

Article

Martin Buber and Social Justice

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Abstract: Martin Buber's seminal work is his *"I and Thou"*. In *I and Thou*, Buber establishes a philosophical foundation for the creation of a dialogical society. Buber's concept of I–Thou dialogue provides a framework for understanding the inherent connection between interpersonal encounters and social justice. As Buber elucidates, genuine dialogue is not confined to the encounter between two persons, but it manifests in the manner of a society organized on premises of social justice, freedom and compassion. In this regard, it is important to note that if we trace Buber's personal and philosophical biography we will not find many instances of him engaging in what could be called social justice activism. Buber did found and join civic organizations that dealt with issues of peace and justice, and lent his support to many such political endeavors (see the organizations called Brith Shalom (Covenant of Peace) founded in 1925 in mandatory Palestine, and Ihud (Unity) founded in 1942, six years before Israel's statehood). Nonetheless, a number of world prominent social justice advocates and activists found inspiration and guidance in Buber's philosophy, and it is perhaps hereby, where Buber's impact on social justice is most distinctly pronounced. What Buber aimed to achieve in his writings and political endeavors was to present a philosophy of relationships on which to found a society established on practices of social justice.

Keywords: Buber; dialogue; Zen Buddhism; liberation theology; religious socialism; social justice; libertarian socialism; mysticism; peace; engaged Buddhism; pure land Buddhism

1. Introduction

Martin Buber did not explicitly engage with the topic of social justice per se. Buber spoke of *I–Thou* as the mode of human relationships better able to actualize the whole-being humanity of each person, and as such, it constitutes the basis for a socially just and compassionate society. Buber spoke of two distinct modes of interconnection with one another and with the world: *I–Thou* relationships and *I–It* interactions. In a simplified way, we can say that *I–Thou* refers to any relationship in which the other is recognized as a *subject*, while in an *I–It* interaction, the other is approached as an *object*. Dialogue implies presence, and presence implies a willingness to disengage the other from its socially constructed attributes, therefore, strictly speaking *I–It* is not a relationship, it is an interaction.

Buber described his social philosophy with terms such as "Religious Socialism" and sometimes "Libertarian Socialism". Buber's primary development of his religious Libertarian Socialist ideas appears in his book *"Paths in Utopia"* (Buber 1996). At the outset, it is also essential to clarify that while Martin Buber speaks of religion, he should not be regarded as a "mystic" in the traditional sense of the term. As Paul Mendes Flohr aptly explains, Buber's thinking evolved and shifted from mysticism to a philosophy of dialogue (Mendes-Flohr 1989, p. 7). For the purpose of understanding Buber's philosophy, mysticism can be defined as the pursuit of a direct, inner and personal experience of the divine or ultimate reality¹. Dialogue, in contrast, seeks the presence of God *in* and *through* the relationship with the other. Buber's distinction between an I and a You is not a *dualistic* dichotomy, for the *between* of *I and Thou* is the *non-dual* realm of relationship. Buber said "When two people relate to each other authentically and humanly, God is the electricity that surges between them." In other words, God emerges from within the relationship. For



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Buber, the presence of God with us is always the presence of God between us, therefore, dialogue, in contrast to mysticism, does not seek to transcend the human realm of the here and now, but through the saying of Thou to all beings, dialogue recognizes the world and all its inhabitants as the realm of the sacred. Buber wrote “God wants man to fulfill his commands as a human being and with the quality peculiar to human beings. A person cannot approach the divine by reaching beyond the human. To become human, is what this individual person has been created for.” We can ask, how can we become that which is already inherent in us? The answer is not in the realm of ontology. Similar to the concept of the inborn Buddha nature, it is necessary to awaken to our own humanity, and that requires the existential task of recognizing the others as Thou rather than It. Buber wrote “Our relationships live in the space between us which is sacred.” In Buber’s dialogical philosophy, the between of *I and Thou* is the sacred soil for the house of God, and in that house justice and compassion are its only inhabitants. The recognition that we already stand on God’s sacred land calls on us to transform the social structures of society to allow for the actualization of the kingdom of God (Mendes-Flohr 2008). In Buber’s terms, the kingdom of God is not a mystical land in heaven above, but a human society structured in response to the prophetic teachings of social justice, freedom and compassion. Buber’s social justice postulates lead him to advocate for a society built on what he referred to as “Religious Socialism”.² But it is of the essence to understand that Buber’s “religion” was non-institutional and non-canonical (Moore 2016, p. 45), and by positing Religious Socialism, Buber emphasized the fundamental dialogical principle that amalgamates as one and the same one’s spiritual commitments with the task of actualizing in society policies of social and economic justice. For Buber, spirituality and social justice are, in effect, one and the same practice. In other words, from a dialogical perspective, we are not pursuing two separate practices, one being spirituality and the other social justice: in terms of Buber, integrating spirituality with social justice simply means that neither practice precedes nor follows the other, but both are conjoined into a single existential unit. If for Levinas, ethics are first philosophy, we can say that for Buber dialogue is first ethics and only then are ethics first philosophy.

Any being, human or otherwise, can be approached as either subject or object. In the case of human beings, there cannot be social justice during the interactions of I–It, for I–It is inherently unjust as it does not regard the other as a full and equal person, but primarily as an object of use (Margulies 2016, p. 77)³. For Buber, the enactment of I–Thou relationships in the day-to-day life of individuals and communities requires the creation of a social and economic system within which dialogue can both manifest and flourish. In this sense, Buber’s political thought belongs within the political and economic ideologies generally identified as embodiments of social justice.

