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Dialogical Theology

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Dialogical Theology

Ephraim Meir

Dialogical or interreligious theology is a new kind of theology that accepts and celebrates religious plurality and is grounded in dialogical praxis. Object and method of this theology are dialogical. Whereas confessional theology is the reflection upon one's own religion, interreligious theology investigates the conditions for an interreligious dialogue in which partners learn from one other and appreciate each other. It is therefore a novel way of relating to different religious groups in society. It learns in 'bookless moments' from and with people who live and think differently.

Rather than operating with a fixed content, interreligious theology is open and contextual. In the emerging new discipline of dialogical theology, distinctness allows for communication. Interreligious theology investigates the incommensurability of religions as well as the comparability between them: it establishes connections through translations and creates bridges. It is prone to promote self-criticism and to stimulate creative interaction with religious others.

In an increasingly global world, foreign religions quickly became neighbour religions. In such a constellation, one may begin to recognize that people from other religions have their own access to what John Hick calls 'the Ultimate Reality'.

Dialogical theology and dialogical philosophy emerged in the twentieth century. Dialogical thought departs from the objectivity of philosophers such as René Descartes, whose scientific rationalism began from the thinking ego who is confronted with objects outside. In a scientific view of the world, outside objects can be studied by the subject in an objective way. However, for Immanuel Kant, the numinous world is not accessible by our minds; we only know the phenomenal world. We only know the world as it appears to us. Dialogical philosophers continue to doubt that the only way to approach the world is through objective observation. With the dialogical turn in philosophy, the world is not objectively describable, nor is it an idealistic projection. Philosophers like Gabriel Marcel and Franz Fischer argued that human beings are not merely knowable: one meets them (Meir 2015b). One may participate in their existence. Dialogical philosophers argue that we live in a network of relations. What is important for them is that there is a between-space; the apex of humanity would lie in the lofty possibility of meeting human and non-human others. Ferdinand Ebner, for instance, argued that through the relationship with human beings and God, one enters the 'spiritual realities' (Ebner 1921). Gabriel Marcel sharply distinguished between the problem (*le problème*), the sphere of knowledge, and the mystery (*le mystère*) which goes beyond knowledge: Being was being with others (Marcel 1951). In dialogical theology, existence is co-existence and togetherness – it

is relationality. Recognition is approached as higher, more elevated than cognition. For religious dialogical thinkers, the dialogue between human beings is the basis of the relationship with the Divine. These insights on the relatedness of all with all are eminently present in Jewish dialogical theologies.

Keywords: Interreligious dialogue, Dialogical theology, Modern Jewish philosophers, Trans-difference, Jewish-Christian relations

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1 Jewish dialogical theology

In the construction of a dialogical theology from a Jewish vantage point, one may become inspired by the dialogical elements in the Jewish sources. It is also possible to study and critically evaluate the philosophies of Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, Emmanuel Levinas, and Abraham Joshua Heschel as contributions to interreligious dialogue and theology (Meir 2015a: 25–49; 2017: 155–185; 2019b: 135–178). Such a study shows the limits and the possibilities of their thinking for present-day interfaith dialogue. Buber, Rosenzweig, Heschel, and Levinas each contributed to Jewish–Christian dialogue and, broader, to an interreligious theology from a Jewish vantage point. As such, their work is relevant for the construction of a dialogical theology and especially for the present-day Jewish–Christian dialogue.

Buber's dialogical philosophy aims at the creation of a between-person. His emphasis is on presentness and on the presence of the eternal Thou in the interhuman encounter. Following Georg Simmel, he distinguishes between religiosity and religion. For Buber, religiosity is the realm of interhuman relationship in which the divine presence becomes manifest, whereas religion is the specific, institutionalized form of religiosity. During his lifetime, Buber initiated and participated in Jewish–Christian dialogues. Likewise, Rosenzweig's life and work, especially his magnum opus *Star of Redemption*, testify to a lifelong engagement in the Jewish–Christian dialogue. Buber's and Rosenzweig's Bible translation efforts were an eminently dialogical enterprise.

Heschel deemed that the plurality of religions is God's will. To save the divine image in human beings, Heschel argued that cooperation with Christianity was necessary. His prophetic thinking led him to a dialogue with Cardinal Bea, who was responsible for *Nostra Aetate* (the Declaration of the Roman Catholic Church's Second Vatican Council on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions), and to cooperation with the Protestant pastor Martin Luther King in favour of the rights of Black Americans.

Finally, Levinas' philosophy on the 'I' as 'here I am' before the other, and on the other as always exterior and inassimilable, brings further building blocks for an interreligious, multi-perspectival theology. Jewish dialogical theology is moored in the philosophies of the forementioned Jewish thinkers.

Dialogical theology is essentially pluralist and goes beyond sameness and otherness in 'trans-difference' (Meir 2018a; 2019b: 29–46; 2021: 305–318). The aim of dialogical theology is to create a relational 'I' and to promote the interaction between religions in view of the creation of peaceful societies. Epistemological humility, recognition of the other, extending hospitality, learning, and translating are the main characteristics of a dialogical theology.

2 Martin Mordechai Buber

2.1 *Ich und Du* (I and Thou)

In his *Ich und Du*, Buber developed a transformative thinking, in which the isolated self is a mere mental construct (Buber 1958a; 1970). As such, Buber belongs to a growing movement of relational thought that contributes to interreligious theology. The 'I' becomes an 'I' through a 'you'. The relationship with God, the eternal Thou, takes place within the relationship with others.

