

The Paradox of Faith and the World

Martin Buber by Arthur Cohen. Hilary House. 110 pp. \$2.00.

by Thomas J. J. Altizer

The religious man has always been confronted by a primary paradox: on the one hand faith compels him to transcend the world; on the other hand faith impels him to address the world. This timeless paradox has a peculiar relevance to the situation of the man of faith today because the believer no longer confronts a culture willing to yield to his teaching, but one fundamentally hostile and closed.

The modern religious man is therefore compelled to convert prophecy into teaching, declamation into persuasion. He can no longer call out to the culture; rather he must accept its conditions and attempt, although transcending it in faith, to burrow from within.

The paradox of the religious man is underscored by Arthur Cohen's *Martin Buber*. Fundamentally his study is characterized by the effort to understand Buber as a "prophet" of the Holy to the modern world. The world will be penetrated by the Holy if men will open themselves to the address of God. Although it may be true that Martin Buber has made himself open to divine address, observed its nature and direction, and is now prepared to set up as a specialist in divine linguistics, the tragedy is that God appears no longer to exist for modern man because He no longer appears to act. As Mr. Cohen observes, where man once knew awe before the divine numen, he now knows only anxiety before the wholly unknown.

The modern sensibility may be characterized as an awareness of the absence of God. "God's Word for us is His silence," as W. H.

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Auden has somewhere remarked. Despite the fact that Buber was moulded by "the era of lost consciousness" whose concrete life was one of alienation and distress, he has discovered the voice of God for our time. Buber is the modern archetype of the classic paradox—he possesses knowledge which essentially transcends the culture and yet feels himself compelled to attempt to instruct the culture.

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The absurdity of this paradox is evident. Mr. Cohen is aware of its religious absurdity; but he is insufficiently aware that it is also an intellectual absurdity. This constitutes the chief limitation of his otherwise remarkable book.

Buber's sensibility and background, as Mr. Cohen's exposition of his biography would indicate, is saturated with aesthetic, not religious, influences. It is perhaps this more than anything else which should have suggested the intellectual absurdity of Buber's stance. Kafka, not Buber, might have become the prophet of our time—for Kafka, not Buber, would have been capable of writing a parable of the God who calls a prophet to address modern culture in the language of atheistic sensibility.

Although Buber might seem to have established contact with the modern consciousness, the profound and unresolved question is whether authentic religious contact does not finally entail the dissolution of the modern sensibility. This is the ancient paradox of the religious man in its contemporary setting.

Mr. Cohen's book is compelled by reason of space (the volume is one among many essays published in the series, "Studies in Modern European Literature and Thought") to an economy of exposition. After an introductory setting of the problem and a biographic excursus, he turns to the

presentation of Buber's theory of knowledge—the well-known concept of "I-Thou." Opening with a review of Buber's attack upon Kierkegaard's concept of the "Single One," he turns quite naturally—and brilliantly—to a treatment of Buber's dialogical thinking.

The perspective here is theological, rather than philosophical. Although Cohen is well aware of Buber's heterodoxy (e.g., "It is one weakness, I fear, in the method of *I and Thou* that God appears last and not first"), the philosophical foundations of Buber's position are insufficiently stated and the relation of his thought to that of Jewish mysticism is only partially stated. It would appear that Buber is close to Tillich and Schelling in his belief that sin is universal, that creation rises and falls through man. This implies assuredly a metaphysical split in creation which is grounded in God Himself.

Following his discussion of Buber's concept of "I-Thou" Cohen turns to an interpretation of Buber's view of the Bible and Hasidism. This chapter is at times brilliant and always illuminating. Buber is seen, not as a Jewish theologian operating within a formal theological tradition, but as a classic Hebrew religious thinker who is open to truth in all forms, whatever the auspices under which it is presented. Buber is conceived by Cohen as an "exegete," not a critic of the Bible. The exegete, rather than the critic, is he who opens himself to the Bible as Revelation. For this reason Buber conceives the Bible as the meeting-place of God and man: "God is the eternal I in quest of a Thou to whom He can speak, and man is the I who can return to God the address of Thou."