In his *Paths in Utopia*, Buber offered a structural analysis that recognized that social injustice, oppression and inequity are deeply rooted in systemic and structural deficiencies⁴. Buber refuted economic systems that perpetuate I–It interactions, fostering inequality and injustice, and called for a critical examination of the underlying social, political, and economic structures that contribute to creation and perpetuation of injustice and oppression. Buber believed that addressing inequity and other forms of injustice required a commitment to systemic changes and the creation of new communities founded on dialogical practices. For Buber, social injustice is not only defined by material conditions, as the need for human community is an existential challenge that transcends strict economic considerations. He believed that addressing social injustice required a profound transformation of society and the reorientation of values away from I–It and toward the implementation of I–Thou. That is, a society built on community, compassion, and solidarity. Buber advocated for a holistic approach to injustice that encompasses both material betterment and social flourishing, aiming to create conditions where every individual will be able to realize their full human nature. From a dialogical perspective, the systemic impediments to justice cannot be addressed only through compassionate charity toward the poor, for what is required is the

removal and transformation of those conditions that cause social injustice to emerge in the first place.

2. Mysticism and Dialogue

In order to comprehend Buber's approach to social philosophy in general and social justice in particular, it is essential to clarify Buber's distinction between mysticism and dialogue. The entire foundation of Buber's philosophy stands on his rejection of mystical practices as essentially non-dialogical religious experiences. Buber wrote "What has to be given up is not the I, as most mystics suppose: this I is indispensable for any relationship, including the highest, which always presupposes an *I and Thou*." Buber's dialogical philosophy represents his categorical distancing from previous mystical proclivities as reflected in his earlier books "*Daniel*" and "*Ecstatic Confessions*." For Buber, dialogical deeds can be recognized not by recourse to mystical experiences, transcendental divine entities or exalted emotional contents, but only in the deeds themselves⁵. The similarities we find between Buber and many exponents of mystical traditions help to point at the essential distinction between mysticism and dialogue. There are general similarities between Buber's philosophy of dialogue and the philosophies of mystics, theologians and thinkers, but for the most part, those are similarities without an equivalence. In Buber's philosophy, the relationship of I-Thou is not a mystical encounter between two persons or with God, nor it is a relationship that requires the participants to rise to a spiritual and emotional level akin to an "ubermensch"⁶. In this regard, the work of Paul Mendes Flohr extensively explains Buber's transformation from an adherent to mystical concepts and practices to a person devoted to the concepts and practices of dialogue. Buber speaks of I-Thou dialogue as the primordial moment of inception of all genuine spiritual revelations (Margulies 2022, p. 143). Mystical experiences have the potential to be transformative, shaking individuals out of complacency and sometimes igniting a desire for personal and societal change, but in themselves, these experiences are not dialogical in nature or practice. Mystics often emphasize the need for inner transformation as a precursor to external transformation, but the idea of a prior and posterior state of mind is inherently not dialogical, as genuine inner transformation occurs in the between of *I and Thou*. By cultivating qualities such as love, compassion and equanimity, individuals may be inspired to address social injustices and work toward a more just world, but from a dialogical perspective, there is no need for a precursive inner transformation, as the inner transformation will occur as we pursue the "outer" transformation. Both realms, the inner and the outer are not two separate dimensions of being, but rather one and the same⁷.

Buber's dialogical perspective rejected the basic mystical assumption of "subsuming" the self into an all-encompassing unity within the divine. In the between of *I and Thou* there is no mystical dissolution of the self into the other or into the divine. Buber's "*Between of I and Thou*" is not a mystical space of union or absorption of the self into the other, but it is precisely the space where we encounter the other, human or otherwise, in the fulness of its being. For Buber, God is not an abstract or distant deity, but a presence that emerges in the between of an I-Thou encounter. In the in-between encounter a person moves beyond both his ego-bound self, and his desire for a self-abolishing merger, and enters into a mode of genuine dialogue and presence. The between is the space of mutual encounter of a whole being I with a whole being Thou. It is in this relational space of authentic encounter that the pursuit of social justice is inherent to the deeds themselves. For Buber, God is not an object of knowledge or intellectual speculation, nor is God solely an inner experience, God is a deed we do, and that which we do is justice, love and compassion⁸. As discussed here, the recognition of God as the "between" has unavoidable implications for ethical action and social justice. If God emerges in the relational space of the I-Thou, then ethical conduct is the only essential manifestation of this encounter. Relating to others as Thou, with love, responsibility, dignity, and compassion becomes the act of recognizing the divine presence emerging in the between. The Hindu concept of "namaste," is often interpreted as saying "the divine in me recognizes the divine in you," but the dialogical approach takes

this sentiment a step further by saying that the I and the Thou recognize the divinity not *in* each other separately, but *between* them. In this sense, the I–Thou relationship is inherently a practice of ethical behavior and social justice. The recognition of the sacred “between” compels individuals to address social injustices and work towards creating a more humane and egalitarian society. I–Thou dialogue is not a holy sacrament, it is a concrete, practical and quotidian deed we do, and it was this aspect of existential praxis that drew Buber to devote much of his intellectual oeuvre to describing and interpreting the early Hasidic way of life. And these “here and now” aspects of spiritual life can be likened to what in Zen is called an “ordinary mind,” that is, a *deed-oriented spirituality* emptied from the accruals of extraneous theological and conceptual hindrances⁹. Buber wrote “There is something that can be found in one place. It is a great treasure which may be called the fulfillment of existence. The place where this treasure can be found is the place where one stands.” Nothing in dialogical relationships is transcendental or mystical, it is simply a mindful renewal of genuine human community.

