

MARTIN BUBER: INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE AS MAN'S SEARCH FOR MEANING

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I. Introduction

Clearly, we are now living in a period in history characterized by many historians and sociologists as “postmodern”. One characteristic of this period in history is a greater awareness of the different religious traditions. In some places and periods we have been deeply aware of other religious traditions living and growing alongside our own. However, we have to admit that “this pluralistic consciousness has only fully emerged during the lifetime of people now living.” (Hick 1992: 7) Prior to our age, religions such as Hinduism, and Buddhism, Judaism and Islam, were generally seen as “strange and dark residues of paganism, utterly inferior to Christianity and proper targets of the churches’ missionary zeal.”¹ Today, however, we have all become conscious, in varying degrees, that our Christian history is one of a number of variant streams of religious life, each with its own distinctive forms of experience, thought and spirituality. In a much greater degree, we are now more aware of our “neighbors” who belong to other great world faiths. Knowledge and information about these great religions can now be easily accessed. In big colleges and universities, we find ourselves listening to lectures on Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. Our libraries (and especially our local bookstores), on the other hand are well equipped with books about the sacred writings of great world religions. Travel opportunities have also multiplied and great number of people has spent time in India, Turkey, Egypt, Sri Lanka, and other non-Christian countries. As a result, more people have actually encountered people who actually belong to these major religions. Buddhists, Muslims and Hindus can now be encountered as “real” people in our day-to-day experiences. Such a tremendous awareness of religious pluralism is very pertinent in our time today. The question now is: how should we, as Christians

deal with this emerging consciousness with people of other faiths? Can we still claim that ours is “the only way”, one that possesses the “absolute Truth”? What would be the most appropriate approach to dialogue? How should we reach out to our brothers and sisters who belong to other faiths?

These questions are very much relevant especially in this postmodern period. Many philosophers of religion have exhausted a great deal of study in the area on religious pluralism. One area in philosophy of religion is on the issue on inter-religious dialogue. This subject has become an existential problem that no philosopher of religion could ignore it. One such philosopher is Martin Buber. Martin Buber laid down to us some down to earth strategy on how to engage in authentic dialogue with the “other”.

One such goal for inter religious dialogue is to establish peace and unity among great world religions. But over and above this noble reason is man’s search for meaning in life. Inter religious dialogue is, indeed, an existential problem insofar as it touches the fundamental questions of man’s existence and purpose. This is the reason why inter religious dialogue should not be focused only in the area of theological exchange but, more importantly in dialogue of life – an exchange of experiences and faith and the collective search for meaning in life.

Buber’s whole outlook is existential and situational. This dialogic man is the man who thinks “existentially,” that is, the man “who stakes his life on his thinking.”² That is why his philosophy is neither metaphysics nor theology but a philosophical anthropology. Buber defines philosophical anthropology as the study of “the wholeness of man.”³ Genuine inter religious dialogue, therefore, from a Buberian philosophy does not only deal with the *religious* aspect but the whole human person as well.

This study will be divided into two parts. The first part will discuss the different paradigms of inter religious dialogue that is dominant in our time. It seeks to crystallize the three views in which a particular religious tradition would normally approach other religious traditions. It will likewise highlight the paradigm the Catholic church is using right now. The first part of this study will therefore dwell into philosophy of religion. The second part will be an exposition of Martin Buber’s paradigm of dialogue – its essence, characteristics, method and especially how it differs from the other modes of dialogue. The second

part will also discuss how Martin Buber's paradigm of dialogue can be used as a guide or framework for authentic inter-religious dialogue.

II. Different Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue

There was a period in the history of the Church where it was believed that Christianity was far more superior than other religions. This is very much evident in the missionary activities in the past centuries. Missionary activities were always directed to "evangelization" or "Christianization". The success (or failure) of a missionary can be gauged by the number of his/her "converts". Mission work, was primarily seen as a baptizing the natives of a foreign land and building (planting) the church. Thus, mission was basically seen in terms of "the spread of the Christian faith among people (including Protestants) who were not members of the Catholic Church."⁴ This view was intimately associated with "the colonial expansion of the Western world."⁵

It is important to note however that it is not only Christians who profess that their religion is the only true religion. Other world religions (for example Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Judaism) equally claim that their religions are the sole bearers of truth. Having recognized this point, we can now turn to the question of how the adherents of a particular religion may or should view the other religious traditions. Most contemporary philosophers of religion would list three views in which adherents of a particular religion may view other religious traditions. These are: *Exclusivist*, *Inclusivist*, and *Pluralist* views.⁶