Buber creates a common ground between I and Thou. Starting from the *Beziehung* (the relation) from an I to a Thou, human beings may develop a *Begegnung*, a mutual relating to each other. 'In the beginning is the relation' (Buber 1970: 69; 1958a: 20, '*Im Anfang ist die Beziehung*'). The intention which brings one beyond one's own existence may grow into an intersubjective encounter. As a result, '[a]ll actual life is encounter' (Buber 1970: 62; 1958a: 15, '*Alles wirkliche Leben ist Begegnung*'). Mutuality and reciprocity characterize the lofty meeting, the *Begegnung*. The eternal Thou is present in the between (*das zwischen*) of two people. The divine presence, the Shekhinah, lives between people. The notion of the intersubjective contests the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object. For Buber, we are not mere observers. We do not only describe, analyse, or catalogue. The depth of life lies in the creation of a common space, a 'between' space.

In the third part of *Ich und Du*, Buber points to the necessity of religions, which all create 'a new form of God in the world' (Buber 1970: 166; 1958a: 102, '*eine neue Gestalt Gottes in der Welt*') to the degree that they relate to their living source and force, the ever-present Thou. Religions are therefore necessary but also problematic (Buber 1970: 161; 1958a: 98): they have a Janus face, since they belong to the it-world as well as to the you-world.

Buber situated the human relationship with God within the intersubjective meeting, criticizing Gnostic-style religions which were disconnected from the world. It is only through *Gegenwärtigkeit* (presence) before the other that one receives a glimpse of the ever-present, eternal Thou (Buber 1958a: 16, 69; 1970: 63, 123). Consequently, God is never an object of our thoughts, an 'it', but is rather to be addressed as a 'Thou'. Lowering God to an 'it' has been the eternal problem of religions that want to 'possess' God and make him permanently available (Buber 1970: 155; 1958a: 93). In religions, Buber asserts, one desires 'to have God'; although God cannot become an it, he becomes 'an object of faith' (Buber 1970: 160, 162; 1958a: 98, 99). In contrast, Buber understood authentic religiosity – or the real encounter with the eternal Thou – as taking place in openness to the other human being. Faith and cult may degenerate and freeze the living, holistic 'I–you' relationship into a relationship of lesser degree, the fragmentary 'I–it' relationship that

occurs between subject and object. Inversely, thanks to the living, actual relationship, cult and faith may turn again and again into presence.

Buber's dialogical thoughts as they come into expression in *Ich und Du* are of crucial importance for interreligious theology, which values one's presence that makes the other present without classifying and objectifying, functionalizing or admonishing. The sublime act of 'presence' and the realization of a 'between-person' (*Zwischenmensch*) (Buber 1962d) are cornerstones for the construction of an interreligious theology.

For Buber, interhuman meetings do not take place when knowing or hearing *about* the other and their narrative. In the encounter, one speaks *to* the other, one talks *with* the other, one addresses him or her in openness. The problem is that one easily makes a caricature of the other instead of approaching him or her without bias and even without prior knowledge and concepts. If knowledge comes first, one misses a real meeting. In aimlessness, the marvel of meeting may take place. Dialogue entails confirming (not merely accepting) the partner and approaching him or her as a 'Thou'. Given the fact that the interreligious dialogue is often burdened by a priori categories, biased attitudes, and reductive approaches, Buber's alternative to the problematic it-world with its subject-object scheme is therapeutic.

2.2 Dialogue with Christians

2.2.1 Buber's approach to Christianity

In his relation to other religions, Buber paid special attention to Christianity. He gave great weight to pre-Pauline Christianity and placed it alongside Judaism as an eminent way of serving God. He labelled early pre-Pauline Christianity as radically Jewish (Buber 1962a). Moreover, he thought that as a Jew he could understand Jesus better than Christians, because of Jesus' Jewishness.

Buber wanted to go beyond confessional theology in search for ecumenical unity. This brought him to participate in the multireligious Forte Kreis and to the Patmos group. The Forte Circle was a group of intellectuals who strived to establish a 'transnational authority' just before the outbreak of the First World War. To the Patmos group, founded in 1915, belonged also Franz Rosenzweig, Hans and Rudolf Ehrenberg, and Karl Barth. Buber's engagement in the Jewish-Christian dialogue led him to the publication of the journal *Die Kreatur* (The Creature), which appeared from 1926 to 1929. His coeditors were the Catholic Josef Wittig and the Protestant Viktor von Weizsaecker. The aim of the journal was to create a genuine dialogue between the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant religions that were defined by the editors as 'exiles' (Buber 2011: 96). The title *Die Kreatur* was chosen because religions with different revelations have faith in the world as creation in common. In his non-exclusivist view, there was a plurality: the church and Israel both knew about 'Israel', but they interpreted 'Israel' in a fundamentally different way. In Jewish

parlance, Israel referred to the Jewish people. For the church, Israel was a spiritual entity. They spoke differently about 'Israel' but this did not prevent them building dialogue and to look for common ground.

A different, polemic tone is perceivable in the article 'The Faith of Judaism', first published in 1933 (Buber 1958b). In the article, Buber accuses John the Evangelist of having substituted a dyad for the Jewish triad of creation, revelation, and redemption. For Buber, John reduced revelation and redemption to one single time. Marcion, Paul's pupil, went even further by substituting a monad for the dyad: creation was not God's work and no longer blessed. In Marcion's Gnostic view, the material world could no longer become God's Kingdom. In modern times, the Marcionizing worldview was adopted by Adolf von Harnack, who deemed that the entire Old Testament was the result of an ecclesiastical paralysis. In the catastrophic 1930s, Buber blamed people for turning a blind eye to the 'spirit of Judaism', which endeavoured to bring redemption into the concrete, created world. In his first lecture upon his arrival in Jerusalem in 1938, Buber further explains his thesis: three years after von Harnack's death in 1930, Hitler realized the Marcionite thought, not with spiritual but with violent physical means (Buber 1962b: 1053–1070). For Hitler, the church had to make a choice: to side with Judaism or to categorically distance itself from it. Buber linked Christian antisemitism to Hitler's racial antisemitism. Although Buber severely criticizes Christianity, he resumed his dialogue with Christians, also after the Second World War.

