



## Martin Buber's Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue

31.12.2018 | Kenneth P. Kramer\*

**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.**

*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 Buber<sup>[1]</sup>

Buber's influence on philosophy and religious thought has been enormous. In the words of his friend Hermann Hesse, when Hesse nominated him for the Nobel Prize in literature, Buber was one of the wisest persons living in the world.<sup>[2]</sup> Much of Buber's writings—including his lyrical classic *I and Thou* (1923/58), one of the most influential books of the twentieth century, his translation of the Bible from Hebrew into German, his biblical interpretations, and his work on Hasidism—have had a profound impact on Christian theologians including Karl Barth, Emil Bruner, Gabriel Marcel, Albert Schweitzer, H. Richard Niebuhr, Reinhold Niebuhr, Friedrich Gogarten, and Paul Tillich.<sup>[3]</sup> Reflecting an interreligious ethos, a newer generation of Christian scholars, rather than appropriating Buber for Christianity, have entered into an open dialogue with this philosopher of genuine dialogue and allowed their own Christianity be modified by it. Many studies of Buber's thought have attempted to summarize the scope of his writings (over 30 of his works have been translated into English). Here, I suggest that what sets Buber apart from most modern and contemporary spiritual thinkers is his breakthrough shift in focus from an internalized, ecstatic spiritual sensibility that he held early in life to his existential trust, as his philosophy developed, that one's relationship to God is deeply interconnected with genuine relationships to those we meet.

### Buber's Basic Insight

Until his mid-thirties, Buber saw his spiritual life as marked by moments of mystical ecstasy during which he was lifted out of the ordinary. As World War I began, in July 1914, a young man came to

visit Buber after Buber had experienced a morning of ecstatic reverie in meditation and prayer. The young man and Buber conversed attentively, but Buber, by his own admission, failed to turn to him completely, failed to hear the young man's deeper concerns that lay beneath the surface of their conversation. Later, learning that the young man was killed at the front in the war, Buber confessed:

Since then I have given up the "religious," which is nothing but the exception, extraction, exaltation, ecstasy; or it has given me up. I possess nothing but the everyday out of which I am never taken. The mystery is no longer disclosed, it has escaped or it has made its dwelling here where every thing happens where it happens. I know no fullness but each mortal hour's fullness of claim and responsibility. Though far from being equal to it, yet I know that in the claim I am claimed and may respond in responsibility, and know who speaks and demands a response.[4]

Rather than seeking ecstatic or self-realized awareness, rather than trying to master a yogic practice or enter into a contemplative absorption, by 1914 Buber came to place "genuine dialogue"—direct, honest, open, spontaneous, mutual, address-response communication in the midst of the everyday—at the center of the soul's search for God.

In that light, Buber characterized his own spiritual position in relation to others and to God as standing on the insecure "narrow ridge" between the sacred and the everyday. From this vantage, Buber formulated a third alternative, a space in which there is no certainty of expressible knowledge and where the dialogical meeting between God and human beings occurs. Although Buber is often called a "philosophical anthropologist" or a "religious existentialist," Buber saw himself, according to Paul Mendes-Flohr, "preeminently as a man of letters, a member of the non-academic literati, that class of educated individuals whom Carl Mannheim aptly called the 'free-floating intellectuals' who flourished in central Europe before World War II." [5] Buber was by his own definition a *Schriftsteller* (both a writer, and one who renders scriptures). While philosophy, sociology, and religion all played into his world-view, throughout his later writings Buber strove to be one who simply pointed to the "life of dialogue." Indeed, toward the end of his life Buber was asked if he was a theologian or a philosopher. He responded:

I must say it once again: I have no teaching. I only point to something ...I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside.

I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation.[6]

What Buber meant here was that his life work was not devoted to a concept or philosophical abstraction, but to concrete moments of embodying sacramental dialogue, the communion between whole person and whole person. Rather than transcending the self, the "sacramental" nature of the dialogue occurs when one fully turns toward the otherness of the other and surrenders into relationship.

