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## Approaching God as Person

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## Review Article

### *Approaching God as Person\**

**T**HE timeliness of this solid, compact work could hardly be exaggerated.\* Not only does it treat of that most relevant of all contemporary categories, the *personal*, but it expressly focuses on the problem of God as person, which is the subject of a widespread theological discussion in progress at the present moment.<sup>1</sup> Moreover the author has wisely chosen to limit his investigation to the work of the Jewish philosopher-theologian, Martin Buber, who is perhaps the key figure in twentieth century personalism.

The promise held out by the book's subject matter, then, is enticing, and the reader is not disappointed. The work is a clear, orderly, thorough working-through of Buber's basic approach to the person, and of its theological applicability. While most of the major categories and themes appear more than once, the book nevertheless is terse and concise in style, and must be read with care to grasp its full import. It would be impossible in this review to do justice to the entire range of subjects treated; for example, a major section of the work is devoted to the theophanies in Sacred Scripture, another to the

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\*GOD AS PERSON IN THE WRITING OF MARTIN BUBER. By Pedro C. Sevilla, S.J. Loyola House of Studies, Ateneo de Manila University, 1970. 170 pp.

<sup>1</sup> An interesting evaluation of a few recent books in this discussion can be found in G. Baum's "Towards a New Catholic Theism," *Ecumenist*, 8 (May-June, 1970), 53-61.

contemporary attempts to develop a non-objectifying mode of thinking and speaking of God that would harmonize with Buber's work. In what follows, a more detailed description and comment will be attempted which concentrates on Buber's dialogical philosophy of the person and its implications in the current God-problem.

The central question of the book is: can we meaningfully affirm God as person? The question might well seem rather academic, but in fact is far from being so. Today the traditional objections against a personal God are more than ever operative: to affirm God as personal seems to limit Him to man's size (Spinoza), cut down His transcendence (Jaspers), make Him a being among countless others (Tillich). (pp.10-11, 86-87) To this central question Buber replies that while on the one hand the description of God as person is *indispensable*, yet on the other, such a concept is completely incapable of declaring what God's essential being is. (pp. 15, 86) Since God is a God who makes it possible for man to enter into direct relation with Him, He must be affirmed to be *also* a person, or more exactly, to be the Absolute Person, a Person who cannot be limited. (pp. 86-88, 97, 101) For Buber, God *becomes* a person to be able to speak to man, and at the same time establishes man as person in order that man might be able to be a partner in living, historic dialogue with Him. (p. 89)

In order to appreciate the depth of Buber's idea, some understanding of his basic philosophical categories and themes is necessary. Towards this purpose the author provides an excellent introduction to Buber, especially his theory of knowledge and notion of the person. Buber's own philosophic development was marked by three major stages. From an early "mystical" period, he moved into a transitional stage of what today would be called existentialism, in the form of a philosophy of realization, and finally into his mature work of a dialogical philosophy, developed particularly in terms of a philosophical-theological anthropology. (p. 13)

*Buber on Philosophy.* The author presents Buber's theory of knowledge while outlining his somewhat ambiguous stand on

philosophy. Knowledge and the world are basically twofold for Buber: of objects and of persons. (pp. 17-18) Man's attitude is similarly twofold, depending on the nature of his two primary words, the *I-Thou* and *I-It* combinations. These primary words do not signify things, but rather point to relations. Since they are relational, the "I" in both is not the same: the "I" of the *I-Thou* combination is spoken and manifested when a man stands with his whole being over against another being, and steps into an essential relation with him. (p. 22) In its highest intensity, the *I-Thou* relation is proper to the world of religious experience, the relationship of directness and mutuality, of presence and openness. (p. 46)

The other, the *I-It* primary word, is characteristic of the world of detachment, observation, reflection and use. (pp. 22, 44) While the primary *I-Thou* word can only be spoken with the whole being, the *I-It* word can never be spoken thus. It belongs to the realm of philosophy, whose first act is *abstraction*, the looking and turning away from the concrete, the "inner action in which man lifts himself above the concrete situation into the sphere of precise conceptualization." (p.19) Thus the analytic, reductive and deriving methodology which Buber claims is proper to philosophy, naturally leads to a second act which *transforms* reality encountered into an object of thought, splitting apart the original togetherness into the world of object and subject, or the observed and the observer. (p 20) Thus the "living quality" of the reality encountered is sacrificed, and the tension between knowing and being, between image and reality, is set up. Buber rightly capitalizes on this tension, proposing it as the very life of dialogue. (p. 26) What in logical conception are grasped as mutually exclusive contradictories, in the reality of life are often inseparable.