Buber distinguished between Judaism and Christianity, but he deemed that, in eschatological times, the 'exiles of the religions' would be gathered in the Kingdom of God. This eschatological perspective made religions relative and put them in service of the Kingdom of God, which should not be identified with only one religion. In this way, Buber built bridges between different religions. They were not the *Kingdom* itself. While Buber noted differences between Judaism and Christianity, he developed a 'trans-different' attitude. He believed in the value of an interaction with Christians, and hoped that they could see Jesus with new eyes and learn what had been neglected throughout the ages: that Jesus' context was the context of Jewish *emuna* (confidence, trust). He wanted to teach Christians that Jesus could only be understood from his Jewish background. Jesus became for him the hyphen between two religions that needed each other. One religion could learn from the other. Buber's view on the positive interaction between the two religions is exemplary for interreligious dialogue and theology.

In his *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (Two Types of Faith), first published in 1950, Buber placed Jesus in the history of Messianism: he saw Jesus as someone with Messianic forces, as a suffering Servant of the Lord, a Messianic person who stepped out of hiddenness (Buber 1962c). With this perspective, Buber thought that he had created common ground between Jews and Christians. He hoped that Jews would give a place to Jesus in the

history of Messianism and of Servants of the Lord. He admonished Christians to recognize that Jesus belonged to Judaism and that he could not be extracted from his most natural *Sitz im Leben* ('setting in life' or proper context) in favour of the invention of Christ as presented in Pauline theology and the Christian dogmata. At the same time, he disagreed with Jewish religious fundamentalists, who did not want to hear about Jesus or Christianity. Jesus was his 'big brother', a person who had been completely within the Jewish tradition and had desired that people do not forget the intention of their deeds and remembered to hallow each detail in everyday life. His Jesus was anti-dualistic and anti-Gnostic, like a Hasid, who hallows every aspect of life and accentuates intention and interiority. He related to the world, which had to be mended and brought to the Kingdom of God. Buber wrote extensively about Jesus as an eminent dialogical person and a Jewish son of God. In his view, Jesus was a suffering Servant, an *eved ha-Shem* as in Deutero-Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1–9; 49:1–9a; 50:4–9; 52:13–53:12). He sincerely thought that his understanding of Jesus as suffering Servant could diminish Gnostic tendencies in Christianity.

Buber's view on the relationship between Judaism and Christianity and his approach to Jesus as a suffering Servant are valuable. However, the drawback of Buber's view on Judaism and Christianity lies in the radical opposition he portrays between the Jewish *emuna* (confidence, trust) and the Christian *pistis* (belief in, creed). In his typology, *emuna* is dominant in Judaism, whereas *pistis* rules in dogmatic, Hellenistic Christianity.

For Buber, *emuna* is I–you language, and *pistis* is I–it. Critical of the growing I–it culture of his time, he deemed that this problem started with the Pauline view: Paul's impact would be tangible in the society of Buber's days. Buber argued that Paul objectivized and created dogma instead of continuing a religion in which Teshuva is central (*teshuva*, which is commonly interpreted as 'repentance', etymologically means 'return' as well as 'answer'). In his attention to religion as linked to the concrete secular world, Buber severely criticized Paul, whom he held as responsible for the growth of the I–it culture Buber perceived in society. For Buber, Paulinism was palpable whenever one relinquished a forever unredeemed and unredeemable world. In his own religious socialism, Buber linked religiosity to the concrete world. Faithful to the Jewish idea of *tiqqun 'olam* (mending the world), he contested the dichotomy between religiosity and secularity.

With his contrast between *pistis* and *emuna*, Buber rephrased his philosophical categories of 'I–it' and 'I–you' and applied them to the religious domain. The problem is that by this application of his philosophical categories, Christianity belongs largely to the it-world, deprived of the salvific you-world.

2.2.2 Evaluating Buber's contributions to interfaith dialogue

Through his approach to Jesus, Buber inspired many Christians. He described Jesus as a Messianic person who called for Teshuva. Jesus had a faith that expressed itself

in deeds, but placed the emphasis upon one's interiority, upon *the way* one performs commandments. In this manner, Buber sought to purify Jesus from the dogmatic garments in which he was dressed by his followers in later stages. Similarly to Buber, David Flusser tried in his historical research to understand Jesus from his Jewish origins. Buber and Flusser, each in his own way, thereby laid foundations for a fruitful and challenging dialogue between Judaism and Christianity. From the standpoint of interreligious theology, this is a great contribution: a very Jewish Jesus, a kind of *zaddik* (righteous one), connected to and responsible for others, rejoicing and suffering with human beings, became the link between Judaism and Christianity.

Buber invited Jews and Christians to truly meet each other in dialogues without preconceived agendas. Both had their own way to God and had to testify to his presence through meetings in this concrete world. Alongside Buber's contribution to the interreligious dialogue and to dialogical theology, there are also some flaws in Buber's writing on religions.

First of all, Buber's presentation of post-Pauline Christianity as devoid of deeds is contestable. It is therefore questionable if one may typologically reserve the existential attitude of *emuna* for Judaism and divest Christianity of it. The holistic 'I–you' as well as the fragmentary or functional 'I–it' are present in Judaism as well as in Christianity. Buber's distinction does not acknowledge a more complex reality. Notwithstanding his own remark at the beginning of his *Zwei Glaubensweisen*, he remained apologetic in this book.