In the last years of his life, when a biblical scholar asked Buber whether he held his translation of the bible and his biblical studies to be the quintessence of his life work, he replied:

If I myself should designate something as the "central portion of my life work," then it could not be anything individual, but only the one basic insight that has led me not only to the study of the Bible, as to the study of Hasidism, but also to an independent philosophical presentation: that the I-thou relation to God and the I-thou relation to one's fellow [hu]man are at bottom related to each other.

This being related to each other is...the central portion of the dialogical reality that has ever more disclosed itself to me.<sup>[7]</sup>

Considering the wide ranging subject matter of Buber's thought (e.g., Taoism, Hasidism, mysticism, dialogue, education, psychotherapy, ethics, comparative religion, Judaism, Christianity), and in light of all his awards, recognitions, and achievements, when he speaks of the one basic insight that guided him in all his work we naturally pay close attention to the nature of this insight. How could one concern possibly integrate all his varied interests? How could he have given adequate expression to this concern in a way that encapsulates its totality?

Buber's basic insight is grounded in his experience of God's ever-new, ever-dialogical presence as it appears to us refracted through the matrix of life events. Buber characterized genuine, unreserved dialogue as sacramental, as embodying and expressing the covenant between humans and the absolute, between the human I and the divine Thou. Buber was well aware, of course, that the reciprocal relationship between persons and God cannot be proved, nor can the existence of God. Though formless, however, God can be and is experienced in the immediacy of the everyday hallowed in genuine dialogue between persona and person.

As Buber wrote, "[t]he basic doctrine that fills the Hebrew Bible is that the life of faith involves a dialogue between the above and the below."<sup>[8]</sup> One "tastes God," in Buber's view, through what he called "sacramental dialogue." What Buber meant when he suggested that dialogue is "sacramental" was not that it was confined or restricted by an institutional definition or a ritual experience. Sacramental existence, for Buber, meant the covenant between finite existence and the absolute. In every genuine relationship between persons, transcendence can be glimpsed enspiriting the passions, intentions, and communication of each person. The basic underpinning of Buber's sacramental dialogue—where the Voice of the infinite and finite speech most nearly come together—can be found in the Hasidic belief that, like creation, revelation and redemption occur in the timelessness of each moment. That is, God sacrifices God's unlimited power into creation such that creative, revelatory, and redemptive acts can occur, ever anew, through the freedom and spontaneity of a partnership between God and humankind.

For this reason, Buber wrote that "[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."<sup>[9]</sup> The German word translated here as "strict," *streng*, means absolute, rigorous, observed rigidly, unavoidably. In the title of this essay, I have replaced the word "strict" with the word "sweet" because strict often suggests authoritative or fixed meanings, neither of which Buber intended. Indeed, in a parallel remark Buber spoke of the "strict and sweet experience of dialogue,"<sup>[10]</sup> thus bringing the two words together. When a baseball player hits the ball perfectly, for example, it is often called hitting the ball on the "sweet spot" of the bat, the spot with the most solid wood. Or, when one explains an event by saying "how sweet it is," one refers to how righteous it is. And of course, "sweet," as a flavor, entices our tastes. Like the word "glimpse," which suggests the ability to recognize a miniscule portion of a much larger whole, the word "tasting" suggests an ability to savor the smallest sample of a larger feast. Sacramental dialogue gives us a taste of transcendence, a taste that sensitizes our being (in relation to the other) and reinvigorates the dialogic impulse.

Buber was particularly concerned with genuine change, with the possibility of a person shifting, or turning, as he wrote in his 1923 classic *I and Thou*, from I-It communication to I-Thou communion. To speak of "the sweet sacrament of dialogue," Buber held, is to speak of God-infused "events that open into a genuine change from communication to communion,"<sup>[11]</sup> "for where unreserve has ruled, even wordlessly, between persons, the word of dialogue has happened sacramentally."<sup>[12]</sup> When discussing such shifts from communication to communion, Buber, writing about 18<sup>th</sup> century European Hasidic communities, described "sacramental existence" as a covenant of participatory engagement between humans and the eternal partner, such that "what is

above binds what is below and what is below binds what is above; they bind themselves to each other, meaning and body bind each other.”<sup>[13]</sup> Since Buber had abandoned mysticism because it distracted from the immediacy of the divine in dialogue, this “binding” did not imply a mystical merging with the Absolute or a spiritual unity with an abstract essence. Instead, a person in dialogue joins together with God hand in hand.