*Person, Relation and Dialogue.* These two primary words, *I-Thou* and *I-It*, then, constitute the dialogic relation which Buber lays at the base of all human existence, (p. 68), of all biblical faith (pp. 85-86, 96), and all history. (p. 115) As the being who says "I" in both these primary combinations, man is both a self-differentiating, self-appropriating *individual* (in *I-It* relating), as well as a genuine *person* in mutual reciprocity with

a thou. What is specifically human for Buber is not so much the individual's self-consciousness as his capacity to freely relate in direct contact with another. (p. 59) These free interpersonal relations make up the sphere of the "between", the conceptually uncomprehended, ever reconstituted sphere of man's interpersonal existence wherein something "takes place" between one being and another. The "between" is for Buber a primal category of human reality. (p. 70) It insists that the reality of the person is relational, and secondly, that the reality of the relation is not to be localized within the individuals involved, but between them, (p. 70) much like an electric field between two poles. (p. 31)<sup>2</sup>

It is the electric tension between two persons that Buber develops with his famous analysis of dialogue. In exposing the numerous types of false dialogue, Buber reveals genuine, authentic dialogue as a "turning towards" the other in an attitude of *inclusion*, setting up a mutual reciprocity which alone reveals man as man.<sup>3</sup> This life of dialogue involves a two-fold principle: a "setting at a distance," which provides the human situation, and an "entering into relation," which constitutes the operative factor in the person's self-becoming. (pp. 65-68)

This self-becoming of the person in dialogue is compared by Buber to the involvement of the whole man in creating a work of art. It is the whole man who paints, creates poetry, and the art object is thus presented as a whole in a way rational objects never are. (p. 28)<sup>4</sup> The stress on *wholeness* in terms of involvement and present encounter with reality, is another

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<sup>2</sup> This notion of *between* has been developed along different lines by a number of rather novel approaches to man. Cf. W. Kuhns, *Environmental Man* (Harper & Row, 1969) and S. Keen, *Apology For Wonder* (Harper & Row, 1969). The latter work is developed in regard to man's relation to God in very off-beat fashion in the same author's *To A Dancing God* (Harper & Row, 1970), and more matter-of-factly by P. Berger in his excellent little work, *A Rumor of Angels* (Doubleday, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> The full dimensions of "inclusion" on the metaphysical level have been worked out in detail—rather complex detail, to be sure—by J. Toner in his *The Experience of Love* (Corpus Books, 1968).

<sup>4</sup> Buber's basic idea of relating philosophy and art in his explanation of the person is shared by other contemporary philosophers. Cf., for

major trait in Buber's idea of the person. (pp. 28, 57, 96) The person is a man who has become whole, who can respond in direct personal decision to another's call, who takes responsibility, and whose wholeness is ultimately due to his encounter with God. It is through his wholeness that the human person renders homage to God. (pp. 57, 96-97) Clearly, this presents us with a more contemporary approach to the traditional Christian truth that the glory of God is the final end of all creation, and that this glory is formally the human person freely relating to his Creator.<sup>5</sup>

*Philosophy and Religion.* In developing the person's relation to God in his wholeness, Buber actually lays down his conception of the general relationship between religion and philosophy. Religion is depicted in terms of the living existential encounter of an *I-Thou* relation with God (genuine, true religion) while philosophy is its objectification in thought. Religion is founded on the duality of the *I-Thou*, whereas it is the basic subject-object dichotomy, an elaboration of the *I-It* primary word, which grounds philosophy. (pp. 36, 40) Religion for Buber is essentially the act of holding fast to the living God (p. 33); without this relation, or when confined to speculation and dogma, or when exercised merely as reflective, uncommitted contemplation, religion is simply false. For genuine religious knowledge must be based on a mutuality of contact, a given reciprocal meeting. (pp. 36-37)<sup>6</sup>

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example, A. Forest, "Art and Metaphysics," *Philosophy Today*, 3 (Winter, 1959), 223-30, and L. van de Water, "The Work of Art, Man and Being: A Heideggerian Theme," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 9 (June, 1969), 214-35.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Denziger, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, DB#1805, or the 33rd ed., DS#3025, for Vatican I's explicit definition. This new approach is being worked out today in terms of a theological anthropology that grounds a theology of development. For a few helpful leads, see Paul VI's *On the Development of Peoples* (*Populorum Progressio*) #14-21; *The Christian and the World*, by A. Auer, et al (Kenedy, 1965); *Man Before God*, by J. Alfaro et al (Kenedy, 1966) and C. Moeller, "Renewal of the Doctrine of Man," *Theology of Renewal* (ed. L. K. Shook) vol. II, 420-63.

