



Martin Buber's Secular Religiosity

Brilliant and impossible to pigeonhole, Martin Buber's odd, syncretic theology both embraced and rejected aspects of traditional religion. *Contemplate* asked two scholars, Ron Margolin (Tel Aviv University) and Sarah Pessin (University of Denver), to do a bit of explaining: What were the secular aspects of Buber's philosophy?

Martin Buber became one of the most renowned Jewish thinkers of the 20th century, thanks largely to his influential work of dialogical philosophy, *I and Thou*. Born in Vienna, Buber lived with his paternal grandparents in Lvov (East Galicia) until the age of fourteen. When he returned to Vienna for his secondary and university education, he became estranged from Judaism. Buber's interest was rekindled later on, however, through his encounters with Theodore Herzl and the nascent Zionist movement.

Yet it was not to traditional religion that he returned. Buber rejected the *halachic* way of life and the traditional, heteronomic belief in the divine transmission of the law. For Buber, true religiosity exists within social frameworks, where relationships are based not on utility, but on deep and authentic interactions—what he called a life of dialog, or I–Thou. It didn't matter to him whether the biblical commandments were divinely inspired. What mattered was that they were formulated by the Jewish people and their leaders. As long as they inspired communities in which I–Thou relations prevailed, they served a valuable purpose.

It's no surprise that Buber devoted much of his time to the revivification of Judaism and the Jewish renaissance. He translated the Hasidic tales. He translated the entire Bible into German (a project he began with Franz Rosenzweig), because he thought it was crucial for modern Judaism to draw cultural inspiration from the Bible. And he wrote numerous articles and books pertaining to the Bible and Hasidism, which he considered the earliest and latest forms of Jewish renewal prior to the modern age.

Thus did Martin Buber remain faithful to his “Believing Humanism,” as he put it. Without abandoning Judaism, he remained committed to the Jewish people, religious feeling (if not religion, *per se*), and the Kantian idea—a wholly secular idea—that the human mind is the source of all our perceptions and conceptions, including those of religion.

—Ron Margolin

Ron Margolin is a senior lecturer at Tel Aviv University, where he teaches as part of the OFAKIM program for the study of Judaism as Culture. He is also a research fellow at The Shalom Hartman Institute in Jerusalem. Dr. Margolin earned his Ph.D. at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is the author of *The Human Temple: Religious Interiorization and the Structuring of Inner Life in Early Hasidism* (The Hebrew University Magnes Press, 2005).

In his subtle dance between the sacred and the everyday, Martin Buber occupies the wonderfully complex space of a religious thinker who is not religious, and a secular thinker who is not secular. For Buber, discovering God—and with this, the notions of Revelation and Creation—are to be understood in terms of what he calls the “I–Thou” encounter. But this encounter, in all its capacity to unveil the sacred, is contained within the simple everyday encounters that you have with any person (or thing) in the world around you. The “I–Thou” way of being, for Buber, describes a certain kind of open, receptive attitude on your part; it is an attitude which opens you up to charged reciprocal encounters in which your own being comes alive to the particular here-and-now of a unique moment. Thus, for Buber, the act of “searching for God” is dramatically re-envisioned as a search for the world of people and things around you, and for your own authentic self.

Within this context, nothing upsets Buber more than unexplored religious orthodoxies. For Buber, calcified religious law is simply not the path to God, and can in fact even block that path. Along with other existentialist thinkers, Buber sees unengaging religious rules and rituals not only as doing little to open the human spirit, but as actually robbing us of our human capacity to authentic self-expression, and in this way deadening our capacity for sacred encounter. In Buber's vision, finding God is all about how you live in the world, and not at all about finding or serving a big Invisible Man in the heavens. —Sarah Pessin

Sarah Pessin is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Hecht Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Denver. She is the author of numerous essays on medieval Jewish philosophy, and also works on the theme of anxiety and humor in Jewish theology and culture. Dr. Pessin directs the Jewish-Multicultural Initiative at the Center for Judaic Studies at the University of Denver, where she taught a popular course in Jewish secularization, “Where is God?: Medieval and Modern Jewish Thought in Conversation.” She earned her Ph.D. from Ohio State University.

To read a longer version of this essay, go to www.culturaljudaism.org/ccj/contemplate