3. The Systemic Hindrances to *I and Thou* Relationships

From the perspective of Buber’s philosophy, the principal hindrances to a dialogical life are the social constructs that prevent us from putting into practice the genuine deeds of I–Thou dialogue. I–Thou dialogue requires the building of a social structure within which the hindrances to its actualization could be minimized, and as discussed here, Buber identified this structure as “Religious Socialism.” It is in this sense that Buber’s philosophy intersects with political ideas and programs. In other words, it is an error to regard Buber’s dialogue as encompassing solely a relationship between two participants, as that could be construed as a “monologue of two”¹⁰. Dialogue, in its concrete and practical implications, is an overall social project. Therefore, in order to be able to practice I–Thou relationships we must create a society within which dialogue can be made manifest. As Buber insisted, I–Thou is a relationship each person does in accordance to his abilities and circumstances¹¹, emphasizing, as he did, that dialogue is not a dogmatic approach as there are no formulas or codes to proscribe the forms and contents of a dialogical relationship. Codifying relationships amounts to the adoption of an I–It approach to the practice of dialogue, the same as the codifying of our relationships with God in the form of institutional religion¹². For this reason, we can say that since it is not possible to articulate in strict terms what I–Thou entails, in a sort of apophatic manner, we can try to describe what *it is not*. Every time we reduce the scope and reach of I–It, we are creating the space and the time of I–Thou¹³. In a similar vein, Paul Tillich wrote “Buber’s existential ‘I–Thou’ philosophy. . . should be a powerful help in reversing the victory of the ‘It’ over the ‘Thou’ and the ‘I’ in present civilization . . . The ‘I–Thou’ philosophy. . . challenging both orthodox and liberal theology, points a way beyond their alternatives” (Tillich 1948, p. 23). Buber viewed the creation of intentional communal societies and their integration into larger federative structures standing beside and apart from the state as resulting in a concrete reduction in the realm of the political in favor of the expansion of the realm of the social (Buber 1996). This emptying of the realm of *Itness* can be likened to what in Zen is known as the creation of “The pure land of the Buddha in the human realm”¹⁴.

When we extend the principles of the *I–Thou* relationship from the realm of the personal to the realm of the social we find that the practices of dialogue inherently manifest in the form of a just and equitable society. It could not be otherwise, for while the I–It interaction is a utilitarian and objectifying interaction between people and with nature as a whole, the I–Thou relationship recognizes the essential humanity of each person and emphasizes the inherent dignity and value of human beings as such. The I–Thou relationship emphasizes the recognition of each person’s inherent value and irreplaceable uniqueness. This confirmation of otherness is crucial for social justice, as it demands that we acknowledge the humanity of all individuals, regardless of their race, social utility, gender, caste, socioeconomic status, or any other socially constructed characteristics. The I–Thou relationship, being a deed we do, involves a deep sense of empathy and

solidarity with oppressed individuals and communities. Dialogue calls for an irrevocable commitment to respect the experiences and struggles of others, standing alongside them in their pursuit of social justice, and actively working to dismantle the underlying systemic causes of oppression and discrimination. The dialogical praxis of social justice calls for the recognition of everyone's equal rights and the implementation of those rights through the overturn of pre-existing hierarchies and systems of privilege. Dialogue confronts and addresses the structural injustices that perpetuate inequality and discrimination, striving for a more just and inclusive society. *I and Thou* requires concrete efforts to address and rectify systemic inequalities and oppression from the immediate realm of the personal to the overall realm of the social. The I–Thou relationship entails the *responsibility* to engage in ethical action toward the other, demanding that we actively work for the creation of a more just and equitable society¹⁵. The principles of love, empathy, and compassion inherent in the I–Thou relationship are precisely the manifestation of the values and goals of social justice¹⁶. By embracing the praxis of I–Thou and the delimiting of our I–It interactions with one another we contribute to the realization of social justice, equality, and human flourishing for all.

4. The Between

The concept of the between of *I and Thou* is Buber's most fundamental dialogical principle. In Buber's philosophy, the concept of God *as* and *in* the between of the I–Thou relationship is the foundation for the dialogical understanding of social justice. Without the concept of the between, *I and Thou* remains a relationship that does not necessarily expand from the realm of the interpersonal to the realm of the social (Buber 2002). Buber affirms that there is no I outside of a relationship, and that the I of the I–Thou is not the same as the I of the I–It¹⁷. In other words, borrowing from Zen language, there is *no-self per se*, there is only the *emergence* of a *true-self* in the between of *I and Thou*. Since only through a Thou one becomes an I, hence the irrevocable need to pursue and promulgate deeds of social justice. Conversely, there is an illusory-self, that is the ego, that emerges from the interactions of I–It. The implications of this distinction for Buber's social philosophy is that the only way for the implementation of a socially just society is to facilitate the emergence of our innate true-selves through the practices of dialogical relationships (Margulies 2022, p. 18). The between is not a mystical absorbance of the I and the Thou into a unity that transcends and encompasses both, but a "narrow ridge"¹⁸ on which each participant firmly stands in the fullness of his own being. There is a distinction between ontological unity and existential otherness. From the perspective of Buber's philosophy of dialogue, we manifest the ontological wholeness of Being through the existential dialogue between *I and Thou*. Buber wrote "God is found near to the sphere that lies between beings, to the kingdom that is hidden in our midst, there between us." Buber can be understood as arguing that from an *existential* perspective God is not only the third person in the between of I–Thou, but God, in all dialogical regards, is the between of *I and Thou*. This being the case, there can be no room in that between for any social policy not based on social justice. The between is akin to the environmental realm of the spiritual, and as such it requires protection and nurturing. The spiritual environment is protected through the transformation of the social realm from a capitalistic–consumerist society and into a dialogical realm of I–Thou relationships.

Buber's in-between dialogical approach is the point of confluence when the personal, the social and the "spiritual" become one and the same. We find this non-dualistic approach in many sources within the Jewish religious traditions. One salient example is the founder of the Mussar movement, Rabbi Israel Salanter, who said: "My Spiritual needs are more important than my material needs, but the material needs of my neighbor are my spiritual needs"¹⁹. Whether, in A. J. Heschel's words, God is searching for us, or alternatively, we are searching for Her, from Buber's perspective, it is the *responsibility* for the other that opens what Zen calls the "gate-less gate" to the true presence of God in our lives. In other words, in the between of *I and Thou*, inner transformation is one and the same with outer transformation.