<sup>6</sup> This general approach to religious knowledge is being developed along new but analogous lines, following the lead of M. Polanyi, by

To know God, then, is to meet Him in the lived togetherness of an encounter, that is, in the essential immediacy of the *I-Thou* relationship. Yet this encounter, in absolute contrast to all others, provides *no objective aspect* of God's own being. (pp. 41, 90) God is the Absolute Thou who cannot become an It, that is, who can never be objectified.<sup>7</sup> Thus all talk *about* God, all efforts to prove His existence, pertain to the realm of philosophy, and are ultimately grounded on man's search for security, for continuity in both time and space. (pp. 74-75) According to Buber, God cannot properly be inferred in anything—neither as author of nature, nor as Lord of history, nor as correlative to the thinking subject. (pp. 73, 92-93) God cannot be elicited from any given; He is neither in the world nor outside it. Rather He is the wholly Other, the wholly Same, the wholly Present, the *complexio oppositorum* exemplified perhaps most perfectly in the "perfectly immanent, perfectly transcendent" opposition. (p. 101)<sup>8</sup>

The point Buber wishes to make here seems to be that God can never be domesticated into something conjured up or even anticipated by man; rather He is the self-revealing and self-concealing God who meets man when and where He wills. Yet creation for Buber is not a hurdle to God, but the road

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J. Gill. Cf. his "The Tacit Structure of Religious Knowing," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 9 (Dec., 1969), 533-59. Buber's definition and description of religion should act as a *needed check* on some contemporary authors who take Bonhoeffer's ambiguous grasp of religion as a starting point, and go on to make up their own definitions in terms of "a clinging to the dead forms of the past." (G. Moran and M. Harris, *Experiences in Community*, Herder & Herder, 1968, p. 57).

<sup>7</sup> The effort to grasp God as Thou in non-objectifying knowing is carried out in a full length work by G. Baum, *Man Becoming* (Herder & Herder, 1970) 285 pp. Work continues on this problem in critiques of Marcel; cf. L. Blain, "Marcel's Logic of Freedom in Proving the Existence of God," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 9 (June, 1969), 177-204.

<sup>8</sup> This *complexio oppositorum* of Buber is, of course, not new to the Christian tradition. Perhaps the most outstanding traditional figure in this approach of God is Nicholas of Cusa. See, for example, L. M. Gomez, "From the Names of God to the Name of God: Nicholas of Cusa," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, 5 (Feb., 1965), 80-102.

itself, not, obviously, in the traditional sense of the objective effect of God as First Cause, but rather in the existential, subjective dimension of the lived I-Thou encounter of mutuality and presence. (pp. 93-94) While again illustrating Buber's antipathy toward the "objectified," this existential stance serves to cut off any fruitless metaphysical speculation on the God-head, the *God-in-se* behind the God of the divine-human encounter. The only God that man knows, or could possibly know, is the God who has revealed Himself in living, historical dialogue. (pp. 90-91) Here, there is a certain similarity of basic intent between Buber and K. Rahner's thesis that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, that is, the God of Revelation is God-in-Himself.<sup>9</sup> But whereas Buber limits all valid knowledge of the God of Revelation to the immediate, concrete, existential encounter, Rahner's effort is toward perfecting and purifying a valid ontological view of this self-revealing God.

*Knowing God through Man.* Another interesting comparison between Buber and Rahner's more recent work concerns the relation of man's knowledge and love of God to his knowledge and love of his fellowmen. Buber holds that it is through every particular Thou that we glimpse the Eternal Thou—in each thou we address the Eternal Thou. (p. 94; *I and Thou*, pp. 6, 75) This basic problem is addressed by Rahner in his essay on the unity of love of God and love of neighbor.<sup>10</sup> While careful to explain that the *explicit* act of love of God in prayer is not identified with love of neighbor, Rahner nevertheless affirms that "the categorical, explicit love of neighbor is the primary act of love of God," and that "it is ontologically, not merely morally or psychologically, true that he who does

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<sup>9</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, "The Concept of Mystery in Catholic Theology," *Theological Investigations*, vol. IV, part 3, pp. 61-73; also his more recent work, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel, (Herder & Herder, 1970) "The Axiomatic Unity of the 'Economic' and 'Immanent Trinity,'" pp. 21-24 *et passim*.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. K. Rahner, "The Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations*, vol. VI, pp. 231-49. The quotations in the text approximate the text found on p. 247; the exact quotes were taken from an earlier summary, *Theology Digest*, 15 (Sum, 1967), p. 93.



not love the brother whom he sees, cannot love God whom he does not see. He can only love God whom he does not see by loving his visible brother."