By 1940, Buber coined a new term “pansacramentalism,” which he used to distinguish key features of Hasidism’s sacramentality. In his essay “Symbolic and Sacramental Existence,” Buber placed Hasidic sacramental practice in the broad context of all religions and particularly in the continuity between Hasidism and biblical prophecy. To sharpen the articulation of his understanding, Buber distinguished between “primitive,” or “naïve” pansacramentalism, in which one takes possession of or manipulates a power or force at certain times and in certain places, and a new, comprehensive Hasidic pansacramentalism.

This unreduced comprehensiveness knows that the sacramental substance cannot be found or manipulated in the totality of things and functions, but it believes that it can be awakened and liberated in each object and in each action—not through any methods that one can somehow acquire but through the fulfilling presentness of the whole, wholly devoted [person], through sacramental existence.<sup>[14]</sup>

Hasidic sacramentality required no rules, involved no ceremonies, practiced no rites. Nothing needs to be known or learned. Rather, sacramental existence happens ever and again in the midst of authentic interactions with the world. For this reason, and what is of utmost significance for this essay, Buber maintained that a sacrament “includes an elementary, life-claiming and life-determining experience of the *other*, the otherness, as of something coming to meet one and acting toward one.”<sup>[15]</sup> In the midst of these moments of genuine, dialogic interactions, whether with persons, events, places, or things, God’s presence awakens.

Hasidism, as Buber wrote, is not pantheistic. At the same time, it teaches that the world is an irradiation of God, that the spirit of the holy rests in things as sparks waiting to be released into the world. These sparks are liberated from their isolating shells when persons hallow their relationships, or treat them in a holy manner, by completely surrendering themselves with compassionate respect into their encounters with others, human and natural. As Buber wrote, “The people we live with or meet with, the animals that help us with our farm work, the soil we till, the materials we shape, the tools we use, they all contain a mysterious, spiritual substance which depends on us for helping it towards its purer form, its perfection.”<sup>[16]</sup> For Buber, sacramental existence means hallowing the everyday, and it involves performing any action with one’s whole being directed toward that which confronts one in the immediacy of direct experience.

God can be tasted, then, in unreserved togetherness when interhuman dialogue is empowered by suprapersonal, relational grace. Arising from the spontaneous spirit of mutuality, from the midst of non-dualistic reciprocity, the divine-human relationship itself *creates* and recreates us in communion. It *reveals* God’s inexpressible presence in the world and *redeems* us into the freedom of genuine relationship. Following Buber’s description of mutuality in *I and Thou*, and recognizing its ontological and existential nature, Grete Schaeder locates the *between*—for Buber, the primordial category of human reality, which he offered in the metaphor of the “narrow ridge”—in the back and forth movement of vibration, filled by a stream of being to being which is only the breath of things and beings, bathed in God’s refulgent light...<sup>[17]</sup> Ignited by the spiritual fire of grace and borne by the “oscillating sphere” of “the between,” we are called to be human through sacramental dialogue and are made new in responding authentically to the other. Individual opinions, judgments, and needs fall away in sacramental dialogue. The meaning, value, and empowering presence of dialogue releases us to become truly ourselves-in-relation when the God of the moment is glimpsed as “absolute Person” and is tasted as sweet sacramental communion in the word dialogically spoken, the word dialogically heard.