We find this dialogical approach in many different spiritual traditions. Francis de Sales said “You learn to speak by speaking, to study by studying, to run by running, to work by working; in just the same way, you learn to love by loving. All those who think to learn in any other way deceive themselves.” Richard Rohr understood the I–Thou and the process of dialogue in clear Buberian terms. Rohr wrote: “The in-between of things. Reality is radically relational, and all the power is in the relationships themselves! it sounds a lot like what we call holy spirit . . . we do not think ourselves into new ways of living, we live ourselves into new ways of thinking” (Rohr 2015). In other words, from a Buberian perspective, we can not “prepare” for dialogue for we must let dialogue prepare us. While mystics who report to have directly encountered the divine may feel a responsibility to act as agents of change in the world, from a dialogical perspective, the agency is itself the encounter with God.

5. The I–It and Its Systemic Manifestations

In contrast to the essence of the I–Thou relationship, the I–It interaction is characterized by the relegation of individuals to their ultimate utilitarian value, and it is in the rejection of this type of social interaction that the I–Thou system of relationships becomes the embodiment of social justice. From a Buberian perspective, the most intractable hindrances to human liberation are of two kinds: the spiritual-systems we have invented to help us attain it, and the social systems that fragment our lives into times of genuine encounters and times delineated by the strictures of I–It social interactions²⁰. Social justice and liberation cannot be partial, otherwise, what shall we call those times when we are not just or not liberated? There is no being partially just or partially free, there is only being partially unjust and fully in bondage. We should understand that Buber did not argue that social justice could only be achieved through the cultivation of authentic relationships, but to be precise, authentic I–Thou dialogue is itself the system of social justice we seek. In other words, there can be no social justice without I–Thou dialogue, and I–Thou dialogue remains empty of redemptory meaning if not extended from the personal to society as a whole.

Buber’s basic premises of dialogical spirituality mirror similar understandings within Zen Buddhism, namely, that genuine spirituality manifests not in mystical raptures, but in the deeds we do, in the between of *I and Thou*. That is to say, the life of the spirit, or the life of poetry, or even the life of the God, must be enacted in the ways we live our lives with each other and with the world, for spirit, poetry and God are the between of I–Thou (Margulies 2022, p. 97). Many practitioners and adherents of Zen have arrived at a similar understanding and organized themselves in various movements to advance issues in social justice and peace known as “Engaged Buddhism” (Thich 2017). From Buber’s dialogical perspective, we do not manifest spirituality by performing religious rituals, we manifest the spirit by embracing the neighbor, and we embrace the neighbor by entering into relationships of genuine communal structures founded on social justice. This type of spirituality is found in various degrees in all religious traditions. St. Francis of Assisi well said: “We teach the gospel, and if necessary we use words too.” That is to say, we manifest the presence of God by the ways of our relationship with the whole of existence. Indeed, if the realms of the spiritual, the poetical and the Godly are realms of relationship, we must understand that our human calling is to engage in the transformation of society. In Buber’s terms, we must transform society from a system based on I–It interactions to a community founded on I–Thou relationships.

6. Buber and Religious-Libertarian Socialism

Buber’s philosophy centers around the concept of dialogue, which he undertook to be the manifestation of genuine humanity, and believed that communitarian socialism possesses transformative potential in fostering understanding, empathy and authentic relationships. Buber distinguished between the realm of the political and the realm of the social, and by privileging the social over the political, Buber demanded the reduction in the scope of the state in the lives of individuals and communities (Buber 1996). The State,

for Buber, whether in its capitalistic or soviet-style manifestations, was an impediment to the creation of genuine socialist communities, or as he himself put it: the alternative of his period was to choose between Moscow and Jerusalem (Buber 1996). As with the term “mystic,” it is important to note that Martin Buber should not be wholly associated with the conventional understanding of anarchism, a political ideology advocating for the abolition of hierarchical systems of power, in particular, those embodied in the institution of the state. Buber’s philosophy of dialogue shares commonalities with Anarchist principles, but only inasmuch as those reflect principles of communitarian socialism. Buber’s ideas resonate with key Anarchist concepts such as voluntary cooperation, decentralization and federation of cooperative communities, individual autonomy and social justice. Buber’s emphasis on horizontal relationships aligns with Anarchist principles of voluntary cooperation and the rejection of hierarchical authority. Anarchism advocates for the decentralization of power structures, recognizing that centralized authority often leads to oppression and inequality. Similarly, Buber’s philosophy emphasizes the reorganization of society as a federation of autonomous cooperative communities of production, distribution and mutual aid, and in this regard Buber saw in the incipient Kibbutz movement one example of the system he envisioned²¹. These cooperative communities are to be formed on the basis of social autonomy and the rejection of coercive power. The basic Anarchist argument against oppressive structures, including the state, capitalism and other hierarchical systems that perpetuate social injustice through inequality, echoes Buber’s proposals for the reconstruction of society along communitarian lines.

At the same time, Buber had an abiding interest in the importance of the philosophies of Taoism and Buddhism (Margulies 2022; Herman 1966). Similarly to Buber’s understanding of the function of I–Thou in the realm of the social, in “the Orient,” the importance of the actualization of awakening as deeds of engagement with the world is built into the fundamental dharmic goal of enlightenment²². In this context, there is an abiding similarity between Buber’s ideas concerning the implementation of the socially just communities in the present time with the Ch’an Engaged Buddhist doctrine of the Pure Land on Earth (Master Sheng Yen 2007). For Buber, as for Ch’an’s teachings concerning the Pure Land, the communal ideal is not a description of a mystical heaven, nor, in a more mundane sense, is it a project that needs to be postponed until after the overall social revolution has ensued. Buber’s social philosophy called for cooperative communities to be established aside and beside the existing non-dialogical social and economic system, and through their larger federative agreements start to replace the functions of the state thereby rendering it vacuous. In other words, Buber did not call for revolutionary action against the existing unjust systems of governance, but for their replacement through active projects of community building and their mutual affiliation into larger federations. The larger the federative entity the more powerful it will be to avoid and eventually replace the state.²³ Similarly, Ch’an Master Sheng Yen’s “Buddhist Humanism” and its core teachings of Pure Land on earth are an explicit argument in favor of a Buddhism that is engaged in the “redemption” of the world in the “here and now.”²⁴ For Sheng Yen, Amitabha’s Pure Land should not be understood as referring only to a transcendent realm of the spirit, something akin to a paradise or even para-nirvana, nor is it only a cultivated mind’s enlightened approach to the comings and goings of daily existence. Similar to Buber’s ideas on the possibility of creating communities within the current non-communal system, Sheng Yen explains that Pure Land is a concrete and practical goal attainable in our current lives through actions of social responsibility and mutual solidarity (Margulies 2022). Moreover, the Buddha’s eightfold path to human liberation includes the principles of right livelihood and right actions (Bhikkhu Bodhi 1984). These principles are not ancillary teachings but integral parts of the path itself. It is in this sense that Buber saw the early Kibbutz movement and their federation into larger federative units as exemplary attempts at socialist communitarianism. As Maurice Friedman writes “The most promising experiment in the Village Commune, according to Buber, has been that of the Jewish communes in Palestine. These have been based on the needs of a given local situation rather than on abstract ideas and theories. At