We are touching here on the very core of the human person, and on the nature of the very possibility itself of relating to God that issues from this core. How does a man really get to any understanding of God as person? How is it possible for any man to grasp in any way the reality of God's love, of God's freedom, of God's Spirit? What Rahner and Buber seem to be doing is simply to call to our minds the obvious fact that we know nothing of the personal except through our experience of persons; that this knowledge and understanding is a process that goes on through life, and so not only initially, but throughout our lives, our prayer and explicit relating to God is always in some manner played in and through our experience of our brother. The philosopher will arrive at the insight that man himself is the road to God; the theologian might add: through the Incarnate Word, in whom, through whom and for whom, man lives.<sup>11</sup>

But there is, it would seem, in both Buber and Rahner, a fundamental difficulty faced by any theological anthropology which tries to work from the concrete existential encounter: how to maintain the metaphysical presupposition of the essential bond which the existing man has to his Absolute Source, while still dealing with human existence as it is experientially realized? How to give full value and weight to man's commerce with his fellowmen as independent, responsible persons, and at the same time integrate this with his relation to God?

*God as Subject.* This relation to God is specified even more when we honestly face the problem of how we can know God precisely as Subject, as Thou. How can we know God "from the inside," become co-subjects with Him on the personal level? The very conditions that regulate any genuine

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<sup>11</sup> Cf. for example, H. Ebert, "Man the Way to God," *Philosophy Today*, 10 (Sum, 1966) 88-106; and St. Paul's numerous texts, and their standard commentaries, such as *Colossians* 1/15-16, 18-20; *Ephesians* 13-14, together with St. John's Prologue.

*I-Thou* interhuman relation such as concrete, embodied presence and mutuality, give-and-take reciprocity, and multiform objective expression, are clearly had not in the man-God relationship. Obviously God is not "another person" on the same ontological level as man. My own self is not independent and exclusive of God in the way I am when compared to other human persons; on the contrary, I exist as a person only because of God's creative presence in knowledge and love of me. Ontologically God and I are both involved in *all* my acts, yet we are certainly not co-subjects in the manner in which I and my friend ("we") co-author our dialogue together.

The ontological dependence of the human person on God must obviously include his personal acts of relating to God, and consequently he can never simply relate to God as opposite him as he does toward his fellowmen. God is always ontologically present in him and in his every act. Nevertheless, on the level of his free activity, he stands responsible *before* God for his human acts, as the mystery of sin prevents us from forgetting. On this level, while still acknowledging God's ontological presence, God is in a sense opposite him, and precisely as a *Thou*. It would seem, then, that our sole avenue of reaching God as subject, as *Thou*, must not be based on any special experience of God (which in fact would make God an "object") but rather in the subjective experience of ourselves "from within" *precisely as dependent*, or in the time honored phrase, as *contingent*.<sup>12</sup> But here we are considering contingency not in its objective, "from without" dimension, but precisely as experienced "from within" on the personal level, or perhaps better, on the interpersonal level.

A concrete example of this experience might be drawn from the universal human reality of love. There are good grounds for affirming that a mutual act of intense love between two human persons is often experienced as a "gift," as something "given," something beyond the capacity of each individually and of both together. So a certain non-objectifying grasp of

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<sup>12</sup> This is the general solution proposed by S. Tugwell, O.P. in an excellent little article, "Contemplation and the Knowledge of God," *New Blackfriars*, 48 (Aug., 1967), 585-91.

