



Martin Buber: A Contemporary Perspective

Martin Buber was born in Vienna in 1878. After studying at the universities of Vienna, Leipzig, Zurich and Berlin, he joined the Zionist movement in 1898. In 1901 he founded the Juedischer Verlag which published, in German, Jewish books of high literary quality. All this before, at age 26, he discovered Chassidism, whose religious philosophy and message for modern society he probed in many subsequent publications. In 1923 he published *I and Thou*, his highly influential view of religion as a direct, mutually involving dialogue and relationship with the Divine. Although agreeing with Kant that man cannot intellectually know ultimate reality, Buber held that man can, nonetheless, have meaningful direct contact with a Divine entity which he can never know in itself.

Finally forced out of Germany by the Nazis, Buber moved to Palestine in 1938, serving as a Professor of Social Philosophy at the Hebrew University until his retirement in 1951. While there, he published two books on Biblical faith: *Torah Ha-Neyim* (in Hebrew) and *Moses*. In 1961 he completed his translation of the Bible, started in 1925 with Franz Rosenzweig, based on the principle that the Bible does not seek to be read but to be listened to, as if its voice were being spoken today. He was also a founder and the first President of the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities (1960-62), before his passing in 1965. His impact on both Jewish and non-Jewish modern religious philosophy continues to command respect.

The papers in this stimulating volume, edited by Paul Mendes-Flohr, examine various aspects of Buber's multifaceted life and thought. They were first presented at a conference, in Buber's memory, sponsored by the Israel Academy. Addressing the gathering, the late Nathan Rosenstreich emphasized the unusually wide spectrum of Buber's interests and his prescient anticipation of today's interdisciplinary discourse. Shmuel Eisenstadt, once Buber's doctoral student, depicted Buber, despite his academic appointment, as a basically extramural, postmodern intellectual with a decided ambivalence towards the prevailing academic barriers and conventions of his time.

Taking him on his own terms, Karl-John Ilman, Dan Avnon and Michael Fishbane examined Buber's Biblical scholarship and affirmation of Divine immanence. The late Gillian Rose, however, decried Buber's religious anarchism which she asserted prevented his developing an adequate account of the modern political state. Taking a middle ground, Remi Brague suggested that Buber misread or omitted several key texts, but that he still offered many seminal insights into the nature of religious faith.

Guy Stroumsa asserted that Buber made a significant contribution to the scientific study of comparative religion, and that *I and Thou* was basically an introduction to religious phenomenology. In response to Stroumsa's question of why, therefore, Buber's impact on religious scholarship per se was limited, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky responded that Buber was never a historian of religion, although his literary output dealt largely with great religious documents and spiritual traditions. In his view, Buber was not as interested in rigorous classical scholarship as in the direct spiritual encounter with reality that animates Chassidism and much Eastern religion.

Dan Laor, drawing on rich archival materials, recounted the fate of Buber's monumental *Corpus Hasidicum*, a comprehensive collection of Chassidic tales written in collaboration with S.Y. Agnon. The nearly completed manuscript was burned in the 1924 fire that gutted Agnon's apartment in Bad Homburg (Germany) and, despite repeated efforts, the project was never finished. The details of their two-decade collaboration, however, help illuminate Buber's approach to the study of religion.

This long-awaited volume of perceptive articles has just been published by the Israel Academy, in collaboration with Syracuse University Press.



The
FORUM

is published quarterly by the American Foundation for Basic Research in Israel, a non-profit, tax-exempt organization registered in the State of New York (USA).

The American Foundation for Basic Research in Israel (AFBRI) supports the development of science in Israel and facilitates the participation of the international donor community in this endeavor.

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