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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 Buberⁱ

Kenneth P. Kramer*

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.

PART I

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.ⁱⁱ 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.ⁱⁱⁱ 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

Verein der Freunde und Förderer des Martin-Buber-Hauses e.V. 64646 Heppenheim
Association of Friends and Sponsors of the Martin Buber House, D-64646 Heppenheim, Germany
President: Dr Eva Schulz-Jander

Bankverbindung/ Bank account:: Sparkasse Starkenburg Heppenheim – IBAN: DE18 5095 1469 0010 2180 19
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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.^{iv}

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."^v 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.^{vi}

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.^{vii}

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.”^{viii} 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 en-spiriting 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.”^{ix} 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,”^x 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,”^{xi} “for where unreserve has ruled, even wordlessly, between persons, the word of dialogue has happened sacramentally.”^{xii} When discussing

such shifts from communication to communion, Buber, writing about 18th 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.”^{xiii} 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.^{xiv}

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.”^{xv} 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.”^{xvi} 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...”^{xvii} 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.”^{xviii}

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!^{xix}

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.^{xx}

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.”^{xxi} 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.

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.

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- ⁱⁱ Maurice Friedman, *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber* (New York: Paragon House, 1991), ix.
- ⁱⁱⁱ For a discussion of Buber's influence on Christian theologians, see Maurice Friedman, *Martin Buber: The Life of Dialogue* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1955), 268-280.
- ^{iv} Martin Buber, *Meetings* (Chicago: Open Court, 1973), p. 46.
- ^v *Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective*, ed. Paul Mendes-Flohr (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2002), p. 8.
- ^{vi} *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp (London: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 693.
- ^{vii} *Philosophical Interrogations*, eds. Maurice Friedman, Sydney and Beatrice Rome (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1964), p. 99ff.
- ^{viii} Martin Buber, *At the Turning* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Young, 1952), p. 48.
- ^{ix} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 17.
- ^x Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 21.
- ^{xi} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 5.
- ^{xii} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 4.
- ^{xiii} Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960), p. 166.
- ^{xiv} Martin Buber, *The Origin and Meaning of Hasidism*, ed. and trans. by Maurice Friedman (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), 170.
- ^{xv} *Ibid.*, 166.
- ^{xvi} Martin Buber, *The Way of Man According to the Teaching of Hasidism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1995), p. 38.
- ^{xvii} Grete Schaeder, *The Hebrew Humanism of Martin Buber*, trans. Noah Jacobs (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1973), p. 164.
- ^{xviii} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 19.
- ^{xix} Martin Buber, *A Believing Humanism: My Testament*, trans. Maurice Friedman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 50.
- ^{xx} Martin Buber, *The Knowledge of Man: A Philosophy of the Interhuman*, ed. and trans. Maurice Friedman and Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1965), p. 85.
- ^{xxi} Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, p. 17.

***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).