God as Subject could originate within this interpersonal co-experience precisely as dependent, as including an ultimate co-Subject, the Absolute Thou.<sup>13</sup>

This general approach would also modify certain traditional conceptualizations of the mystery of divine Providence and predestination. Instead of an objectified eternal divine decree, man's predestination could perhaps legitimately be viewed more in terms of an act embracing both God's call and man's free response; God and man would then, in a sense, be co-subjects of predestination. This, of course, does not "explain" the mystery involved in the inter-relation of created human freedom and absolute divine creativity. But it does move the problematic onto the explicitly personal level and beyond, that is, the level of God as Absolute Thou who *transcends* the personal inter-human categories.<sup>14</sup> This raises the possibility and even the necessity of a distinct, presently underdeveloped dimension of analogy that would no longer be founded on causality as understood traditionally, but rather on the link between relative, creative conscious freedom and Absolute Creative Freedom.<sup>15</sup>

*Author's Critique.* The author concludes his work with a chapter consisting of a clear, penetrating but eminently fair

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<sup>13</sup> Among the more notable contemporary attempts to work out a detailed existential prolegomenon for the theological understanding of God and man's relation to Him in faith, L. Gilkey's work is outstanding. Cf. his *Naming the Whirlwind: The Renewal of God-Language* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1969). A briefer version of his basic argument, together with an incisive critique of Moltmann's theology of hope, can be found in his essay, "The Universal and Immediate Presence of God," in *The Future of Hope: Theology as Eschatology*, ed. by F. Herzog (Herder & Herder, 1970), pp. 81-109. The same theme is treated by W. Kasper, "How Can We Experience God Today," *Theology Digest*, 18 (Sum, 1970), 122-31.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. E. Schillebeeckx, *God and Man* (Sheed & Ward, 1969), chap. 6: God's Good Guidance of Life, pp. 234-56.

<sup>15</sup> The need to develop new dimensions of the traditional doctrine on analogy is stressed by D. Burrell, "God, Language and Transcendence," *Commonweal Paper* #1 (Feb. 10, 1967) pp. 511-16, and in E. Simmons article on the "Knowability of God," in *Sacramentum Mundi*, vol. II, pp. 391-94.

critique of the weaknesses of Buber's dialogical approach. Citing Lonergan to good effect on the place of meaning and of objective knowing in personal existence, the author brings out the inadequacies of Buber's non-conceptual, non-propositional grasp of the real. (pp. 143-44) Father Sevilla further points out the deficient place Buber assigns to reflection. It has been pointed out by another critic that Buber seems to oscillate between regarding reflection as an extraction from the primacy of mutuality, to viewing it as a basic presupposition for all dialogue.<sup>16</sup>

Hence the dialogical principle itself seems ultimately inadequate as an ontological foundation. This inadequacy may be traced to Buber's vacillation between stressing the factual description of human life with its primacy of relation, and his effort toward uncovering an ontology grounding this life, which leads him toward a primacy of the I. The scope of relations is not self-contained, but refers to factors which themselves are not relations—contains *content*. In any attempt, therefore, to understand faith and religion, to do theology, there is question of more than the givenness of Presence. The shout "Thou!" is not adequate in itself; there is always the human questioning of the content and the significance of such a cry.

Nonetheless, the author clearly brings out the truly substantial contribution Buber has made toward a more sensitive appreciation of our relation to God as person. The absolute sovereignty and freedom of God within the dialogic relationship clearly stand forth, and are intimately linked with man's inter-human personal experience. Thus the nearness and remoteness of God, so constantly stressed in Scripture, are now sensed within a contemporary personalistic problematic. (p. 165)<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Cf. the excellent critique of N. Rotenstreich, "Some Problems in Buber's Dialogical Philosophy," *Philosophy Today* 3 (Fall, 1959) 151-67. The critique of C. Frankenstein which Fr. Sevilla discusses in his text, has appeared in English version in *Cross Currents*, 18 (Spr, 1968), 229 ff.

<sup>17</sup> The Biblical approach to God's nearness and remoteness is well discussed in *The Presence and Absence of God*, *Concilium*, vol. 50, ed. by P. Benoit and R. E. Murphy. (English ed., vol. 10, #5, Burns & Oates, Dec., 1969).

The balanced appreciation of Buber's work which this book provides leaves the reader in debt to Fr. Sevilla's critical appreciation and acumen. Further research and illumination on the contemporary God-question may be expected, we sincerely hope, in future years from the same pen. Particularly needed today here in the Philippines is a creative re-thinking of Buber's personalistic approach in terms of the lived Filipino experience. The clamor for Filipinization of studies philosophical or theological may seem ill advised and propagandist; yet no one seriously doubts that the reality haltingly depicted for us through Buber's dialogical perspective, if translated and re-created in indigenous idiom through insightful reflection on Filipino interpersonal experience, would come to light and illumine men in a radically *new* way, about their Absolute Thou. It is the hope of this reviewer, that the author of this fine work, together with many of his confreres in philosophic and theological studies, may contribute in an ever increasing and more profoundly moving manner, toward this new relating to God as Subject.

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