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To a Christian, Mr. Cohen's discussion of Buber's *Two Types of Faith* will be particularly inter-

esting. In this work—which Cohen considers Buber’s most profound work of Biblical study—the Hebrew concept of *emunah* (a faith which binds the believer to history and creation) is contrasted with the Pauline conception of *pistis* (faith as a radical leap which abandons the creation). Neither Buber nor Cohen is capable of dealing with Paul’s concept of faith (can any Jew, as Jew, ever understand Paul?); nor can Buber (in calling Jesus his “great brother”) deal more naturally with Jesus than can Cohen.

Mr. Cohen, whatever the limitations which providence imposes, astutely carries forward the distinction of *emunah* and *pistis* by pointing to Buber’s distinction between prophetic and apocalyptic religion. Prophetic faith wills the renewal and sanctification of the creation; apocalyptic faith looks forward to a destruction of the world which alone will make salvation possible. The apocalyptic believer draws an absolute line between the old and new aeons, between the reign of the Law and the reign of the Christ. Thereby, Buber argues, he abandons creation. In contrast to such surrender of the world, the man of prophetic faith gives himself to the hallowing of the world.

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A Christian can only stand in wonder at the depth and power of Buber’s conception of Judaism. If

Buber is right in his conception of the essential difference between Judaism and Christianity, then a Christian can never respond to the Jewish goal of hallowing the world. And it would appear that Hasidism could never have occurred within Christianity.

We are told that Buber is persuaded that the first principle of Hasidic teaching is the concept of a life of fervor and exalted joy. Hasidism (as opposed to Christianity) does not attempt to force redemption or to demand God’s action. As Mr. Cohen beautifully expresses it: “It has been and remains the task of Israel to reunite the Divine Presence (which, according to Jewish belief, wanders throughout the Exile of the World) and the Holy One, to return the fragments of creation to their unity and integrity.”

To achieve the reunion of God and creation is the work to which the Jewish mystic is dedicated. It is this religious task which Martin Buber has made meaningful to the modern world. Mr. Cohen has captured that meaning, but he is not wholly happy with it—for he senses in it a threat to normative Judaism, to the faith of the people of God, to the *Torah* itself.

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Perhaps Christians will never be able to understand Judaism. Certainly Martin Buber is a religious thinker without parallel in the Christian world, but despite

his apparent influence among Christians, his thought must remain basically foreign to the Christian faith. So likewise American Christianity has no apologist who embodies the anguish and the rage with the zeal of Arthur Cohen. In this book Mr. Cohen has given himself as much to an attack upon the modern world as to a presentation of the thought of Martin Buber.

The dimensions of *Martin Buber* are not large enough to give full scope to Mr. Cohen’s thought—and this probably accounts for most of the limitations I have suggested. But Cohen and Buber share a common limitation. They wish to speak in the language of faith and yet to be heard in the world. They imagine that faith itself has something to say to the world’s problems. They desire to revise the voice of the prophets for our age.

But though Buber has substituted a mystical doctrine of sanctification for the prophetic doctrine of judgment, he is no more prepared to speak to the world than were the prophets. And though Mr. Cohen has powerfully presented us with a vision of the reality of faith, he is not yet prepared to give himself to that detachment and abandonment which is a consequence of faith. Finally, he embodies, perhaps, the dilemma of us all: we want to be bourgeois men of faith. This once more is the timeless paradox with which we began.

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A JOURNAL OF ETHICS AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS
volume 1, no. 4 | April 1958

WORLDVIEW, successor to the World Alliance News Letter, is published monthly by The Church Peace Union. Subscription: \$2.00 per year. Address: 170 East 64th Street, New York 21, N. Y.

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