the same time they have not been limited to the purely topical but have combined it with ideal motives inspired by socialistic and Biblical teachings on social justice (Friedman 1998, p. 120)".

In *"Paths in Utopia"*, Buber studied Anarchist thinkers, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin and Gustav Landauer, but he chose not to engage with the writings of Bakunin. Buber's political "teacher" was Gustav Landauer. Landauer argued for a Libertarian Socialism sharply contrasted to the more "direct action" Bakunin version, and most importantly, Landauer opposed the widespread Leninist version of state Socialism. Following Landauer, Buber was deeply critical of those embedded structures of oppression and social injustices that hindered the possibility of genuine I–Thou human relationships. Buber quotes Landauer's statement "The State is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of human behavior; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently." For Buber, capitalism and the state structures that sustain it, is the embodiment of the I–It system founded on the assignment of socially constructed monetary values to every human body and mind. As such, capitalism is a system that denies the essence of I–Thou relationships. Buber recognized in capitalism the detrimental effects of power imbalances, exploitation and dehumanization on individuals and communities.

7. Hebrew Humanism and Liberation Theology

Buber's Hebrew humanism calls for compassionate responses to human suffering by addressing the systemic causes of injustice. Buber's Hebrew humanism explored the paths by which religious and spiritual principles can inform and contribute to social and political transformation. Buber spoke from within his own Jewish cultural ancestry. As he once stated "I stand at my door and from there I speak to the world" (Buber 1990).

Buber did not explicitly define his philosophy within the framework of liberation theology, which is a tendency prevalent within the Catholic Church and some strands of European Protestantism, but he advocated a similar social vision concerning the need to organize society on principles of Religious Socialism. Buber's social critique focuses on the I–It objectification of the other, where individuals and communities are reduced to means rather than ends. His call for authentic relational encounters challenges oppressive power dynamics by seeking to dismantle those systems that dehumanize and exploit. In this context, Buber's ideas have had a visible impact on Catholic and Protestant liberation theology thinkers. Buber's Religious Socialism and the doctrines of liberation theology share their emphasis on the belief that dialogue, faith, social justice and the pursuit of liberation for the oppressed are the essence of a genuine relationship with God²⁵. The "founder" of liberation theology, Fr. Gustavo Gutierrez's call for "a sacrament of the neighbor" (Gutierrez 1988; Boff 1987) is a Buberian call for a deep dialogical transformation of society. Buber's influence on Protestant theologians has been significant and consequential. Many Protestant theologians who engaged with social justice issues have found Buber's philosophy to be of consequence to their understanding of the social repercussions of the distinction between *I and Thou* and *I and It*. Similarly, teachings of "Dharmic Socialism" and "Engaged Buddhism" mirror the contents and aims of Buber's Religious Socialism (Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu 1997).

Buber's views were described as "Hebrew Humanism" (Bieman 2002). Buber spoke of a "Believing Humanism." Buber's views concerning dialogical philosophy and social justice are firmly rooted within biblical exegesis as well as within some of the Judaic homiletical traditions. Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon, known as Maimonides, taught: "Anticipate charity by preventing poverty. Assist the reduced fellow man either by a considerable gift, or a sum of money or by teaching him a trade, or by putting him in the way of business, so that he may earn an honest livelihood and not be forced to the dreadful alternative of holding out his hand for charity. This is the highest step and summit of charity's golden ladder". Here, there is no questioning of the specific circumstances that lead the fellow man to become "reduced", and there is no demand to teach the person to earn his own livelihood rather than to give him a cash stipend. These views define the concrete application of the practices

of “radical love”. Radical love implies the imperative to establish a society in which the need to provide charity to the disadvantaged members of our communities will no longer be necessary. In other words, the call is to radically change those social conditions that make charity necessary in the first place, and that is the true manifestation of radical love in the realm of the social.

In the biblical book of Deuteronomy (15:8) it is written: “You shall surely open your hand to the poor, and shall surely lend him sufficient for his need/lack, according as he needs/lacks”. The Talmud explains the phrase: “According to that which is lacking for the poor person, you are commanded to give him . . . if it is appropriate to give him bread, they give him bread; if dough, they give him dough, if to feed him, they feed him. if he is not married and wants to take a wife, they enable him to marry; they rent a house for him, and provide a bed and furnishings . . .” While the Torah does not specifically itemize the reasons for the fiery demise of Sodom and Gomorrah, the prophet Ezekiel found it necessary to explain the motives behind God’s decision to destroy the cities: “Behold this was the sin of Sodom. She and her daughters had pride, excess bread, and peaceful serenity, but she did not strengthen the hand of the poor and the needy.”

One of Buber’s magisterial contributions to Jewish religiosity was his studies and explorations of the Hasidic movement, particularly its literary and folkloric expressions. In Hasidism, the highest rung of piety is to be a “Tzadik”, a practitioner of “tzedek”. The term *tzedek* denotes various different things, but in its Hebrew linguistic root it means social justice, and as such, it is mandatory by virtue of God’s own commandments. Deuteronomy (16:20) says “Justice, justice (tzedek, tzedek) you shall pursue”. Here, the word justice is repeated twice as a rare biblical literary tool for emphasis²⁶. There are seventy-seven instances in the entire Torah where words are doubled up or repeated for emphasis. The prophet Amos inveighed bitterly against the exploitation of the poor and the weakest members of the community.

