

Engaging God

A brief discussion of religion using the I-It / I-Thou Paradigm

Over the last few hundred years we have managed to move our society further and further away from God.¹ In Fact, just using the unified title of God and capitalizing it we then turn around and point out how superior we are to those Pagan cultures that went before us. *Deus*, *JeozGött* and *God*² are all now singular terms by which we attempt to define the Almighty and separate it from those who have gone before us. Then we get really philosophical and say that this God is dead and free ourselves from any form of Divine Tyranny we might perceive as existing in the universe. Praising ourselves for being so smart that we don't even need this unified concept of Deity hanging over our heads we wonder why we still feel unfulfilled in our day to day lives. Using Buber's I-It / I-You paradigm let us examine how this has happened and see if we can come to any conclusions as to how it might be overcome.

We should begin by an examination of Martin (Mordechai) Buber's paradigm³ as outlined in the book *I and Thou*. Although difficult to explain (he had initially intended it to be 5 volumes according to the forward by Walter Kaufmann ("The Plan Buber Abandoned", pg 49)) this concept defines two different ways by which we interact with the universe. The first, the I-It relationship, is the most common whereby we experience objects. Everything that we examine, act upon, etc... is an I-It relationship. Anything we actually engage in such a way as to create a reciprocal relationship with it is an I-You relationship.

An excellent example is the reading of a novel. While one is aware of reading words printed on a page, you are engaged in an I-It relationship with the story. When all of the words and pages fade away and all that exists are the images that the author has created and the action taking place in your mind then you have broken through to an I-You relationship with the story. All external time ceases to exist and only the story playing out in your mind exists. It is even possible to, in this state, be unaware of anything going on around you, even someone trying to get your attention. The second state cannot be forced, and once it is consciously noticed it is lost. But during that time you have entered the I-You space.

This I-You engagement is most common with other people where a reciprocal relationship is set up, like two people in a deep conversation where all time and space disappears, or the hypnotic staring into the eyes of two people who don't even need to talk and yet are communicating, engaging each other, on some level.⁴ It can be done with people, animals, plants, ideas, books, art, almost anything that can give something back, even if the reciprocity from the other side is only inspiration.

Outside of the intense I-You relationship, the world is made of things. Even other people are simply objects with which one has an I-It relationship. You can interact with objects, you can communicate with them in various ways, act upon them, avoid them, etc... Only occasionally can one enter into the I-You relationship and see the Person or the Genius behind the Object, to actually encounter and engage the Other. You can have an experience of things, weight, colour, texture, taste,

¹ NOTE: Throughout the paper God is a title or a reference to an individual deity whereas G-d refers to the ultimate divinity, the Limitless Light, the One.

² Latin, Greek, German and English respectively.

³ Or at least how this writer understands the paradigm at this time.

⁴ Buber describes the latter example as having occurred with an average house-cat (pg. 145-146).

colours, etc... but these are all I-It based, object based, experiences. Even the I-You relationship cannot carry well in memory because we tend to remember the face, the clothes, the shapes, colours, smells, etc... all objects. It is almost as though, as long as we are aware of Time we are not aware of the Soul or Spirit of the Other.

This becomes a serious issue when one wishes to engage the Divine. Modern society has managed to lock away their God in houses of stone and place a complex hierarchy of religious men between the people and their object of worship. In fact the very title “God” tends to objectify the Divine. But why should the title diminish the holder of the title?

Let us take, for example, a great King. If everyone around him treats him as a great King, from his counsellors to his staff to his playmates, how long can he remain human. For everyone around him he is The King, he is never Henry or Louis or Jim. Such a person would certainly begin to withdraw from the world, untouched on a psychic / personal level. For those around him the Symbol of the King is more powerful in their minds than the Spirit of a Man. When one replaces the Divine with the title of God it becomes impossible to see beyond the title, beyond the definitions we have placed upon Him. One sees the Crown, not the Person that it rests upon.⁵

If God is always an It and never a You, always an object and never a subject, how can we find salvation within or without? We define God, we write (and read) paper upon paper trying to reduce God to the nature of an insect. We steal the wonder from the world and apply scientific objectivity to everything, and yet it is, in part, that wonder which opens us up to the possibility of an I-You relationship with nature. If we sit in the forest and count the trees and fill our minds with ecology and photosynthesis, we will never engage the forest, we will never encounter it, only experience it and remember the IT.

The ancient Pagan lived their lives amongst their Gods. A severe storm wasn't just meteorology but Thor, God of Thunder out on a bender or Zeus trying to punish someone for some slight real or imagined. Valhalla and Asgard were just the other side of the rainbow and Odin walked the earth testing his children's hospitality. The openness of wonder, of belief that the Gods could be engaged made the individual OPEN to the possibility of encountering God. After all, if God truly is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent than how can insects like ourselves dictate how He will appear to us or in what way we will experience, encounter and engage the divine?⁶

The Orthodox and Hasidic Jews both consider God a person more than a thing. In fact, they even change the title writing it as G-d to distinguish between the title and the personality. They use the many names and titles including the personal name יהוה which is often referred to as HaShem or “The Name”. HaShem is used as a proper name in conversation though since they believe that speaking the name aloud would release too much power (of course nobody remembers the true pronunciation of the name any longer since the Torah was written long before Hebrew adopted written vowels). The Synagogue for them is the modern manifestation of the Tent of Meeting mentioned in Exodus 29. People

⁵ Crown is an intentional symbol as the highest Sephiroth on the Qabalistic Tree of Life is Kether, the Crown. God, at this point, is still but an avatar, we have to look beyond the veil to know His true nature.

