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Martin Buber: TWO TYPES OF FAITH *

MARTIN BUBER'S book must be welcomed as an invaluable aid to clearer thinking about Jesus and His relation to the faith of those who do or do not recognize in Him the ultimate expression of God's revelation to Israel and the world. As the author says in one place of human nature, that a person has certainty about his nature *as human* only by virtue of the shocks to this certainty, so often we become aware of the true value of our beliefs only through the challenges which they must, inevitably, meet. Not that Buber administers any paralyzing shocks to accepted points of view, but he explores the consciousness of the Jewish and of the Christian faiths so thoroughly that thought patterns are exposed which before had been only vaguely expressed.

Yet before considering the elements of Buber's thesis we must recognize the one defect in his work which colors it with a certain inconsistency. It is his complete reliance on the assumptions of liberal Protestant scholarship in matters of text and interpretation. His acceptance of the arbitrary rejection of whatever does not suit the liberal dogmas is hard to reconcile with the author's otherwise often mature penetration of the Gospel narratives. Liberal scholarship has, in our own day at last, been seen for what it is, an essentially superficial manipulation of what are in themselves elaborately complex problems. Buber speaks of the genuine traditions in St. John's Gospel "which have not yet been adequately investigated, and which only yield their character when translated back into Aramaic or Hebrew" (p. 117), and in this he shows himself aware of the modern respect for the Fourth Gospel. Indeed his frequent use of John implies an apperception of its sincerity which tallies with the view of those scholars who find the personal allusions in John's Gospel so intimate, and the spirit therein so sensitive and delicate, that the pious fiction so often supposed by the higher critics is psychologically unthinkable. But elsewhere he alludes to the "Johannine presuppositions" and prejudices

* New York: Macmillan Co., 1951.

(pp. 32, 128, etc.). Not that this dependence on liberal criticism is confined to the Fourth Gospel. Quite otherwise. The Synoptics, he thinks, are also overladen with accretions, developments, reinterpretations, and mythical elements. Buber accepts this as a fact; and yet one has the distinct impression, from reading his book, that he accepts these canons of "higher criticism" without building too strongly upon them. With certain obvious exceptions, the Jesus of his book is not the shadowy enigma of the few Gospel fragments left to us by liberal scholars but the very real personality that stands out from an integral reading of all four Gospels. It is almost safe to say that he could not have written this book if the Jesus he had to deal with was the uncertain and undetermined name of the higher critic's fancy.

This much said, we come to a consideration of Buber's thesis and the fabric out of which it is made. The author's wish is to distinguish between two types of faith, the one Jewish and the other Christian, *emunah* and *pistis*. Not, as he is quick to point out, that they are found in their pure state today among either Jews or Christians; the two types are the faith of the Old Testament and the faith of Paul, if both are accurately understood. In this latter sense, then, he presents Jewish faith as something wholly existential: an absolute belief not specified by particular objects, but arising from a personal relationship in which one finds one's self face to face with God primarily by being a member of the community of the people of God, whose faith is based on a collective historical experience. Christian faith, however, is not a state of being but an act: an act by which one believes *this* or *that* to be true. It is of the intellectual order and not a personal relationship. Jesus, the true Jesus of the "authentic" Gospel material, is faithful to the Jewish concept of faith; it is the gnostically minded Paul who introduced the Greek type of *pistis*.

There is, of course, some truth in Buber's thesis, but his lines are drawn too sharply and without much regard for objectivity. He pictures the Jew as one who "feels the nearness of God," who "does not need to be convinced of what he does not see" (pp. 38-39), whereas the author of the epistle to the Hebrews, representing Pauline faith, presents God as "an article of faith" because He belongs to the category of "things not seen" (p. 38). So, in Genesis, Abraham's faith is a "simple face-to-face relationship between God and man," while for Paul, in Romans, it is replaced by "an interpenetration which comes about by

faith"; the "dialogical" is replaced by the "mystical" situation (p. 47). In the one case, God simply *receives* Abraham's attitude of faith, whereas in the other, God *imparts* the state of faith.

Here we are at the heart of the problem, for is there any real difference between these two modes of faith? Can there be any relationship between two persons in which "nearness is felt" without mutual giving? The consciousness of being sought inevitably elicits a response. The simple face-to-face relationship cannot exist without interpenetration, and no one receives without thereby giving of himself. Of all the types of faith certainly the mystic's is the most existential, as Bergson has pointed out, and the relationship that existed between God and Jeremiah is not qualitatively different from that which existed between the same God and Teresa of Avila. The morcellation of faith against which Buber reacts so strongly, the fact that this or that should be believed, is not a phenomenon of Pauline origin. The Law of the Old Testament fulfilled the same function for the Jew that dogma fulfills for the Christian. The two are but different manifestations of a divine condescension which recognizes man's need for something to cling to in moments of darkness. Even the mystic has his dark night of the soul when God's presence is felt as anything but near. And Jeremiah is a classic example of the Jewish mystic with precisely such experience. To return to the Law, Buber realizes that the fact of the Law does not harmonize with his thesis, and he tries to evade it by suggesting that the Torah, although it contained laws, was essentially not Law but rather God's instruction in His way (p. 57). No matter! The existence of a particular "way" implies a particularization, a morcellation that cannot be denied.

Buber's selection of Abraham as a type of Jewish faith is a piece of irony. Ironic because Paul, whom Buber resists with such vehemence, chose the same Abraham as an example of simple faith without the Law, the kind of faith that is meant to characterize the Christian. And Paul is correct, for it would be inconceivable for any Jew of biblical times to regard Jewish faith as something divorced from the Law. There is further irony in Buber's consideration of Jewish faith as a "community affair"; not that it is not, but that he implies that Christian faith is not. Perhaps this highlights Buber's lack of familiarity with Catholic doctrine and his too great dependence upon Protestant theology. Catholic teaching, drawing its inspiration in this matter from

the same Paul whom Buber regards as his antithesis, insists upon the community of the baptized in their faith. The doctrine of the Mystical Body is a theology of existential faith *par excellence*. As a distinguished scholar has recently summed it up: "God loves Christ, and Christ loves God; Christ in God loves us, and we in Christ love God" (Victor White in *Love and Violence*, New York: Sheed and Ward, 1954, p. 226).

A last word in defense of Paul. To say, as Buber does, that for Paul "one aim of the divine Lawgiver is here set forth as being to make His own law ineffectual" (p. 81) is to do an injustice to the thought of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul says explicitly (Rom 7:12) that the Law is holy, good, and just. Instead of being ineffectual it is most effective, for it forces sin—the drive to deify the ego—to assert itself and thereby to unmask itself. The Law may not be capable of preventing sin, but it presents sin to the conscious self; and what possible relationship—of any degree of sincerity—can exist between God and a man who is not aware of his own tendency to make himself a god?

We can be grateful to Buber for many things, however. Grateful for most of what he says in chapter 7 with its beautiful understanding of the true symbolic value of the Torah; grateful for helping us to grasp the full significance of our Lord's words regarding the fulfillment of the Law (Mt 5:17); grateful for the rich background to the discourse between Jesus and Nicodemus which Buber supplies in chapter 11; grateful that he admits to a "fraternally open relationship," growing ever stronger, with Jesus, whose position in history, he acknowledges, is beyond "any of the usual categories" (pp. 12-13). This book is a testimony to the truth of his own statement that Christianity's acceptance of Jesus as God and Saviour is "a fact of the highest importance which, for His sake and my own, I must endeavor to understand" (p. 12).

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