In general, the Hebrew Bible contains the very specific and radical social teachings of twenty-one prophets. The prophets admonished the people to implement in the here and now the social and personal laws of the kingdom of God on earth. In a similar vein as Sheng Yen’s teachings on the Pure Land, the prophets’ kingdom of God is not in heaven, it is in this earth, and within this kingdom there is only room for social justice for the poor and liberty for the oppressed, peace between nations, and generally, an ecologically conscious society. Within the context of Buber’s Hebrew humanism he emphasized the importance of the equitable distribution of resources, the elimination of structural inequalities and the empowerment of marginalized voices, such as was the case with the Palestinian population of pre-state Israel. Buber tirelessly worked for the creation of a bi-national Jewish–Arab republic rather than a Jewish state (Mendes-Flohr 2005). In this regard, Buber’s approach to the Jewish–Arab conflict was rooted on two foundations: the first was his overall anti-statist Libertarian tendencies. The second foundation was deeply rooted in biblical teachings regarding the equality of rights between citizens of the land and its migrants²⁷. For Buber, the Palestinian Arabs were not foreign migrants to the land but fully rightful residents of the “land of two peoples”. Nonetheless, after the legal establishment of the State of Israel, Buber called on the newly formed Israeli government to relate to its Arab minority with policies and practices of social justice in the manner taught in the Torah. He demanded full civil rights and equality between Jews and Arabs.

In terms reminiscent of Buber’s I–Thou, Pope Francis speaks of creating a “culture of encounter” (Pope Francis 2016). As Paul Mendes-Flohr remarked, “Pope Francis uses Buber’s terminology about encounter and dialogue, but without explicitly mentioning Buber.” While not doctrinally an adherent of liberation theology, Pope Francis speaks of the Gospels of Jesus as teaching of caring and redemption for the poor and exploited. Francis said: “You pray for the poor, then you feed the poor: that’s how prayer works.” Compare this with Buber’s own words: “When people come to you for help, do not turn them off with pious words, saying, ‘Have faith and take your troubles to God.’ Act instead as though there was no God, as though there was only one person in the world who could help—only

yourself.” In other words, it is incumbent upon us to take actual responsibility for the fate of those in need, for we are the fulfillers or deniers of prayer. One important figure within the liberation theology movement is Paulo Freire (2007). Freire was influenced by Buber’s dialogical philosophy and its implications for social justice. Freire wrote: “Critical and liberating dialogue, which presupposes action, must be carried on with the oppressed at whatever the stage of their struggle for liberation. The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality. If the structure does not permit dialogue, the structure must be changed.” In terms of both, dialogue as education and the need to change the structure of society in order to allow for dialogue to become a reality, Freire is echoing fundamental Buberian ideas.

A glaring example of Buber’s reach within liberation theology was the “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” written by the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. In this letter, King states: “Now, what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law, or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law. To put it in the terms of St. Thomas Aquinas, an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law. Any law that uplifts human personality is just. Any law that degrades human personality is unjust. All segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority. To use the words of Martin Buber, the great Jewish philosopher, segregation substitutes an “I-it” relationship for the “I-thou” relationship and ends up relegating persons to the status of things. So segregation is not only politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, but it is morally wrong and sinful. Paul Tillich has said that sin is separation. Isn’t segregation an existential expression of man’s tragic separation, an expression of his awful estrangement, his terrible sinfulness? So I can urge men to obey the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court because it is morally right, and I can urge them to disobey segregation ordinances because they are morally wrong.” On 14 February 1965, Martin Buber added his name to a letter addressed to president Lyndon B. Johnson thanking him for the release from prison of Martin Luther King, and asking that the other 300 civil rights prisoners be promptly released as well²⁸. Catholic social projects such as Dorothy Day’s workers cooperatives are exemplary experiments in Religious Socialism, inspired, to a great extent by Martin Buber’s philosophy²⁹. The Catholic Workers movement is especially significant in that it was organized by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin as a federation of autonomous communities much in the way Buber envisioned society as a whole in his *Paths in Utopia*. Day studied and reflected on Buber’s philosophy as part of her own teachings on social justice, religion, cooperativism and Christian Anarchism. Thomas Merton, shortly before his untimely death, asked himself to judge his own life in light of Martin Buber’s philosophy of dialogue. Merton wrote that in light of what he perceived to be “the hollowness and falsity of my life... my business is to verify Buber’s (spirituality) with my own” (Merton 1999). In liberation theology, there is an effort to reconcile religious beliefs and values with Socialist principles, such as economic equality, social justice and collective ownership of resources. For Buber, non-political socialism and non-institutional religion are integral parts of the renewal of society along dialogical principles. Buber wrote: “Religion without socialism is disembodied spirit and, therefore, not genuine spirit; socialism without religion is body emptied of spirit and, hence, also not genuine body. But—socialism without religion does not hear the divine address; it does not aim at a response. Still it happens that it responds; religion without socialism hears the call but does not respond” (Buber 1996). Neither can be alive.

In summary, Religious Socialism, as advocated by Martin Buber, seeks to reconcile religious practices with the pursuit of social justice through the transformation of societal structures. Buber’s Religious Socialism argues that spirituality and social responsibility are intertwined and that the ideals of compassion, justice and solidarity are integral to a faithful life. As Buber’s philosophy emphasized the significance of dialogue and genuine

encounters in the pursuit of social justice, he believed that transformative social change could only occur through a renewal of spiritual creativity and communitarian association. Buber's Religious Socialism addresses economic inequality, exploitation of workers and human rights. He criticized capitalism for perpetuating social divisions and its commodification of human beings. Buber advocated for social and economic systems that foment and sustain I–Thou relationships, those that prioritize the well-being of all individuals and promote the equitable distribution of resources. He envisioned a society where economic relationships are grounded in solidarity, cooperation and shared responsibility.