## Key Elements of Buber's Sacramental Dialogue

Within the immense panorama of human interactions, Buber was untiringly interested in ways in which communication occurs. While the term “dialogue” is often used as a synonym for “conversation,” what we ordinarily call “dialogue” should more properly and more precisely be called “monologue.” It is simply the everyday communication of ideas, information, beliefs, opinions, points of view, tastes, and desires. Genuine dialogue, by contrast, Buber equated with “real meeting [*Begegnung*],” which may be more accurately translated as “engaging and being engaged.”

For Buber, the meaning of the word “dialogue” (“dia,” traveling across from one side to the other; and “logos,” which Buber understood as common speech-with-meaning between persons) was context-dependent. In 1929, five years after publishing *I and Thou*, he clarified his own understanding of the word by distinguishing between 1) “genuine dialogue,” 2) “technical dialogue,” and 3) “monologue disguised as dialogue.” The latter two forms, Buber wrote, refer to the communication of independent viewpoints, experiences, morality, and even spirituality as mere information. Genuine dialogue, by contrast, refers to an event of shared mutuality that *happens* in immediate interactions between people when each genuinely turns to engage and be engaged by the other. Underscoring the importance of *being* a dialogue (indwelling the words that are spoken) as opposed to *having* a dialogue (remaining outside the words spoken by judging and comparing), Buber wrote that in genuine dialogue, whether “spoken or silent,” “each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.”[\[18\]](#)

What Buber writes about genuine or sacramental dialogue could not have been formulated, as Buber noted himself, without the creative support and unconditional love of Paula, his wife of more than fifty years and his consummate dialogical partner. Buber's relationship to Paula was of crucial importance for his life's work. In the summer of 1899, while attending the University of Zurich, Buber met Paula Winkler, and they married shortly after over objections that she was a Gentile—“a pagan,” as she joked. Although raised a Munich Catholic, she converted to Judaism, and in so doing lost her own family. Remarkably, as Hugo Bergmann observed, when Paula said “we Jews,” “we felt ourselves confirmed.” In Paula, Martin found true equality of relationship. With Paula, Buber came to recognize that marriage is built upon mutually saying what you mean and doing what you say. In his poem “Do You Still Know It?”, written in 1949 to commemorate their fifty years of dialogic life, Buber credited Paula with helping him find direction for his talents and interests. In it, he wrote two lines that link genuine dialogue with transcendence:

How a mutual animated describing

Arose out of it and lived between you and me![\[19\]](#)

The phrase “mutual animated describing” points directly to what Buber meant by sacramental dialogue that emerges from “the between.”

But what are the principle elements, methods, or interpretive views upon which Buber's understanding of dialogue is based? From the human side of the divine-human partnership, at least four interrelated elements describe sacramental dialogue: 1) Turning with one's whole being, truthfully, fully, without reserve, toward who or what encounters me; 2) Making the other present by co-experiencing, as much as possible, what the other is thinking, feeling, and sensing, and then

including this awareness into my response; 3) Receiving the other as a partner through genuine listening both to what is said and to what is unsaid; and 4) Confirming my partner by accepting and affirming him or her both now and into the future without necessarily agreeing with everything said. When these elements are mutually embodied and expressed, dialogue is fulfilled.

Buber was, of course, well aware that each person is encased in a metaphorical “armor” that impedes dialogue and that, therefore, makes genuine dialogue rare. Nevertheless, he was concerned with the human possibility of breaking through the armor of apathy, habitual behavior, and monologue into unreserved dialogue in which “turning to the partner takes place in all truth, that is, it is a turning of the being” wholly to the other. In this dynamic “turning toward”:

Every speaker “means” [makes present] the partner or partners to whom he turns as this personal existence.... The experiencing senses and the imagining of the real which completes the findings of the senses work together to make the other present as a whole and as a unique being, as the person that he is. But the speaker does not merely perceive the one who is present to him in this way; he receives him as his partner, and that means that he confirms [no matter in what I am against the other, by accepting him as my partner in genuine dialogue] this other being, so far as it is for him to confirm.[\[20\]](#)

In this typically Buberian passage, Buber's key elements of sacramental dialogue are evident: *turning* wholly towards the other; *addressing*, or meaning the other; *listening*, or receiving the other; and *responding*, or confirming the other. When dialogue becomes sacramental between partners who openly and mutually engage each other without reserve, without agenda, each is seized in their depth by a common fruitfulness, a togetherness that cannot be experienced in any other way. No wonder, then, that Buber would affirm that our future as humans depends upon the revitalization of genuine dialogue.

