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Covenant and Zionism

ARTICLE SECTION HEADING

The purpose of this paper is threefold: to give a brief exegesis of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's concept of I-Thou, to link this to his religiously formed Zionism, and to critically evaluate his Zionism, as well as address various criticisms of his Zionism from his contemporaries.

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The central concept of Buber's entire philosophy is the I-Thou relationship. I-Thou can best be described as the radical sanctification of another's existence. It is the grounding of our existence in our relatedness and the immanence of our relationships with those around us. Through these relationships, we come to an understanding of our covenant both with them, and, through them, with God. Hand in hand with this concept is the over-arching classically Jewish notion of covenant. Covenant is the establishment and promise of brotherhood and sisterhood with those around us, with the knowledge that it is through covenant with others that we establish a covenant with God. Linked to these concepts in both a historical and immediate-religious fashion is the also classically Jewish idea of Messianism, or the notion that one day the covenant once established between peoples and between God will be redeemed and renewed. Messianism is typically discussed in two ways within the Jewish tradition: Transcendent Messianism and Promethean Messianism.

Historically speaking, Transcendent Messianism is the classic post-second temple exile era idea, associated with the still prevalent Rabbinic tradition. It is the notion that it is only through divine intervention, that is, through a liberating God, that this world can be redeemed. It also includes the idea that the Jewish people will one day be united out of Diaspora in a return to the promised land, but that this can only happen through God's power. Promethean Messianism is what is most closely relat-

ed with Political Zionism, which is a post-nineteenth century form of Jewish Nationalism. It is the notion that Jews are ultimately responsible for their own destiny, and that it is up to the Jewish people, notably as political actors, to redeem the world. It also includes the idea that the Jewish people ought to be united out of diaspora, but only through political actors.

The question that I am trying to address is: where does Buber fit into this conversation? *My thesis is that Buber seeks to take into account both the current political realities and the historical-sacred narratives of Judaism to strike a balance between Transcendent and Promethean Messianism. He does so by advocating for Brit Shalom, a one state solution in which Jews and Palestinians work to cultivate their God-given land, to cultivate I-Thou between each other, and to rise above nationalism.* I evaluate his stance on Zionism to be the most compelling of Jewish Zionist narratives that balance Jewish needs with the needs of the Palestinian people. I also hold that Buber's outlook can serve as a role model to the Jewish community at large who seek reconciliation and a turn towards the other as a starting point for religious inquiry.

Of course, Buber was not free of criticisms. I will evaluate the potential problems raised with Buber's Zionism raised by various individuals later on in this paper. Generally speaking, I hold Buber to have reached a higher form of political realism, as his diplomacy and idealism serve to create an atmosphere in which Jews can seek a real and lasting

peace with their neighbors. I will also discuss this at length later in this paper.

I-THOU

Buber's concept of I-Thou is arguably the most central concept in his religious philosophy as well as his political theology. Though a highly humanistic concept, it is also notable for being a radical innovation in the discourse about God. I-Thou represents a turning of our attention away from meta-narratives: "All real living is meeting" (Herberg, 46)¹. Rather than life being defined by our relationship to finitude or death, we are defined by the immanence of our relatedness to others: "The primary word I-Thou establishes the world of relation" (45)². It is within this sphere in which we can achieve wholeness, or reach our utmost potential for relating to others and to hold fast to our covenant with them. Through this establishment of I-Thou, the Eternal-You is established, the realm of God and the divine.

The next question of course is: how can this be realized within the context of a community? For Buber, Jewish history is defined by its attempt to establish I-Thou within the context of a community: "Buber's political thought constitutes an effort to extend this insight into the sphere of group life. Here his focus was on the nature of and requisites for the relation of true community among peoples, that goal to which he believed humanity had aspired throughout history" (Woocher)³. I-Thou is thus not simply an existential humanism, bent on establishing good friendships among individuals. Rather, the establishment

of I-Thou is what determines the health and well being of a community:

The inner substance of community was defined, in Buber's view, by its dialogical character – its serving as a setting for the interpersonal immediacy and mutual confirmation of the I-You meeting, and its relationship to a "living center", a common task, work, and vision, from which the voice of the Eternal You addresses the group, calling it to a life of responsibility, justice, and brotherhood (Woocher).⁴

The next question is: how are the ideas of Covenant and I-Thou linked to Transcendent and Promethean Messianism? Buber seeks to establish a middle ground between the two extreme forms of Messianism. On one hand, Buber argues that Transcendent Messianism is overly passive and inappropriate within the context of the Holocaust and centuries of Jewish oppression and exile. On the other hand, Buber holds that Promethean Messianism is ultimately misguided in that it ultimately obscures the importance of I-Thou by purporting an ideology which ignores the logic of Jewish eschatological Messianism: the establishment of a society founded upon I-Thou and covenant. It does so by overly focusing on the ends but not the means of getting there. It is this form of Messianism which characterizes mainstream nineteenth century Zionism, and which, Buber argues, is ultimately

responsible for many of the woes and conflicts that characterize the current state of Israel, most notably the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Thus, we can begin to see Buber's position emerges from this context. To restate my thesis: Buber holds that the world is redeemed not by a transcendent God, but through cultivating I-Thou within the context of a community, the true meaning of God's commandments for us. It is clear that Buber is seeking to differentiate his views from other mainstream forms of both political Zionism, which are nationalistic, and the kind of Zionism for which he is advocating and which has been deemed *religious Zionism*.