8. Conclusions

Buber has had a significant impact on the discourses of social justice and peace throughout the world. Buber insisted on the fact that spirituality and social justice coalesce as one and the same practice, as there can be no genuine spiritual life outside of the I–Thou relationship. The interconnectedness of all that exists is what Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh called the practices of “inter-being”, which in Buberian terms is the between of *I and Thou*. Hanh, the Buddhist, did not speak of no-being or intra-being, but of a being grounded in the relationship with one another and all beings. In Buber's words, “At the beginning it was the relationship, and all real life is encounter” (Buber 1971). By integrating as one and the same spiritual insights with a commitment to social justice, individuals and communities can work toward the creation of a more just, compassionate and equitable world. Buber's advocacy of *religiosity* instead of religion serves as a wellspring of inspiration and guidance for the pursuit of personal transformation through I–Thou relationships, and for those relationships to serve as collective efforts to address systemic injustices. In conclusion, we can say that Buber's philosophy of dialogue is best understood by positing that dialogue precedes existence and then existence precedes essence. Buber's philosophy can be summarized by the realization that we should not seek God above or below, not in the spirit or the flesh, for God is not an entity anywhere. God is the between of *I and Thou*, and that between is the actualization of a society built on freedom, radical love and social justice (Margulies 2022).

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Notes

- ¹ Mysticism is also understood as achieving a unity of the self with the self of the divinity. The aim is the obliteration of the self and its subsuming within the “self” of the godhood. Buber maintained a fluid exchange on this topic with Gershom Scholem. Scholem's studies on Jewish mysticism, even as he defined it as a “revival of the mythic,” which seems to coincide with Buber's interest in Hasidism in terms of legend or folklore, diverted from Buber's approach to Dialogue as the foundation of religious experience. See (Scholem 1971).
- ² See (Friedman 2002). The mature expression of Buber's concern with realizing the divine through true community is the religious socialism which he developed in the period immediately after the First World War. This development was decisively influenced by the socialism of Buber's friend Gustav Landauer, the social anarchism of Michael Kropotkin, and the distinction between ‘community’ and ‘association’ in Ferdinand Tönnies's work, *Gemeinschaft und Gesellschaft* (1887). Community (‘Gemeinschaft’) Buber defines as an organic unity which has grown out of common possessions, work, morals, or belief. Association (‘Gesellschaft’) he defines as a mechanical association of isolated self-seeking individuals. It is an ordered division of society into self-seeking individuals held together by force, compromise, convention, and public opinion.
- ³ See Note 28 Martin Luther King 's letter from a Birmingham jail.
- ⁴ In *Paths in Utopia* Buber wrote “Seen from another angle this difference may be clarified still further. When we examine the capitalist society which has given birth to socialism, as a society, we see that it is a society inherently poor in structure and growing visibly poorer every day. By the structure of a society is to be understood its social content or community-content: a

society can be called structurally rich to the extent that it is built up of genuine societies, that is, local communes and trade communes and their step by step association" (Buber 1996).

In 1906, Buber published *Die Geschichten des Rabbi Nahman*. One of the fundamental points of Buber's understanding of Hasidism was precisely the insistence on the role of community and the quotidian life of the hasid as both the means toward and the expression of the relationship with God (Buber 1906).

Buber wrote "What good is the ecstasy of a religious experience if it caused me to miss a chance to save a desperate fellow human at my door?".

In his *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Buber (1958) wrote "To begin with oneself but not to end with oneself. To start from oneself but not to aim at oneself".

Buber wrote: "The world is not comprehensible, but it is embraceable: through the embracing of one of its beings".

See the Zen dialogue between Master Nansen and Joshu, Joshu asked "What is the Way?" "Ordinary mind is the Way," Nansen replied. "Shall I try to seek after it?" Joshu asked. "If you try for it, you will become separated from it," responded Nansen. "How can I know the Way unless I try for it?" persisted Joshu. Nansen said, "The Way is not a matter of knowing or not knowing.

It is of interest to note that Jacob Levy Moreno, the founder of the school of psychodrama, offered a critique of Buber's Dialogical philosophy as a "monologue of two." In a similar vein, Viktor Frankl, the founder of Logotherapy argued that Buber's dialogue does not transcend itself outside of the dyadic relationship. Both these observation underscore a lack of understanding of Buber's dialogical philosophy as essentially a community oriented practice.

Buber wrote "In spite of all similarities, every living situation has, like a newborn child, a new face, that has never been before and will never come again. It demands of you a reaction that cannot be prepared beforehand. It demands nothing of what is past. It demands presence, responsibility; it demands you".

Buber wrote "I do not accept any absolute formulas for living. No preconceived code can see ahead to everything that can happen in a man's life. As we live, we grow and our beliefs change. They must change. So I think we should live with this constant discovery. We should be open to this adventure in heightened awareness of living. We should stake our whole existence on our willingness to explore and experience".

Buber wrote: "It is indeed true that there can be no life without injustice. The fact that there is no living creature that can live and thrive without destroying another existing organism has a symbolic significance as regards our human life. But the human aspect of life begins the moment we say to ourselves: We will not do more injustice to others than we are forced to do to exist".

See Master Sheng Yen *A Pure Land on Earth*, Dharma Drum Monastery [2007] "The concept of a pure land on Earth is no illusion or fantasy, like a castle in the air. Rather, it is a reality that each and every one of us can experience in real life. The intention of building a pure land on Earth is not to move the pure lands of the Buddhas in other parts of the universe to Earth, nor does it set out to manifest on Earth of today the scenery of pure lands as described in the Amitabha Sutra, the Medicine Buddha Sutra, the Akshobhya Buddha's Land Sutra, and the Sutra of Maitreya's Descending to Our World. Instead, it applies the concepts of the Buddhadharma to purify people's minds, and applies the exemplary lifestyle of Buddhists to purify our societies. By means of purifying our thoughts, life, and minds and by putting in step-by-step, persistent endeavor, we work to achieve the purification of the social and natural environment. The Buddha Land Chapter in the Vimalakirti Sutra states, "By relying on the Buddha's wisdom, one can see that the land of this Buddha is pure. Once we look at the world with the Buddha's wisdom, we will perceive that the pure land is everywhere".