Elucidating this interhuman experience of genuine dialogue, Buber contrasted two basic movements. The first he calls “reflexion,” or bending back on oneself by privileging one's own self-consciousness, by allowing the other to exist only as the content of one's own experience. Each time I “turn away” from the other who encounters me or calls me forth into the world, Buber held, what is most human becomes obscured. The other basic movement he calls “turning towards.” Turning from selfishness and *toward* genuine dialogue with another happens through a combination of personal will and relational grace. The personal intention to turn away from everything that would prevent us from entering into genuine relationship with the other is essential. At the same time, relational grace generates and supports genuine interhuman encounters. When a person intentionally turns toward the other in a spirit of real responsibility, including in that response a sense of the other's thoughts, feelings, and experiences, the relationship becomes “transparent into the absolute,” and the substance of the words spoken “assume the cadence of an inwardness” that stirs one's “heart of hearts.”[\[21\]](#) From this stirring in the interhuman *immediacy* of dialogue, the divine voice addresses us.

What holds these elements together in a creative tension, what binds together a conscious “self” with a conscious “other,” Buber calls “the between.” When turning, addressing, listening, and responding are mutually experienced, God's presence can be glimpsed through the spirit of vital reciprocity. More than an inner experience, or realization, or transformation, neither individualistic nor collectivistic, “the between” is a relational space ever-and-again re-constituted in our meetings with others. In the most powerful moments of dialogue, where “deep calls unto deep,” it becomes unmistakably clear that genuine relationship means the mutual presence of the “spirit” embodied in relationship. In the mutual giving of person and person, the transcendent source that infuses life with its fullness can be tasted. Not unlike Rinzi Zen Buddhist emptiness (*shunyata*)—a middle path between being and non-being in Mahayana Buddhism—Buber's “between” can be compared to empty space, a formless form without discriminating obstacles, in and through which a co-created liberating freedom arises for each dialogical partner.

## Glimpsing 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. 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*.”<sup>[22]</sup> 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...”<sup>[23]</sup> 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.<sup>[24]</sup>

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.<sup>[25]</sup> By shifting his emphasis from the “eternal *Thou*,” which he described in *I and Thou* as “the mysterium tremendum that appears and overthrows,”<sup>[26]</sup> 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.<sup>[27]</sup>

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”<sup>[28]</sup> 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.”<sup>[29]</sup> 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.”<sup>[30]</sup> 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."<sup>[31]</sup> 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*."<sup>[32]</sup> 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."<sup>[33]</sup> 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.<sup>[34]</sup> Rather, prayer, in Buber's sense of the word, means whole-heartedly 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 style="text-align: center;">TURNING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wholly away from self-absorption by giving yourself to relationship</li> <li>• Toward encountering the unique other as a</li> </ul>	<p style="text-align: center;">TURNING</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wholly away from self-absorption by giving yourself to relationship</li> <li>• Toward encountering the creative Source of</li> </ul>

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

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."[\[35\]](#) 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."[\[36\]](#) 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.[\[37\]](#)

## Becoming Who We Are Created To Be

That prayer and interhuman dialogue are inter-dependently sacramental is not just an idea, it is a living expression of being dialogically created ("in the beginning, God said: let us create... human beings"), dialogically constructed (evolved, raised, educated, developed), and dialogically called into personal existence ("as I say Thou I become I."). For Buber, the fundamental result of engaging in sacramental dialogue, both with others and with God, both in public discourse and in private prayer, is the renewal of the entire person. As Buber repeatedly described it, to become who we are created to be, it is the responsibility of every person to participate dialogically with