It is positive that Buber situates Jesus completely in the history of Jewish faith. He hereby challenges Christians to understand Jesus differently, from his Jewish life setting, in the tradition of *emuna*. He wanted Christians to leave their attitude of *pistis* and return to the tradition of *emuna*. But was he right in contrasting Jesus with Paul? In the new view on Paul from a Jewish standpoint, Paul is no longer the founder of a new religion; he is rather the religious genius who extended the divine alliance from the Jewish people to the entire spectrum of the nations of the world.

It is quite understandable that, after the Shoah, Buber blamed Christianity for its anti-Judaism, its exclusivism, and its purely Christian prototypical reading of the Hebrew Bible. However, he knew that Jews and Christians each had their own way of talking about the divine mystery and perceived that this may lead to mutual understanding. In the renewal of their respective faith, Israel and the Church had much to say to each other that had not yet been said – and, in this manner, they could help each other.

With *Zwei Glaubensweisen*, Buber offered the reader his analysis of the crisis of Western civilization, which he regarded as being greatly influenced by a kind of Christian Gnosis. In the book, he attests that Christians need the Old Testament and may understand themselves better on the background of Tanakh. With his anti-Gnostic stance, Buber

wanted to save Christianity from a religiosity that was not linked to daily life in this concrete world. Yet, the means he used to reach his goal remain problematic.

Today, new Jewish views on Jesus and Paul have arisen among American Jewish scholars. Zalman Schachter-Shalomi and Daniel Matt are not interested in the historical or ethical Jesus or in his Messianism; they accept Christian claims of incarnation *prima facie*. Their reception of Jesus evaluates him positively, including in his more transcendent aspect.

Of further importance for the Jewish–Christian dialogue is the so-called ‘new perspective on Paul’, which maintains that Paul did not place *nomos* (law) and *pistis* (belief/faith) in opposition (Meir 2017: 182–185). Mark Nanos, for instance, maintains that Paul saw himself entirely within Judaism, that he was not the founder of a new religion but a reformer who fought against Jewish ethnocentrism and considered the non-Jewish converts as ‘full members of the family of Abraham, and not merely guests’ (Nanos 2011: 553). Non-Jews could participate in the covenant without having to observe all the mitzvot (the 613 commandments), which are preserved for Jews and, therefore, boundary makers. Like Buber, many Jewish scholars saw Paul as the first apostate from Judaism. However, a more accurate close reading of the authentic letters of Paul indicates that his Judaism was never relinquished but lived and valued as the source of a greater movement of atonement, of *kappara*, which included the entire world.

Notwithstanding the above criticism, Buber greatly contributed to the construction of an interreligious theology. His reflections on the importance of *emuna* (trust) form the basis for any interreligious dialogue. In Buber’s vision, Judaism could learn from Christianity and vice versa. Christians believe individually (in the sense of each Christian coming to the Christian faith as an individual) but may learn from Jews to see the implications of their faith on the collective level. Likewise, Jews with their interest in the collective may learn from Christians that the individual is also important. Buber’s remark at the end of *Zwei Glaubensweisen* is conducive of a real interreligious attitude, in which one is open to learn new things from the other in the search for a good life in view of the ‘Ultimate Reality’. His dialogical, interpersonal thinking may be applied to the ongoing conversation between people who belong to different religious groups.

With his dialogical thought, Buber contributed to the appraisal of a plurality of religions in relation to the ‘eternal Thou’. He paved the way to a new view in which all religions approach the Transcendent or Unutterable, about which all religions have so much to say. His meta-religiosity allows for acceptance and criticism of religions that are all in ‘exile’ and threatened by nondialogical, Gnostic, and magical elements. Religion is not God himself and no believer is in possession of God’s pure word.

Building relations with Christians was not always easy for Buber. A special issue of Buber's periodical *Der Jude* (The Jew) on the theme of Judaism and Christianity was published in 1924. Almost all of the Christian contributors failed to leave their polemic position (Mendes-Flohr 2019: 169–170). On 14 January 1933, about two months before Hitler's boycott of Jewish shops, Buber accepted a discussion with Karl Ludwig Schmidt. Schmidt was a Professor of New Testament at the University of Bonn and a highly respected liberal Christian. The debate took place at the *Jüdisches Lehrhaus* (Jewish Study House) in Stuttgart. The positions taken by Schmidt were clearly supersessionist and anti-Zionist. Buber forcefully disagreed and highlighted that the divine covenant with the Jewish people remained in vigour (Mendes-Flohr 2019: 175–180).

Of special importance for Jewish–Christian relations is Buber's and Rosenzweig's formal-equivalent translation of the Bible (Meir 2015a: 83–116). With their translation they wanted to counter the neo-Marcionist tendencies in German society which rejected the God of the Hebrew Bible and wished to erase Christianity's Jewish roots. Buber and Rosenzweig further wanted to acknowledge that the God of the Jews is the Creator of the world, a point which has to be taken seriously in Christian–Jewish dialogue and Christian theology. Finally, they wanted to convince Christians that salvation was not particular, but universal (Mendes-Flohr 2019: 170–172).

2.3 'The Question of the Single One': a challenge to Christians

Buber brought religiosity as ethics into the sphere of the political. In 1936, he published his 'The Question to the Single One' (Buber 1962c). This essay addresses the Christians in Germany. It tried to convince Christians not to follow the hysterical masses who blindly followed Hitler without personal standpoint. Buber polemizes with Kierkegaard, who separated religion and ethics and who did not marry because he wanted to become a solitary man of faith, alone before God, the 'Single One' in faith. Whereas Kierkegaard renounced the world and marriage and avoids the crowds to become the 'Single One', Buber takes the *res publica*, the body politic, seriously. Kierkegaard turns away from what Buber perceives in his communication with the Divine. Instead of lauding the isolated, unmarried person, Buber praises social life and the coexistence with others as the way that leads to God. It is not separation from human beings but instead the interconnection with them brings the Divine into perspective. Buber reproaches Kierkegaard for confusing the body politic, or public existence, with the crowd. The Single One, Buber concludes, is not the one who has an exclusive relation with God far away from engagement in the world. It is rather the one who is concerned with the body politic and brings one's engagement in the world before God. The Single One is, therefore, not the Kierkegaardian 'I' who subtracts the world; it is the one who takes responsibility. The Single One who lives in responsibility is involved in politics and responds to the Divine in a social way.