⁶ If one understands the nature of the Avatar this becomes a much easier concept to work with. After all, it is possible that all of these myriad Gods and Goddesses are just avatars through which the Ultimate Divinity has manifested in order to engage His children and to live amongst them. In our modern scientific world, would we even notice a fully manifest, physical Avatar? Most likely if it exhibited any powers we'd dissect it like a new bug.

come together, some talk to each other, some pray, some discuss the weekly Parshot (Torah Portion) and some follow the Rabbi's ritualized series of prayers and there are people walking in and out all of the time.⁷ It is a place in their lives for community and a place where there is room for G-d, and some come just to talk to Him.

Both are so foreign to the Christian society and their methods of dealing with their God. They place him in a Church and call this the 'House of God', as if that's the only place he can be found. They then separate God from the congregation and require the mediation of a Priest in order to speak with God, how unlike the Jewish Rabbi, who is a teacher and an expert on G-d, always willing to help the individual find their OWN way. The Jews continue to argue and examine all aspects of their faith. They **engage** their faith. Christians, like Karl Barth, point out that everything has been said, everything that's important is done already. One cannot engage something of that nature because there is nothing new, nothing to add to the existent body of knowledge. God is omniscient, omnipresent and omnipotent, we cannot reach Him, we cannot touch Him, we cannot engage Him, only hope that our feeble prayers reach Him in some way. The title has replaced the individual.

The both the Kabbalist and the Qabalist⁸ take a more complex approach to the nature of Deity. All of the various names of G-d exist within the created universe. It is through these, and the Archangels, that one can encounter G-d in one of His many forms/personalities. And yet it is clearly understood that the true 'mind' or 'spirit' of God exists behind the "Veils of Negative Existence" the first, and closest, veil being called אֵינִי (AIN)⁹ or No-Thing. Since we cannot reduce the true nature of G-d to mere 'thinghood', we draw a line beyond which, we acknowledge, that we can never understand or comprehend while still human. By creating this line of demarcation we accept that G-d is both unreachable and unattainable but also that we can engage Him directly through the use of the personalities and names which have been created within our realm of existence. Both accessible and inaccessible, both here amongst us and beyond our very understanding the ultimate Divine Consciousness of the Universe exists in near paradox.

Although our dominant society in the West has turned their God into an object, an It wrapped in definitions and attributes, they cannot stop the true seeker from finding the paths. Although Barth tells us that there is no way humanity can make their way to God and that only God can make a path to Humanity he fails to recognize that G-d has, in fact, forged several roads by which we may travel. We did not create these roads, Barth is correct in that part of his theology, but one does not need to know anything about road building to walk upon them. We need to stop thinking of God and start focusing on G-d.

Our Christocentric society is not entirely doomed though, for there are places within the Christian lexicon that could lead the seeker to building this type of personal relationship with G-d and not the fearful, grovelling relationship to God dictated by Holy Mother Church. I am, of course, speaking of the

⁷ Author's note: Coming from a Roman Catholic and High Anglican background with their highly ritualized forms the seeming chaos of the Synagogue was quite a surprise and took some getting used to when I studied with them. A great example of the personal nature of G-d in their culture is what I was told by one friend in the congregation: "I come to talk to Morty, Morty comes to talk to God"

⁸ The Hasidic will tend to spell קַבְּלָהּ as Kabbalah and the Hermeticist will spell it as Qabalah.

⁹ Pron. Eye-In

mystical side of Christianity which has been purposefully suppressed by said organization. In Gnostic terms, one must tear down the Demi-urge, the false God, and rediscover the true G-d that still exists behind him. Remove the idol and see the spirit, nay, *engage* the spirit. Find Him in all things, not just in buildings of stone.

“I am all: from me all came forth, and to me all attained. Split a piece of wood; I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there.” (*Gospel of St. Thomas*, 1:77) Here we are certainly discussing a You, a person that can be found, that can be engaged. In fact, if we allow ourselves to accept this teaching then we realise that *every* I-You encounter is with G-d. If He is within everything, surrounding everything, like The Force in *Star Wars* than we can engage Him all of the time. If we acknowledge this engagement, this contact, whenever we encounter anything, and recognize it as an encounter with G-d we shall rapidly find that space within us filled. No longer are we looking at the trees, but experiencing the Forest — no longer are we looking at the signs and symbols (they are but tools) but encountering the Divine.

No matter what tradition we come from, we all need the Divine in our lives. The artificial forms we have inherited from the past are not sufficient to give us fulfillment, not enough to give us the wonder and joy in existence that is our right as children of G-d. Society will not change in a year, or a decade, but over time only as individuals find the old paths and set their feet upon them. Perhaps Nietzsche only had it half right in his famous declaration on the death of God — we must kill God to discover G-d, tear down the artifice, split the wood and lift the stone and encounter G-d each alone.

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