God's creative, revelatory, and redemptive voice in that part of the world where we stand. "The environment which I feel to be the natural one," Buber wrote, "the situation which has been assigned to me as by fate, the things that happen to me day after day, the things that claim me day after day—these contain my essential task and such fulfillment of existence as is open to me."[\[38\]](#)

Buber's basic insight into the deep reciprocity between our interactions with each other on the one hand and with God on the other engenders trust that God is forever present in all genuine relationships. Because God addresses us through relationships of dialogue, calling us to again and again transform the world, such trust, for Buber, is not simply an affirmation of belief in an abstract truth but rather an existential posture based on our direct experience of God as one always ready to enter into conversation with us. Turning to God, for Buber, is like turning to your best friend, the perfect listener: someone who not only hears every word, but also hears our thoughts, even those we are not yet aware of; one who completely understands what we mean by everything that we say and don't say; and one who always responds honestly, compassionately, and justly.

This basic theme is presented clearly in Buber's addresses on Judaism delivered in New York in November and December of 1951. At the end of his first address, "Judaism and Civilization," Buber encouraged his audience to recognize themselves amidst the political facts of life. He then asked a provocative question: "How can we become what we are?" In other words, how is it possible for human beings to really become genuinely *human*? What do we need to learn, practice and cultivate in order to become the relational persons we have been created to be?

Buber began to suggest an answer to this question in his second address, "The Silent Question," by asking another, more profound question: "Who, indeed, can help me if [you can] not?"[\[39\]](#) In this question, Buber was capturing a deep longing within the human spirit to fully trust existence. He was also suggesting an answer to his first question—"How can we become who or what we are?" Rejecting the "I" of self-enclosed pride and isolated egoism, Buber identified humankind working in concert with God to help each other fulfill our humanity. Faith, Buber noted, forms a bridge between "two firm pillars, man's 'I' and the 'I' of the eternal partner."[\[40\]](#) In other words, two seemingly contradictory insights are true at the same time: we cannot satisfactorily answer the question of who we are meant to be without divine assistance; and yet, we are the only ones who can answer that question with and for each other. For this reason, Buber concluded his second address by saying,

*you yourself must begin.* Existence will remain meaningless for you if you yourself do not penetrate into it with active love and if you do not in this way discover its meaning for yourself. Everything is waiting to be hallowed [made holy] by you... Meet the world with the fullness of your being and you shall meet God.[\[41\]](#)

The fulfillment of our humanness, Buber told his audience, is waiting to be realized and disclosed through our active participation in the fullness of creation. The "active mysticism" of which Bergson spoke is found precisely here, in Buber's affirmation of the communal nature of our relationship with God.

According to Friedman, Buber's third address in his series of lectures on Judaism, "The Dialogue Between Heaven and Earth," "reveals the coming together of Buber's interpretation of the Hebrew Bible and his philosophy of dialogue with an explicitness that cannot be found in any of his other writings."[\[42\]](#) Buber opened his third and final talk with a comparison between Hebrew scripture and the sacred texts of other living religious traditions. Unlike all other scripture, he claimed, the Hebrew Bible is full of a dialogue between heaven and earth. Again and again, God addresses humans directly, thus inviting us to stand in "the dialogic situation." For Buber, God's plan for humanity was to bring us more fully into dialogue with God. God invites us into a partnership with both the present One who creates everything, including the dialogic situation, and with creation itself, through which the eternal partner addresses us. Buber affirmed, in this third

address, that the God of scripture continues to speak “within the limits and under the conditions of a particular biographical or historical situation.” For Buber,

In the infinite language of events and situations, eternally changing, but plain to the truly attentive, transcendence speaks to our hearts at the essential moments of personal life. And there is a language in which we can answer it; it is the language of our actions and attitudes, our reactions and our abstentions; the totality of these answers is what we may call our answering-for-ourselves in the most proper sense of the expression.[\[43\]](#)