ZIONISM

Buber's *religiously informed* political views on Zionism can be defined by two main *principles*. The first is to *think long-term* about establishing good relationships between Israel and its neighbors. This translates into establishing *religious and social* covenant with the Palestinians over *mutual love of the land*, and to establish it as a holy site between them. The second is to *avoid the tendency to be overly political* and to not establish a 'nation' like other European nations. This translates into avoiding turning Zionism into a political organizer, but rather as a *religious and social space*. What is stressed between these two elements is that the focus ought to be on establishing trust through covenant within the social and religious sphere, and to absolutely avoid being political when unnecessary, as this can lead to the dissolution of trust, which is essential in

establishing covenant. The next question is how these principles translate into specific views?

For Buber, thinking long-term politics is essential in avoiding potential conflicts. Thinking long term politically in this context means not ignoring the so-called 'Arab Question', but rather, confronting the necessity to establish covenant. What would the foundation of this covenant be? For Buber, there are in fact many, many foundations to be laid:

The first of these foundations are historical: they have their source in the common origin of the two peoples; their languages are closely related, and the tradition of their common father, Abraham, binds them from the earliest days of the Semitic race. Their customs, too, have many common and related aspects... it was the Spanish-Arabic period that saw a blossoming of spiritual and philosophical creativity among the Jews" (Mendes-Flohr, 197).⁵

The second, and probably most important, is the "mutual love for their homeland that the two peoples share" (197).⁶ It is to Buber's surprise that these common grounds have not eased social tensions and created a sense of brother/sisterhood among these two peoples. He argues that it is mostly due to the political element, that is, the intersection of world-politics that creates separation and tension between these two highly similar peoples:

Even now, in every place where the Arab village population has not yet been affected by politicization, neighborly relations, peace, and brotherhood reign between Jewish and Arab farmers" (197).⁷

For Buber, the interpolation of the political question in every element of our lives is hugely detrimental, especially in this conflict. Essentially, what has happened is that the economic question, the formula of *Realpolitik*, and the question of "How am I different from you?" rather than "How am I similar to you?", determines us: "[The evil I am referring to] is the current exaggeration, indeed glorification, of politics in our world, of its absolute domination, out of all proportion to what is truly important in life" (194).⁸ The economic question, of how can I get more than someone else, how can I produce for *myself* and my *own* people overrules what is actually vital for communal life: "The vital and healthy foundation of any economy is comprised of the inner urge to create goods that are of benefit to humanity and that further our cooperation with other men, our brothers (*sic*), whose relationship to us rests upon a basis of common assumptions and similar goals (195)."⁹ In conjunction with this problem of the politicization of all forms of life is Nationalism. Along with the question of "how am I different from you" and "how can I get more than you", is "How can I get more power than you?" Power is not intrinsically good or evil. The problematic element in power is a will to power, less concerned with being powerful than with being more powerful

than others: "Not power but power hysteria is evil.... Modern nationalism is in constant danger of slipping into power hysteria" (50).¹⁰

Juxtaposed with nationalism is people-hood. Being a people is to be conscious of shared history, shared suffering, and the ties of blood and water. Nationalism, on the other hand, is like an illness, an over-emphasized consciousness of difference. It is the fulfillment of a "lack" (51)¹¹ – a lack of inner ties, and a lack of fulfillment within the inner life of a people. People-hood is primary and healthy, a nation is the outer recognition of this inner principle, but nationalism is these two elements become out of balance.

BILTMORE PROGRAM

The Biltmore program is a site where we can discuss Buber's policies, and how his principles shape his views. The Biltmore program was created to "alleviate the impending catastrophe facing European Jewry... that the gates of Palestine be opened; that the Jewish Agency be vested with control of immigration into Palestine and with the nested authority for up-building authority... and that Palestine be established as a Jewish Commonwealth" (160). Since the creation of Israel as a Jewish commonwealth came to mean the survival of the Jewish people, any dissent towards this program was seen as nothing short of treason. Buber fiercely opposed this program, obviously not because it sought to save Jews from Hitler, but because "in the projected Commonwealth of Palestine the Arabs

will not only be deprived of collective political equality, but will also be subordinated to the economically stronger Jewish community”... And furthermore: “Partition,” Buber warns, “will lead to unprecedented and interminable strife with the Arabs” (161).¹³

What are the potential criticisms of this stance? They are manifold, for as Buber himself portrayed it, his view would be taken most likely as being “traitorous”. The first criticism was simply that Buber was being thoroughly irresponsible in the abandonment of his fellow Jews who didn’t have the same luxury of safety that he did, situated away from Nazi Germany: “Dissent on the demand for mass immigration was thus no longer a matter of political disagreement, it was now construed as a betrayal of the Jewish people” (161).¹⁴ Buber’s response is essentially that while it is absolutely necessary to save as many Jews as possible, thinking short-term politics is going to create an insoluble conflict in the future:

You argue about short-term politics and I speak to you of long-term politics. Short-term politics does not go well with morality, while long term politics merges with morality at certain crucial junctures. (163)

Taking a highly unpopular stance, Buber was willing to “limit Aliyah for the sake of accommodating the Palestinians” (15).¹⁵ It was indeed possible, in Buber’s views, to balance the immediate needs of the Jewish people

whilst still accommodating the Arab population at large. He primarily objected to the desire to either insist on there being a Jewish majority which would take away from the collective political equality of the Palestinian population, or create a state-partition in which the Jewish population, at an economic advantage, would ultimately dominate the other non-Jewish populations. Buber argues that it is this fear of external European-based domination, not anti-Semitism, which drives the general hostility towards Jewish people at this time period. In terms of situating this within its historical context, a time in which the Jewish people were in desperate need of a safe haven, *Buber was not opposed to immigration to Israel in large capacities, simply that this should not be for the purpose of creating a Jewish state, but rather, for the more genuine need of escaping Hitler.*

The next criticism was that Buber was still mixing morality with politics, and thereby retreating from the real political questions: “If so, tell me why on practical grounds you are opposed to the Biltmore program?... [Buber responds that] it is impossible to build with one hand while holding a weapon in the other... One generation is entitled to pass on the builder’s tools to the next generation, but not both the builder’s tools and a weapon” (163).¹⁶ In other words, the Jewish refusal to step outside of itself and consider how it will affect its neighbors may work in the short term, but the long-term political and social ramifications will create a near impossible situation.

The third criticism concerns Buber's Jewish Universalism, that is, his desire to engage with other communities more so than with the Jewish community is clear in his policy on the Biltmore program. Buber would argue that the lack of desire to engage is essentially the approach that has been taken in the past and, as history has shown, has simply not worked. Closing off borders and our ways to others again leads to highly irresponsible politics: "Failure to respond in an imaginative and forthright fashion to the 'Arab question' would thus not only be a moral failing but also impolitic. The politics of power – so-called Realpolitik – was myopic, and hence in the long run bound to undermine the pristine goals of Zionism" (15).¹⁷ Buber's universalism is his attempt to keep the Jewish community from being politically irresponsible and create an environment that could potentially generate

anti-Semitism: "It then was not in the name of abstract ethical principles that Buber opposed the official Zionist policy, but rather in the name of what held to be a greater realism" (15).¹⁸ Rather than Buber being a universalist or a "naïve idealist" preaching from moral "Mount Olympus" (174)¹⁹, *it is easy to see Buber as a highly practical politician. Realistically, if the Jewish people aren't prepared to engage with other communities, they are going to isolate themselves and they are going to bring themselves into problematic situations.*

One criticism which Marc Ellis raises, which is the same question that many of the Palestinians we would imagine could raise against Buber, is: "Was not Buber's mission of Jewish mission really the continuation of European Colonialism, albeit in a more friendly manner?... [H]is sense of development, though socialist and decentralized, was

Interreligious Engagement, Jerusalem; photo, Cetta Kenney



still based on a European rather than a Middle Eastern model” (Ellis, 107). This, I believe, is a legitimate critique of Buber’s Zionism. While Buber is correct in his turn towards the “other”, both within his religious philosophy and his Zionism, this turn in his politics is never entirely complete, as he never thoroughly explicates the importance of looking into Palestinian narratives. While I believe that, from a Jewish perspective, Buber’s Zionism is unparalleled in its wisdom and foresight, coming to an understanding of the Palestinian narrative would only enrich this understanding. Thus, I believe it is up to us to take with us the insights of Buber and enhance them with an understanding of the Palestinian narrative, so that we may truly come to a place of I-Thou.

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NOTES

The writings of Martin Buber include the text *I and Thou*, and excerpts from *Between Man and Man*.

NOTES

¹ Herberg, Will. *The Writings of Martin Buber*. New York, NY: World, 1968. Print.

² *ibid* 45.

³ Woocher, Jonathan. “Encore Archive.” Martin Buber, *The Politics of Dialogue*. N.p., n.d. Web. 07 May 2015.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid* 197.

⁶ *ibid* 197.

⁷ *ibid* 197.

⁸ *ibid* 194.

⁹ *ibid* 195.

¹⁰ *ibid* 50.

¹¹ *ibid* 51.

¹² *ibid* 160.

¹³ *ibid* 161.

¹⁴ *ibid* 161.

¹⁵ *ibid* 15, Mendes-Flohr commentary on Buber in introduction.

¹⁶ *ibid* 163.

¹⁷ *ibid* 15, Mendes-Flohr commenting on Buber in introduction.

¹⁸ *ibid* 15- Mendes Flohr commenting on Buber in introduction.

¹⁹ *ibid* 174.