In a time when truth was brutally politicized, Buber understood responsibility as conscience, as conscience of the '[divine] spark' (Buber 1967: 69). As such, this responsibility of each and every human being is distinguished from a collectivism that would suffocate the individual who takes the presence of the other seriously. Buber closes his essay with the following words:

That man may not be lost there is need of the person's responsibility to truth in his historical situation. There is need of the Single One who stands over against all being which is present to him – and thus also over against the body politic – and guarantees all being which is present to him – and thus also the body politic.

True community and true commonwealth will be realized only to the extent to which the Single Ones become real out of whose responsible life the body politic is renewed. (Buber 1967: 82; 1962c: 264–265)

Only on the surface does the essay deal with the Single One of Kierkegaard. In fact, it deals with the actuality of Buber's time, more specifically with Carl Schmitt's theories in which friend/foe division is essential as basis for politics (Cherniak 2024: 27–57). In his essay, Buber attacks the juridic theoretician of the Third Reich who worked with the distinction between friend and foe as parallel to the distinction between moral good and evil. The underlying idea of Schmitt's political theory is that man is evil. His theological associate was Friedrich Gogarten, who underscores the absolute sinfulness of the human being and his redemption by the grace of God alone. For Buber, good and evil are not a pair of opposites; the two are present in the human being: humans are both good and evil. The two poles are in humanity. Contesting the totalitarian state, the Single One in his responsibility and conscience gives due account to God.

Buber's dialogical essay presupposes the positive interaction between human beings as the backbone of a religiosity that is incompatible with authoritarian structures. It not only contests Kierkegaard's fleeing from the world but also (and foremost) Schmitt's dangerous theory that endows the state with the authority to decide over what is good and evil. The Single One as I–you is involved in the world, intertwined with others in conscience and unavoidable responsibility.

2.4 Religious or Hebrew humanism

In Buber's philosophy, the uniqueness, dignity, and value of every human being are central. He envisioned true communities which he found in early Hasidism and which he wanted in his dialogical Zionism. He distanced himself from Kierkegaard's solitary 'knight of faith' as well as from the Russian collectivism; each individual was irreplaceable and had to come to full fruition in the community. This explains Buber's concern for the Arabs

in Israel/Palestine and his lifelong fight against a narrow nationalism. In this fight, he was clearly inspired by his friend Gustav Landauer, who cured Buber from a narrow German nationalism and helped him to develop from '*Kriegsbuber*' ('War Buber') to the dialogical thinker of *I and Thou*.

Buber himself overcame the abyss of meaninglessness and stepped towards a humanism that, with time, became more and more dialogical. Other biographical elements – such as the tragic death of a young soldier called Mehé, who died in the frontline after he contacted Buber in search for meaning – led to his mature, full-blown dialogical thought as expressed in *I and Thou*. Buber's dialogical philosophy and life are inevitable for a future dialogical theology.

3 Franz Rosenzweig

In Rosenzweig's *Stern der Erlösung* (The Star of Redemption, originally published 1921), the command 'Thou shalt love' (Deut 6:5) and the response 'Here I am' (Gen 22:1) are central (see Rosenzweig 2005). More than Buber, Rosenzweig paid attention to the institutional forms of religions. He regarded Judaism and Christianity as two authentic responses to the divine revelation. Judaism stayed in a dialectical, critical relationship with Christianity. Additionally, the Bible was the Jewish Bible *and* the New Testament. Rosenzweig appreciated the conjunction '*and*', which he utilized to oppose a monadic view of reality. As such, his thought abides at the beginning of a pluralized theology. He further contributed to the interreligious dialogue and theology through his conviction that translation constitutes a readiness to share a common world. In his *Jehuda Halevi* (in which he translates a collection of poems by the medieval philosopher and poet), he wrote:

There is only One Language. There is no peculiarity of one language that—even if only in dialects, childish speech, or idioms of a particular class—cannot be detected, at least in embryo, in every other language. This essential unity of all languages, and based on it the commandment for all human beings to understand one another, is what creates the possibility and also the task of translating—the possibility, the permissibility, and the obligation to translate. (Rosenzweig 2000: xlv–xlvi)

3.1 Bible translation

Through their Bible translation, Buber and Rosenzweig brought a refined contribution to dialogical thinking and theology. The capacity to engage in translation is one of the criteria for successful interreligious meeting and dialogue. Buber and Rosenzweig's *Verdeutschung der Schrift* (this German translation of the scriptures started in 1925, was continued by Buber after Rosenzweig's death, and completed by him in 1961), with its demand to be 'heard' by Jews as well as by Christians, is an eminent example of intercultural and interreligious dialogue. The translation brought Jewish culture into interaction with the German one and, in this way, contributed to 'trans-difference' and a

hermeneutics of the foreign, in which otherness and sameness come into dialogue. The difference of Jewish culture present in the Hebrew words, strange to the German ear, was preserved in the translation. The particularity of the Hebrew world was not domesticated and absorbed in the German translation. Buber's and Rosenzweig's sensibility for the original words brought a change of perspective in the hearers of the biblical word. Gnostic spiritualization became impossible, because the translation respected the materiality of the word. Buber's and Rosenzweig's method, which preserved alterity, remains vital for every form of conversation, and especially for interreligious conversation (Meir 2015a: 37–38).

