountering the creative Source of life as a loving partner

<p style="text-align: center;">ADDRESSING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accepting and valuing this person’s expressed stand • Making the other person present as your dialogical partner 	<p style="text-align: center;">ADDRESSING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Praising/adoring/thanking/loving God immediately and intimately • Expressing a question/need/concern vital to your present situation
<p style="text-align: center;">LISTENING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attentively, with your whole heart, to what is said/not said • Imagining what the other is thinking/feeling/experiencing 	<p style="text-align: center;">LISTENING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Silently, with your whole heart, for God’s “summoning” • Glimpsing spirit-infused signs, instructions, promptings
<p style="text-align: center;">RESPONDING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibly and honestly without agenda or withholding yourself • Confirming, even when disagreeing, a willingness for future dialogues 	<p style="text-align: center;">RESPONDING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrating revealed hints which press inward and stir your heart • Bringing prayer insights/signs into the dialogic immediacy of life

Although dialogue with God, for Buber, involves these basic habits of mind and spirit, there is no single way of receiving God’s address. God’s voice emerges in surprising ways and with surprising messages. Among the infinite variety of ways that God’s speech addresses us, one comes through dialogue with humans recollected in prayer. In dialogical prayer, that is, God’s numinous voice flashes forth from the recollected voices of others and resonates within the heart-mind of the prayerful. As the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote, God “fits Himself exactly to our souls by adapting His Godhead to them; and our souls are fitted exactly to Him by the worthiness of our creation after His image and His likeness.”^{xv} As if elaborating upon this view, Buber wrote,

You know always in your heart that you need God more than everything; but do you not know too that God needs you—in the fullness of His eternity needs you? How would man be, how would you be, if God did not need him, did not need you? You need God, in order to be—and God needs you, for the very meaning of your life.

If we pray, Buber continued, “Thy will be done,” we must in truth add “through me whom Thou needest.”^{xvi} Impossible to understand, yet necessary to imagine, God needs me for our partnership to

flourish, needs me to accept God just as God is ever-ready to accept me, needs me to pray and to listen attentively for signs in daily life, and needs me to live dialogically and relationally. When I approach prayer in this way, my role in praying shifts. I bear a new responsibility to invite God's presence into the world, and with this new responsibility comes a new attentiveness to everyday events, encounters, and exchanges in which God's Voice speaks.^{xvii}

ⁱ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1948), p. 17. My translation. This article originally appeared in "Tasting God: Martin Buber's Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue," *Horizons Journal*, 37/2 (2010): 224-245.

ⁱⁱ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith, second edition (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), p. 75. All future quotations from *I and Thou* will refer to this edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torch Books, 1957), p. 127.

^{iv} Martin Buber, *Meetings*, p. 44.

^v Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God*, p. 96-97.

^{vi} Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, p. 79.

^{vii} Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 136-137. When asked if God as "absolute Person" has a separate center of consciousness, Buber replied "[t]o ascribe to God a 'special and separate center of consciousness' means to say at once too much and too little." *Philosophical Interrogations*, p. 88.

^{viii} Paul Mendes-Flohr, *Divided Passions: Jewish Intellectuals and the Experience of Modernity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991), p. 268.

^{ix} Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, p. 40.

^x Martin Buber, *The Way of Man*, p. 41.

^{xi} Maurice Friedman, *A Dialogue With Hasidic Tales: Hallowing the Everyday* (New York: Human Sciences Press, 1988), p. 134.

^{xii} Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation between Religion and Philosophy*, p. 126. Italics added. This presupposition, Buber added, is destroyed by over-consciousness that *I* am praying and that I am *praying*.

^{xiii} Martin Buber, *Meetings*, ed. and trans. by Maurice Friedman (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1973), p. 46.

^{xiv} Martin Buber *Philosophical Interrogations*, pp. 85-86.

^{xv} *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 122.

^{xvi} Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, pp. 82, 83.

^{xvii} Buber's good friend, Abraham Joshua Heschel, spoke about prayer a bit differently: "We do not communicate with God. We only make ourselves communicable to Him. The purpose of prayer is to be brought to His attention, to be listened to, to be understood by Him; not to know Him, but to *be known* to Him." Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), p. 10. Agreeing with Heschel's point, which views prayer from God's perspective, Buber also views prayer through the perspective of the *relationship* between God and the one who prays.

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