Buber wrote "Love is responsibility of an I for a Thou: in this consists what cannot consist in any feeling – the equality of all lovers. . .".

As Cornell West said "Justice is how love looks like in public".

In his *I and Thou*, Buber (1971) wrote "Through the Thou a person becomes I" and The I of the basic word I-Thou is different from that of the basic word I-It.

Buber's use of the term "narrow ridge" was inspired by the dictum of rabbi Nahman of Bratslav who said "all of life is a very narrow bridge: but the most important thing is never to be afraid".

When Buber speaks of God as the "Third Person" in a genuine I-Thou relationship it should not be understood as "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matthew 18:20). Buber's third person is not an outside addition to the relationship, it is the relationship itself, for there is no third person outside of the relationship.

Buber wrote "Nothing so tends to mask the face of God as religion; it can be a substitute for God himself".

In *Paths in Utopia* Buber (1996) wrote "One element in these reasons has been repeatedly pointed out: that the Jewish Village Commune in Palestine owes its existence not to a doctrine but to a situation, to the needs, the stress, the demands of the situation. In establishing the "Kvutza" or Village Commune the primary thing was not ideology but work. This is certainly correct, but with one limitation. True, the point was to solve certain problems of work and construction which the Palestinian reality forced on the settlers, by collaborating; what a loose conglomeration of individuals could not, in the nature of things, hope to overcome, or even try to overcome, things being what they were, the collective could try to do and actually succeeded in doing. But what is called the "ideology" I personally prefer the old but untarnished word "Ideal" was not just something to be added afterwards, that would justify the accomplished facts. In the spirit of the members of the first Palestinian Communes ideal motives joined hands with the dictates of the hour; and in the motives there was a curious mixture of memories of the Russian Artel, impressions

left over from reading the so-called “utopian” Socialists, and the half unconscious after-effects of the Bible’s teachings about social justice. The important thing is that this ideal motive remained loose and pliable in almost every respect.

- 22 In 1910, in his translation to German of Chuang Tzu’s parables, Buber states: “Amid our theories of races and cultures, our time has lost sight of the old knowledge that the Orient forms a natural unity, expressed in its values and workings. That despite their differences the peoples of the East possess a common reality that sunders them in unconditional clarity from the destiny and genius of the West.” Also, in 1976, Maurice Friedman wrote that “Martin Buber’s encounter with Asia is an important one. Until his death he remained actively concerned with comparative mysticism. Although Asian studies was not his great central field of scholarship, he was for years professor of Comparative History of Religion at the University of Frankfurt and did, in fact, deal in scholarly manner with Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. His concern with mysticism in Taoism, Hinduism and Zen, and with Eastern thought, became a study in dialogue. It was an integral part of his path”.
- 23 In *Paths in Utopia* Buber (1996) states “Proudhon by no means fails to recognize that “the real problem to be solved for federalism is not political, but economic”. “In order to make the confederation indestructible,” he says, “economic right must be declared the foundation of federative right and of all political order”.
- 24 Sheng Yen stated “In modern times Master Taixu advocated Humanistic Buddhism and promoted the Maitreya Pure Land. Venerable Master Dongchu, my late teacher, carried on this thought to found Humanity Magazine, and upheld the cause of Humanistic Buddhism. The advocacy of Venerable Master Yinshun (1906–2005) that “the Buddha was in the human world” is based on the saying of the Ekottara-Agama Sutra that “all Buddhas come from the human world.” I have followed in the steps of the sages of the past to advocate the pure land on Earth. In addition to expressing in various ways the viability of building a pure land on Earth, I have also given lectures on the topic to articulate the necessity of building a pure land on Earth.
- 25 It is of note to state that Buber’s liberation theology should also be understood as Buber liberating God from theology. Margulies (2022).
- 26 See Buber’s two tomes of Tales of the Hasidim, his Legend of the Baal Shem and The Tales of Rabbi Nahman.
- 27 “You shall also love the stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” (Deuteronomy 10:19.) “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God.” (Leviticus 19:34) “Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.” Then all the people shall say, ‘Amen!’ (Deuteronomy 27:19).
- 28 The text of the letter: Jerusalem, 14 February 1965. Dear Mr. President, We are taking the liberty to express our deep satisfaction that Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is now again a free man and can continue his righteous fight for the equality of his people, a fight to which you Mr. President, have given your full assistance. We are not equally sure that all of the other imprisoned [sic] 300 liberty fighters have meanwhile been released. If this suspicion should prove correct, we submit that urgent steps should be taken to return all of them as soon as possible to their families. Believe us, Mr. President, Respectfully yours Professors at the Hebrew University Jerusalem.
- 29 The last lines of Dorothy Day’s autobiography explain this thought further: “We have all known the long loneliness and we have learned that the only solution is love, and that love comes with community.” This third chapter of Day’s “rhetoric of defiance and devotion” develops within this context of Day’s Community: its participants, costs, conflicts, motives and its more than abundant controversies. While Dorothy Day, in the capitol of the United States was praying for a community which would allow her access to mutuality of purpose, on the other side of the Atlantic, Martin Buber, was planning his dream of a homeland populated by those who might recognize the personal experience of the “I-Thou” encounter which then might be translated into the public experience of communal living. While not suggesting Buber as a constant Day mentor, Day, herself, later described Martin Buber as “admirable for his community experiments in Israel” and she often identified him as “the only modern writer who held out a hope for a modern voluntary community as a place where men and women could live in love and the happiness which God intended for them” (Day, Selected writings). See Fitzwilliams (2009).

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