3.2 *Star of Redemption*

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Rosenzweig came up with an exceptional view on Christianity. He courageously put Christianity next to Judaism and defined it as a legitimate response to the divine revelation. In Part III, book 1 of *Star of Redemption*, Judaism has a metahistorical task; in Part III, book 2, Christianity is engaged in history. One may contest Rosenzweig's view on the division of labour between Jews and Christians in the process of redemption, but he illustrates a complementarity between the two religions. Jews are the fire, and Christians the rays. Christianity in the *Star of Redemption* is eternally on the way, whereas Jews are the eternal people. Such a view is disputable, but it is constructive that Rosenzweig acknowledged both the Jewish and the Christian responses to divine revelation as legitimate. Rosenzweig's view on these twin religions is an example of pluralism that grants legitimacy to another religion. Unfortunately, Rosenzweig did not develop the same strategy for the dialogue with other religions (Meir 2019b: 153–178). Therefore, his account of the compatibility of two religions is only a start in view of the development of a dialogical theology that values the copula 'and' in appreciation of the plurality of *all* religions.

The two communities take part in the divine 'truth', which is higher than the truth experienced by either of them separately. Rosenzweig describes how each community lives redemption differently: the intimate Jewish community lives eternity now, while the Christian missionary community involves itself in history and strives for eternity. He bases his thinking on Judaism with Christianity as its 'antipodic child', not by analysing their respective faiths, but by using a quasi-sociological description of both communities. They are related in a critical-complementary relationship.

For Rosenzweig, Christianity must always spread further; it must be missionary, just as it is necessary for Judaism to set itself apart. Begetting in Judaism is bearing witness for eternity; in Christianity, one bears witness in faith, which is faith in the way to eternity. The Christian faith is faith in something, whereas the Jew does not have faith in something but incarnates faith; Jewish faith, *Zeugnis*, is the product of begetting, *Erzeugen*. On the eternal way, individuals are united by mutual action in the world. *Ecclesia* is therefore the

assembly of individuals who bear testimony to Christ, beyond differences of sex, age, class, and race.

Rosenzweig considered Christianity to be an important way of life next to the Jewish one, and noted many parallels and differences between the two. Rosenzweig regarded Jews as having a special function towards Christians, which consists in reminding Christians that they must not revert again to their previous pagan stage. Christianity illuminates the entire world; Jews with their unity between nation and religion remind the Christians that they are on their way. The synagogue looks prophetically into the future. The Church also wants eternity, and yet Christians are much more linked to history. They have the task of bringing pagans in history to the one God and to vanquish their own paganism. They remind the Jews that they are not the only ones bringing redemption into the world. With his complex description of the Jewish–Christian relationship, Rosenzweig could not conceive of his own self as separate from the image of the other. Christians need Jews as their source, and Jews need Christians as the ‘rays’ of their ‘fire’. Unlike Buber, who situated Jesus in a series of humble servants of God, the ‘*avdé ha-Shem*’, Rosenzweig explicitly highlighted the transcendence of Jesus as essential to the Christian view. Because of his view on the interconnectedness of religions, Rosenzweig may be conceived to be a forerunner of today’s interreligious theology. He started a process of interreligiosity and appreciated the semantic and conceptual power of the word ‘and’ (Meir 2016; 2018b).

4 Abraham Joshua Heschel

For Heschel, as for Buber, humanism, the struggle for human rights, and religiosity went together. He was an interfaith activist, who emphasized the connectedness between people as a condition for religiosity (Kasimow 2015). In one of his lectures, he said: ‘*Any God who is mine but not yours, any god concerned with me but not with you, is an idol*’ (Heschel 1967: 86, original emphasis). Heschel was also critical of religion, which he saw as part of the crisis in religiosity:

Religion as an institution, The Temple as an ultimate end, or, in other words, religion for religion’s sake, is idolatry. The fact is that evil is integral to religion, not only to secularism. Parochial saintliness may be an evasion of duty, an accommodation of selfishness. Religion is for God’s sake. The human side of religion, its creeds, rituals and institutions, is a way rather than the goal. The goal is ‘to do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly with God [Micah 6:8].’ When the human side of religion becomes the goal, injustice becomes a way. (Heschel 1951: 236–237)

In encountering Cardinals Augustin Bea and Johannes Willebrands, and in meeting Pope Paul VI, Heschel aimed to protest against the forced conversion of Jews as well as against the accusation of deicide, which has led to the loss of the lives of many Jews. Prejudices such as these had led to the cataclysm of the Shoah; Heschel wanted to help Christians

to overcome their prejudices and start to perceive the intrinsic value of Judaism. With his prophetic conscience that sympathized with the divine pathos, he viewed his actions as *tiqqun 'olam*, a reparation of the world. To humiliate another person was to humiliate God. This profoundly Jewish and religious thought motivated him to be active on several fronts: he got involved in the liberation of Jews from Russia, protested against the war in Vietnam, marched with Martin Luther King from Selma to Alabama for the rights of Black Americans, and helped Christians to return from their anti-Jewish mindsets, that is, to do Teshuva. Heschel fought against all types of humiliation, which were for him *chillul ha-Shem*, a profanation of the divine Name. Against the tendencies of missionary Christianity, he insisted that the God of the Christians is the God whose covenant with the Jewish people was eternal and who did not regret his promises. Moreover, in order to preserve the eternal sparks in souls, he developed an inclusive thought in which Christianity and Judaism were inseparable partners.