The Exclusivist Paradigm

The first view is what is commonly called as the *exclusivist* view. Christians, radical Muslims and some conservative Jews are known to uphold this kind of view. They hold that their religion is "the only true religion and only source of salvation."⁷ In Christianity, this kind of thinking goes back to the medieval age – medieval, but continuing effectively until about the end of the nineteenth century – of a Christian monopoly of salvific truth and life, expressed in the doctrine *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (outside the church, no salvation)⁸. This exclusivist Roman doctrine had its "equally emphatic Protestant

equivalent in the conviction that outside Christianity there is no salvation.”⁹

The Inclusivist Paradigm

Today majority of Christian theologians and church leaders have moved away from this strict *exclusivism*. They concentrate primarily on the question of salvation, and that salvation is indeed through Christ alone in virtue of his atoning death on the cross, but that this salvation is not confined to Christians but is available, in principle, to all human beings. So non-Christians also can be included within the sphere of Christian salvation - hence the term inclusivism. Non-Christians can be saved because, unknown to them, Christ is “secretly ‘in a way united’ with them.”¹⁰ People of good will outside the Church can be said to have an implicit Christian faith, or to be “anonymous Christians”, or to be in such a state that they *will* respond to Christ as their lord and savior when they confront him after death. On this view Christianity remains the only true religion; but those who do not know Christ can also benefit from his atoning death. This position was adopted by the Catholic Church at the second Vatican Council in the 1960’s and is the position of the present Pope and also of a majority of theologians within the other mainline Christian churches, except in each case for their fundamentalist wings. Its attraction is that on the one hand it preserves the traditional conviction of the unique centrality/normativeness/superiority of Christianity, but on the other hand it does not involve the horrifying implication that only Christians can be saved. This is why it is today so attractive and remains such a popular position.¹¹

The Pluralist Paradigm

The third common attitude towards other religions is widely called *religious pluralism*. This view is highly defended by John Hick, Paul Knitter and other philosophers of religion who sees Christianity as one among the many pathways towards God. According to Hick, this is the most appropriate Christian theology of religions today.¹² This idea holds that there is not just one and only one point of salvific contact between the divine reality and humanity, namely in the person of Jesus Christ, but that there is a plurality of independently valid contacts, and independently authentic spheres of salvation, which include both Christianity and the other great world faiths. Taking on a

pluralist stance, John Hick is very cautious in using the term “God” especially in dealing with other world religions. He believes that this term tends to be “too theistic – for the religious spectrum includes major non-theistic as well as theistic traditions – and to consider such alternatives as ‘the Transcendent,’ ‘the Divine,’ ‘the Dharma,’ ‘the Absolute,’ ‘the Tao,’ ‘Being-itself,’ ‘Brahman,’ ‘the Ultimate divine Reality.’”¹³ Moreover, another problem in the term ‘God’ is that it tends to be more Christian in its very nature and usage.

Proponents of *religious pluralism* would assume the now very widespread view that what is perceived is always partly constructed by the perceiver. In other words, what is perceived is perceived according to the mode of perception of the perceiver. Our concepts enter into the formation of our awareness. This basic epistemological principle was enunciated long ago by Thomas Aquinas when he wrote that “Things known are in the knower according to the mode of the knower.”¹⁴ The mode of the religious knower is differently formed within the different traditions. Hence the different awareness of the Real around which these traditions have developed. In modern times, it was Immanuel Kant who has argued most influentially that perception is not a passive registering of what is there but is always an active process of selecting, grouping, relating, extrapolating, and endowing with meaning by means of our human concepts. This led Kant to distinguish between the *noumenal* world, the world as it exists unperceived, and the *phenomenal* world, that same world as humanly perceived, with all the differences that the act of perception makes. In developing the pluralist point of view Hick is assuming that religion is “our human response to a transcendent reality, the reality that we call God. And as a *human* response there is always an inescapably *human* element within it.”¹⁵ Hence, all religions as human responses to the Divine are always inadequate and/or limited.

The Paradigm Adopted by the Catholic Church

The approach adopted by the Catholic Church from the medieval period up until the beginning of 1960’s was the exclusivist paradigm. For hundreds of years, the Catholic Church believed that salvation is possible only through the Roman Catholic Church and that other religions were considered inferior, outside God’s grace, barbaric and sometimes evil. From this perspective, dialogue with

other religions is certainly impossible. People of other faiths should first of all “convert” to the true religion, which is Christianity.