And we? How does it fare with us? How do we relate to the ever-new presence of the divine dialogian? When we turn wholly toward one another, the substance of what we speak assumes the cadence of an inwardness that stirs one's heart of hearts. The encounter itself becomes transparent into the absolute.[\[44\]](#) Drawing on this culminating insight, Buber maintained that if we are to affirm that it is “God” who speaks at the innermost core of our being when we are addressed then it is necessary

to forget everything we imagined we knew of God ... [to] keep nothing handed down or learned or self-contrived, no shred of knowledge, and [be] plunged into the night...If we named the speaker of this speech God, then it is always the God of a moment, a moment's God...In such a way, out of the givers of the signs, the speakers of the words in lived life, out of the moment's God there arises for us with a single identity, the Lord of the voice, the One.[\[45\]](#)

This implies, for Buber, that God is always becoming new and that God's presence can never be tied to dogma or ritual. God continuously enters into renewed, unique relationships with us. Buber certainly had this insight in mind in 1957 when he wrote in his Postscript to *I and Thou* that God's voice addresses us by penetrating through every genuine interhuman relationship, especially when the words of others stand out as an “instruction, message, [or] demand” that we take a responsible stand.[\[46\]](#)

The transformative power of sacramental dialogue can finally be exemplified by a personal anecdote from Buber's life. On Easter of 1914, Buber met at Potsdam with men from various European countries in order to discuss possible ways of responding to the conditions that would produce World War I. Buber noted that conversations among them were “marked by that unreserve, whose substance and fruitfulness I have scarcely ever experienced so strongly.” In the midst of the discussion, a former pastor, Florens Christian Rang, objected that too many Jews had been nominated to serve on several committees, which he believed would create an unbalanced representation. Obstinate, Buber raised a counter-protest during which, speaking of Jesus, he came to say, “We Jews knew him from within, in the impulses and stirrings of his Jewish being, in a way that remains inaccessible . . . to you [Christians].” At this, first Rang, then Buber stood up in confrontation. For an intense moment of silence, each looked into the other's eyes, standing face to face in a profoundly wordless communion. Suddenly, from the silence, Rang spoke the words, “It is gone.” Before everyone, they gave each other the kiss of brotherhood. Looking back on this encounter, Buber remarked that “the situation between Jews and Christians had been transformed into a bond between the Christian and the Jew. In this transformation, dialogue was fulfilled. Opinions were gone, in a bodily way the factual took place.”[\[47\]](#) In the words of Grete Schaeder, “Buber's lonely stand on the ‘narrow ridge’ at the outposts of human knowledge” in “the mute crepuscular spot where the mind relinquishes the irritable pursuit of facts, is too perilous for many...who cannot share the exhilarating experience” of sacramental dialogue.[\[48\]](#)

---

This article originally appeared in “Tasting God: Martin Buber's Sweet Sacrament of Dialogue,” *Horizons Journal*, 37/2 (2010): 224-245. Republished in *Bulletin of the Association of the Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House*, 2016.

\***Kenneth Paul Kramer** is a professor emeritus of Comparative Religious Studies at San José (CA) State University where he taught from 1976 to 2001. He holds a BA from Temple University, a BD from Andover Newton Theological School, an STM from Yale Divinity School, and a PhD (1971) in Religion and Culture from Temple University. He has published *Learning Through Dialogue: The Relevance of Martin Buber's Classroom* (Rowman & Littlefield Publications, 2013); *Martin Buber's Spirituality: Hasidic Wisdom for Everyday Life* (Rowman & Littlefield Publications, 2012); *Redeeming Time: T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets* (Cowley/Rowman & Littlefield Publications, 2007); *Martin Buber's I and Thou: Practicing Living Dialogue* (Paulist Press, 2003); *Death Dreams: Unveiling Mysteries of the Unconscious Mind* (Paulist Press, 1993); *The Sacred Art of Dying: How World Religions Understand Death* (Paulist Press, 1988); and *World Scriptures: An Introduction to Comparative Religions* (Paulist Press, 1986); he is also the editor of *Dialogically Speaking: Maurice Friedman's Interdisciplinary Humanism* (Pickwick Publications, 2011).