In his 'No Religion is an Island', originally a lecture delivered in 1965 at Union Theological Seminary to an audience sharing the faith of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Heschel appreciated the plurality of religious expression (Heschel 1966: 3–22). In his view, uniqueness and communication are compatible. Confronted with the worldwide 'ecumenical movement' of nihilism, religious people are called upon to see humans as a disclosure of the Divine, in human solidarity with and listening intensively to the prophets of Israel. For Heschel, religion is a means, not an end. He offers the perspective that no word is God's last, ultimate statement. God's all-inclusiveness contradicts the exclusiveness of any particular religion. Consequently, humility is inherent in authentic religious thinking – he calls it 'the secret test of faith'. Dialogue has to do first and foremost with holiness, with *preparatio messianica* (messianic preparation), and no religion has the monopoly over that.

Heschel was in contact with and gave advice to Cardinal Bea during the Second Vatican Council, which marked a significant step forward in the Catholic Church's stance on interreligious dialogue, especially between Catholicism and Judaism. Heschel argued that Jews maintain their own belief *and* transcend their own faith in openness to Christians. One could be autonomous and distinct, while at the same time fostering an openness to the non-Jewish world. Heschel lived the particularity of Judaism, yet he emphasized the hyphen in the expression 'Jewish–Christian tradition' and the religiousness that Jews and Christians have in common.

'No Religion is an Island' contains Heschel's thoughts on the necessity of fighting nihilism and cynicism as common concerns, in a real ecumenical spirit. He speaks as 'a brand plucked from the fire' (Heschel 1966: 117). His destination was New York – had it not been, it would have been Auschwitz or Treblinka. He conceives of the Shoah as a battle against the God of Abraham, 'a rebellion against the Bible' (Heschel 1966: 118). Jews

and Christians are united by the fear of alienation from God and by the task of living in His presence. They both recognize the human as 'a disclosure of the divine' (Heschel 1966: 121).

In Heschel's perspective, Nazism revived Teutonic paganism. Saving the radiance of the Hebrew Bible in the minds of human beings was at stake in the modern world. People had to unite in mutual care and involvement in order to pay attention to God's pathos and to be sensitive to His presence. The task is to 'keep alive the divine sparks in our souls' (Heschel 1966: 133), and to experience in brotherhood the fact that we are objects of God's concern. No religion could do this alone.

5 Emmanuel Levinas

Levinas' contributed to the development of interreligious theology through highlighting that, first of all, one has to be there for the other in 'non-indifference'. He emphasizes the alterity of the other: the ethical demand of the other as the absolute difference cannot be abolished. The infinite demand from the 'face' of the other ruptures one's own totality. In his relational thinking, the I is 'here I am', the one-for-the Other.

In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), he reflects on the possibility of a relationship based upon recognition of the exteriority and alterity of the other, without awaiting reciprocity (Levinas 1969; 1990c). The meaning of the 'face' is 'thou shalt not kill'. The ethical, infinite commandment from the other urges one to answer. *Otherwise than Being* (1974) goes a step further: the primary structure of subjectivity is responsibility (Levinas 1991; 1990b). 'The identity of the same in the ego comes to it despite itself from the outside, as an election or an inspiration, in the form of the uniqueness of someone assigned' (Levinas 1991: 52; 1990b: 88). Levinas describes subjectivity itself in ethical terms. Responsibility is not a mere attribute of subjectivity; subjectivity is initially for the other.

Levinas' contribution to interreligious theology through the welcoming of the religious other cannot be underestimated. In *Totality and Infinity*, he proposes to call religion 'the bond that is established between the same and the other without constituting a totality' (Levinas 1969: 40; 1990c: 30: '*Nous proposons d'appeler religion le lien qui s'établit entre le Même et l'Autre, sans constituer une totalité*'). 'Metaphysics, or the relation with the other, is accomplished as service and as hospitality' (Levinas 1969: 300; 1990c: 334, '*La métaphysique ou rapport avec l'Autre, s'accomplit comme service et comme hospitalité*'). In welcoming the other, the glory of the Infinite is glorified (Levinas 1991: 144; 1990b: 226).

In his *Difficult Freedom* (1963), Levinas defines the ethical relationship as religiosity:

Ethics is not the corollary of the vision of God, it is that very vision. [...] In the Holy Ark from which the voice of God is heard by Moses, there are only the tablets of the Law. The knowledge of God which we can have and which is expressed, according to Maimonides,

in the form of negative attributes, receives a positive meaning from the moral 'God is merciful', which means: 'Be merciful like Him'. The attributes of God are given not in the indicative, but in the imperative. The knowledge of God comes to us like a commandment, like a *Mitzvah*. To know God is to know what must be done. (Levinas 1990a: 17; 1988: 33)

For Levinas, relationship is only possible on the basis of the recognition of the other's exteriority or alterity. This 'difference' or 'transcendence' of the other is not to be totalized by the same. In Levinas' footsteps, God may be conceived in terms of infinity, urging to act and answer the call of the other. Using Levinas' insights, dialogical theology may be defined as a wisdom that discusses a normative element, namely, the uniqueness of each and every human being who asks to be listened to, honoured, and respected, for God's glory.

6 Jews and Christians after *Nostra Aetate*

After the publication of *Nostra Aetate* in 1965, Christian churches changed their attitude towards Jews and Jews also reacted to this change. *Nostra Aetate* (In Our Time) is a landmark document that brought about a Copernican revolution in the Roman Catholic Church and promotes dialogue between Jews and Catholics. There were always such dialogues, but after the Shoah, the Church dispensed with her negative attitude towards Jews and Judaism. For a long time, the Church had forgotten that Jesus was a Jew. After the Shoah – which showed the relation between the anti-Judaism of centuries and racial and state antisemitism – the Church no longer defined its own identity on the negative background of the Jewish religion but began to shape it in connection with Judaism. As expressed by *Nostra Aetate*, the Catholic Church repented and expressed remorse for all the injustice inflicted on the Jews; it atoned for all that had led – in the phrasing of Elie Wiesel – to the death of Christianity in the Shoah.