After the Second Vatican Council, the Roman Catholic Church adopted the second view which is inclusivism. The church now believes that people of other faiths can also be saved but they are saved through the sanctifying grace of Jesus Christ. People who belong to other religions who perform good deeds are called “anonymous christians.”

Only a very few number of progressive theologians, priests, bishops and lay people embrace the third paradigm which is the pluralist stance. These people, who are really engaged in a “dialogue of life” are sometimes threatened, harassed, silenced, punished and excommunicated by the church. Most of the time, the Church accuses them of teaching false doctrines and diverting from the Catholic faith.

Having discussed the three paradigms of interreligious dialogue, we can now move to the second part of the paper which deals on Martin Buber’s concept of dialogue and how we can apply it to contemporary interreligious dialogue.

III. Martin Buber: Dialogue as Man’s Search for Meaning

We have mentioned in the introduction that Martin Buber’s philosophical anthropology is basically existential and situational. The man who is engaged in dialogue is the man who thinks existentially. “*I and Thou* begins from experience rather than abstract concepts, experience which points to what is the human in man.”¹⁶ It basically deals with the everyday problems of man. Maurice Friedman states it clearly when he defines philosophical anthropology:

“A legitimate philosophical anthropology must know that there is not merely human species but also peoples, not merely a human soul but also types and characters, not merely a human life but also stages of life... Buber proceeds to set up a philosophical anthropology as a systematic method which deals with the concrete, existential characteristics of man’s life in order to arrive at the wholeness and uniqueness of man”¹⁷

Christian relationship with other religions were (and in some circumstances, still are) an exchange of monologues. This was acknowledged by the Pope when he asserted that:

"such relations... have scarcely even risen above the level of monologue. From now on, real dialogue must be established. Dialogue presupposes that each side wishes to know the other, and wishes to increase and deepen its knowledge of the other. It constitutes a particular suitable means of favoring a better mutual knowledge and, especially in the case of dialogue between Jews and Christians, of probing the riches of one's own tradition. Dialogue demands respect for the other as he is: above all, respect for his faith and his religious convictions. ("Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate* (No. 4," 1975).

Interfaith dialogue is a meeting of persons and entails meaningful exchange: it involves communication, making and sharing common ground (Latin, *communicare*, "to make common"). That sharing implies certain existential elements, such as anxiety and defensiveness, as well as sense of purpose and meaning.

The encounter of meaning is a meeting of real people within a special context. It is an "I" meeting a "You." Meaning cannot be realized in loneliness and alienation. It should be fulfilled and accomplished within a community. Persons must go beyond loneliness and exclusiveness to an existential all-inclusiveness. They achieve a meaningful dialogue in the recognition of their existence "in the world." They create a community of faith. This unique experience is described by a Jewish philosopher and Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik:

"A community is established the very moment I recognize... and extend greetings to the thou. One individual extends the "shalom" greeting to another individual: and in so doing... creates a community... recognition means sacrificial action: the individual who withdraws in order to make room for the thou."¹⁸

Rabbi Soloveitchik clarifies the significance of recognition in a way that defines the value of dialogue partners:

"Often a man finds himself in a crowd amongst strangers. He feels lonely. No one knows him, no one cared for him, no one is concerned with him... He begins to doubt his ontological worth. This leads to alienation from the crowd surrounding him. Suddenly someone taps him on the shoulder and says: 'Aren't you Mr. So and So? I've heard so much about you.' In a fraction of a second his awareness changes. An alien being turns into a fellow member of an existential community (the crowd). What brought about the change? The recognition by somebody, the word! To recognize a person is not just to identify him physically... It is an act of identifying him existentially, as a person who has a job to do, that only he can do properly. To recognize a person means to affirm that he is irreplaceable. To hurt a person is to tell him that he is expendable, that there is no need for him."¹⁹

Rabbi Soloveitchik adds that recognition implies responsibility. Each member of the community should "assume responsibility for each member of the community, to whom I have granted recognition and whom I have found worthy of being my companion."²⁰ Furthermore, Martin Buber, affirms the value of true community. He rejects both atomistic individualism and totalitarian collectivism. "Individualism understands only a part of man, collectivism understands man only as part: neither advances to the wholeness of man. Individualism sees man only in relation to himself, but collectivism does not see man at all; it sees 'society'"²¹ True community Buber holds, emerges out of the I-Thou. An individual becomes a true person once he steps into a living relationship with other individuals.

For Buber, authentic dialogue is the "dialogic life" – the I-Thou. "All real living is meeting."²² The dialogic life is opposed to the I-It relationship which is dehumanizing, and depersonalizing. I-It is the primary word for experiencing and *using*. It lacks mutuality. It is the typical subject-object relationship. I-It points to a relation of person to thing, involving some form of utilization, domination, or control. On the other hand, in I-Thou, there is "the self-giving love of genuine relation, which does not by any means imply the suppression of the self: 'It is not the I that is given up, but the false self-asserting instinct.'"²³ I-Thou relationship, therefore, "is characterized by mutuality, directness, presentness, intensity, and ineffability."²⁴ It is a relation

which Buber calls a “relation par excellence”, one in which man can enter only with the whole of his being, as a genuine person.

For Buber, the relation to the Thou is direct - “no system of ideas, no knowledge, and no fancy intervene between I and Thou. The memory itself is transformed, as it plunges out of its isolation into the unity of the whole.”²⁵ A person who is engaged in a dialogue establishes a direct relationship to a subject, a person, not for an object. We are responsible to the other as a spiritual entity, a subject of faith, a child of God. I confirm and further the Thou in the right of his existence and the goal of his becoming, in all his “otherness.” To dialogue is to recognize the other as a person with a meaning, a person of God. Once we cease to see the other as merely an object of observation and begin to regard the other as an independent other, then we have the beginning of the I-thou relationship.

Another aspect of dialogue is entering into a direct relationship. An act whose fullest expression is personal acceptance or inclusion (Buber’s *Imfasung*), one experiences the other side of the relationship, or, more precisely, one experiences the relationship from the other side. One life opens up to another without either incorporating the other. Even while the over-againstness remains, there is, as Buber says, a “door swinging into the life of the other,” Buber speaks of this as “imagining the real” – “perceiving and thinking what is occurring in the mid and body of the other” through inclusion or embracing. Buber’s “experience of the other side,” explains Maurice Friedman,

“means to feel an event from the side of the person one meets, as well as from one’s own side. It is an inclusiveness which realizes the other person in the actuality of his being, but it must not be identified with ‘empathy,’ which means transposing oneself into the dynamic structure of an object, hence, as Buber says, ‘the exclusion of one’s own concreteness, the extinguishing of actual situation of life, its absorption in pure aestheticism of the reality in which one participates.’ Inclusion is the opposite of this. ‘It is the extension of one’s own concreteness, the fulfillment of the actual situation of life, the complete presence of the reality in which one participates.’ In inclusion, one person, ‘without fulfilling anything of the felt reality of this activity, at the same time lives through the common event from the standpoint of the other.’”²⁶

Dialogue is the acceptance of the other as other (unique), as a particular being in God. It is a meeting with another person with his or her own rights and commitments. We deal with the persons not object. Dialogue is a communion of the spirit, a process of the movement of the heart from disdain to recognition: from alienation to creative closeness, from confrontation to a relationship of equals. This is the essential directive for everyone who is engaged in inter-religious dialogue. It is a reality that requires not only in the area of theological exchange but also of life. Authentic dialogue, therefore, is not just an exchange of theological doctrines but, first and foremost, a *dialogue of life*. Interfaith theological conversation should search for the meaning in life, of things that matter to man spiritually, emotionally, materially and physically. The conversation should touch the essence of our commitments in a process of sharing intuitions of God, without proselytizing or trying to convert the person of faith. Faith commitments are areas of sacredness, the numinous dimension of a God-person-community relationship open to mutual understanding and respect.

This is precisely the reason why Buber's philosophy is not only anthropological but profoundly religious as well. He sees man "as essentially oriented to God and life as a summons and sendings."²⁷ The dialogue encounter involves a meeting of persons of flesh and blood but also the presence of God in different religious traditions. Recognizing the other as a person of God entails the theological consideration of religious matters because God is the common ground. The nature and aim of a theological discussion in the dialogue relationship is a sharing of the sacredness of God's presence, and of our respective faith commitments.

IV. Conclusion

The dialogue relationship has gone through times of enthusiasm and crisis. It is an ongoing exercise of the spirit responding to God's call after centuries of alienation, persecution, arrogance and domination. It is not by chance that the I-thou philosophy of Martin Buber appeals to our time. Buber's philosophy express the uniqueness of this moment in history: the search of fraternal dialogue and spiritual encounter for meaning – beyond theological differences – of the interfaith encounter.

Buber clearly suggests that “all real living is meeting.” To be engaged in authentic dialogue is first of all to enter into a relationship with the “other”, the Thou. One cannot engage in dialogue in isolation from other people. For Buber, real dialogue entails a community of equals.