Most of the Jews acclaim these positive steps in the Catholic Church. For a few decades now, synagogues have become again attractive for many Christians, as in the time of Chrysostom (who in his *Kata Ioudaion* [Against the Jews] gave free course to his theological outrage against Christians who continued to visit the synagogue in order to enhance their spiritual life). There is today a will in the Catholic Church to understand the Jewish people as they understand themselves. One becomes conscious that the Hebrew Bible is poly-interpretable and that there is a rich Jewish reading of *miqra*. One is more and more conscious that Jesus was not Italian but a Jew of Galilee who lived according to the Torah. There is recognition that the New Testament originated in a Jewish milieu and that it is the result of Jewish culture. This trend leads to rejection of a theology of substitution because of its exclusivism and to recognition of the Jewish people as they live today. It is not enough to recognize the legitimacy of Judaism *before* Christ; Jews remain Jews also *after* Christ, *post Christum natum*. By now, one has taken into account that Jewish words as Law and commandment are not easily integrated into the thought of the

Church. But more time is needed for the Church to get rid of antithetical positions. More broadly, it is questionable if Jews and Christians have fully moved beyond shaping their own identities based on negative perceptions of religious others.

The described radical changes of the Church in the twentieth century did not escape the attention of Jews who thought that these changes deserve appreciation. This led to the document *Dabru emet* (Speak Truth), published on 10 September 2000 in the *New York Times* (see ICJS 2000). More than 200 Jewish scholars and rabbis signed the text. The document clearly highlights the common ground between Jews and Christians and wants cooperation between Jews and Christians as partners. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of *Nostra Aetate*, prominent Orthodox rabbis from Israel, Europe, and the United States issued a statement entitled 'To Do the Will of Our Father in Heaven: Toward a Partnership between Jews and Christians' (2015). In it, they affirm that Christianity is 'the willed divine outcome and gift to the nations' (CJCUC 2015: section 3).

Nostra Aetate and the Jewish reactions upon it are only documents, but these are positive steps that testify to the development of a dialogical thinking. Jews and Christians are on their way, and their imperfect religions do not have the last word, which finally belongs to God. Jews are not yet 'light to the nations' and Christians have not yet realized the final redemption. No one can bring the divine Kingdom alone. All are on the way and the two communities may learn much from one other.

7 Interreligious theology today

In recent years, studies on Jewish dialogue with other religions and spiritual worldviews have been flourishing. Jewish perspectives on Christianity are to be found in many books and articles. There are also numerous studies on the dialogue of Judaism with Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. All these works testify to a growing interest in dialogue and interreligiosity and to an increasingly united world (Meir 2015a: 20–24).

Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn edited a volume in which various scholars discuss interreligious dialogue from a Jewish point of view (Goshen-Gottstein and Korn 2012). Alan Brill has developed a Jewish theology of other religions. In his *Judaism and Other Religions*, he discusses sources that are relevant for the relationship between Judaism and religions (Brill 2010; Meir 2019b: 24). In another volume, *Judaism and World Religions*, he goes a step further. He looks for methods that permit a Jewish discussion of specific religions. Recognizing other religions, he ascertains that one may gain religious wisdom in contact with religious others and that religions have different goals and aspirations. His work investigates what Jews wrote on religious others and how Judaism interacted with other faiths in practice, as a starting point for a dialogical theology from a Jewish vantage point (Brill 2012; Meir 2019b: 24–25).

Other Jewish scholars work in the field of a theology of the other. Michael S. Kogan, for instance, argues that Judaism has a 'double-revelation theory that can now be expanded into a multiple revelation theory as one examines and attempts to evaluate the claims of other faith communities in all their particularism' (Kogan 2005: 112). Kogan is a relativist in theology but a universalist in ethics. He asks: if Paul can say in 1 Cor 9:22, 'I am Greek with the Greek and Jew with the Jews', why cannot God do the same thing (Kogan 2005: 118)? Kogan opens up the covenant to religious others (2017: 124–125). Dan Cohn-Sherbok deems that, 'instead of placing Judaism at the center of the world's religions, the Divine will hold this central place. Such a transformation demands a paradigm shift from Judeo-centric to a divine-centric conception of religious history' (Cohn-Sherbok 1994: 125). He deems that all religious faiths are subjective, including the Jewish one (Cohn-Sherbok 1994: 132; Meir 2017: 123–124).

All these studies contribute to the construction of a dialogical theology which uses dialogue as its content and method. Dialogical theology aims at creating communities that remain specific but are also interconnected. It respects specificity and goes beyond it in communication.

8 Conclusion

Postmodernism pays attention to the specificities of cultures. However, this approach could lead to relativism. Dialogical theology goes against a celebration of the different for difference's sake without bounding differences together, without bridging and linking. It deems that belonging does not stop with one's own group, it also pertains to the world as such.

A dialogical or interreligious theology serves the dialogue between people who remain different. It is the intellectual account of interreligious and intercultural meetings and discusses a multiplicity of aspects in 'trans-difference'. 'Trans-difference' is the possibility of making connections and contact with others, of communicating and bridging, not despite differences but thanks to them. In 'trans-difference' one recognizes the particular and rises above it. By failing to open oneself up to the other's understanding of the Ultimate, one may miss an aspect of religiosity that is relevant to one's own life. As the thirteenth-century Persian Sufi Jalal al-Din Muhammad Rumi said: 'The lamps are different, but the light is one' (Rumi 1978: 166).

Attributions

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