Different religious traditions can engage in a meaningful dialogue by pursuing a Buberian framework of dialogue. The *exclusivist* paradigm does not promote authentic dialogue since (from a Buberian perspective) it looks at other religions as inferior. This attitude, according to Buber is plain and simple an I-It relationship – a relationship that is mainly characterized by domination, exploitation and subjugation. Specifically, the Catholic church needs to go beyond *exclusivism*. It must approach other religions not merely as “objects” for conversion but as people with equal dignity.

Furthermore, major world religions must learn to let go of their assumptions that they are the sole bearers of truth – that they are the only path for salvation. To be engaged in dialogue is to acknowledge that others are also valid paths towards the Ultimate – that all religions are but products of man’s deeper search for meaning in life.

Lastly, major religions should adopt a dialogue that is based on the I-Thou relationship. This model of dialogue to some extent resembles the third paradigm discussed in Part 1 – the *pluralistic* stance. This approach is characterized by respect and understanding of members of other religions. People who are involved in the inter religious dialogue can adopt Buber’s relational framework – the I-Thou. Following Buber’s line of thinking, authentic dialogue should also touch man’s search for meaning. Therefore, real dialogue should also touch man’s existential problems. To enter into dialogue is to acknowledge that all religions are “meaning giving” institutions. Amidst wars and conflicts, poverty and injustice, hopelessness and meaninglessness suffered by millions of people worldwide, the need for an authentic inter-reigious dialogue is becoming more urgent. All major religions should continuously strive to reach out to other faiths. They must bear in mind that the real goal of dialogue is to give meaning to human existence. The great philosopher Martin Buber is telling us that one way to restore healing, peace and hope in a world ravaged by wars, conflict, hunger, indifference and apathy is by treading the path of authentic dialogue.

Endnotes

¹ John Hick. *God Has Many Names*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 7.

² Will Herberg, introduction to *The Writings of Martin Buber*, by Martin Buber (NY: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), 19.

³ Maurice Friedman, introduction to *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, by Martin Buber (NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 13.

⁴ David Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in the Theology of Mission*, (NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 1.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ For a detailed discussion on these three views, see William A. Rowe, *Philosophy of Religion: An Introduction*, 3rd ed (California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2001), 161-71.

⁷ John Hick, *Is Christianity the Only True Religion, or One Among Others?*

[article on-line]; available from <http://www.johnick.org.uk/article13.html>; Internet.

⁸ At the Council of Florence (1438-1445), for example, it was affirmed that "no one remaining outside the Catholic Church, not just pagans, but also Jews or heretics or schismatics, can become partakers of eternal life; but they will go to the 'everlasting fire which was prepared for the devil and his angels,' unless before the end of their life they are joined to the Church." cited from John F. Clarkson, ed., *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translation* (St. Louis, Mo.: B. Herder Book Co., 1995), 78.

⁹ John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness* ed. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, Ltd, 1987), 16-17.

¹⁰ Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity", 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 23.

¹² Hick believes that the third view (religious pluralism) is the most appropriate Christian theology of religions for today because "theology is a growing and developing organism, so that an appropriate theological framework for today and tomorrow may well differ from what was appropriate a thousand years ago or indeed, as the pace of cultural change has increased, a hundred years ago or even a generation ago." See Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 12.

¹³ See John Hick, *God Has Many Names*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982), 90.

¹⁴ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II/II, Q.I, art. 2.

¹⁵ Hick, *Is Christianity the Only True Religion, or One Among Others?*

¹⁶ Maurice Friedman, introduction to *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, by Martin Buber (NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 11.

¹⁷ Ibid., 14.

¹⁸ Joseph B. Soloveitchik, "Jewish I-thou Relationships: Martin Buber's Philosophy in the Jewish Context," *Tradition* 32 (Spring 1978): 36.

¹⁹ Ibid, 38.

²⁰ Ibid, 42.

²¹ Will Herberg, introduction to *The Writings of Martin Buber*, by Martin Buber (NY: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), 21.

²² Ibid.

²³ William Herberg, introduction to *The Writings of Martin Buber*, 17.

²⁴ Maurice Friedman, introduction to *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman* by Martin Buber (NY Harper & Row Publishers, 1965), 12.

²⁵ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, ed. Will Herberg (NY: Meridian Books, Inc., 1960), 46.

²⁶ Maurice Friedman, introduction to *Daniel* by Martin Buber (NY: Harper Row Publishers, 1965), 26.

²⁷ Will Herberg, introduction to *The Writings of Martin Buber*, 17.

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