

JUDAISM AND POLITICS FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF A PHILOSOPHY OF DIALOGUE

Iulia Grad

Babeş-Bolyai University
iuliagrad@gmail.com

Abstract:

Buber is a deeply religious thinker, and this is clear if we consider his analysis of the relationship between religion and politics. For him the religious goal remains at the phase of "pointing the way" never imposing the way and by this, never entering history. For Buber, the Zion is a supranational mission, which aims to replace the politics with the power of the spirit. In this article, we will try to show how Buber is challenging the reader to answer intuitively to his sensitivity in the attempt to avoid easy, once-for-all solutions and accept the demanding "ever anew" that leaves us with only one certainty: the dialogue. We will point out here the danger of the confiscation of the utopian impulse by the political principle. For Buber, utopia represents an important instrument of social action within the sphere of the political principles as long as the utopists resist the temptation to attain the political power and remain under the tutelage of the social principle.

Keywords: Buber, Zionism, politics, spirituality, utopia, messianism.

Martin Buber's interest in politics has manifested throughout his entire career, both as a theorist, as well as a political activist. Although he is known more as a philosopher of dialogue and a religious thinker, Martin Buber's political theory is indispensable for understanding his thought. The philosopher describes a special relation among the three key concepts: dialogue, religion and politics. The unique dynamics of this relationship represents the main focus of our undertaking.

The essential distinction for Buber's political conception - namely the distinction between the social principle and the political principle, should be thought of in terms of the duality underlying the philosophy of dialogue: I - Thou and I - It. The poles between which society and the individual oscillate are: the political pole, that is the

tendency to absolutize the state, and the social pole, described by the effort to establish small communities that allow the emergence of mutual responsibility and immediate relations. Buber accepts the necessity of the political principle, but rejects what he calls the "political surplus", the extension and application of centralized power and authority beyond the space where they are needed.

Therefore, the state is conceived as a system of relations based on power and imposition which represent a threat to human freedom (Buber, 1990: 9), and is opposed to society, which is described by Buber as a network of decentralized communities. Buber states that "all social structures have a certain measure of power, authority, and dominion, without which they could not exist; in none of the non-political structures, however, is this the essential element," (Buber, 1957: 161) but the relation between people, based on a common need or interest.

Hasidism and the sanctification of the profane

The trend of politicization of the mystical that has emerged in some Hebrew intellectual circles in the early 20th century, where we can find authors such as Ernst Bloch, Gustav Landauer or Martin Buber is the subject of an interesting research proposed by Yossef Schwartz. The author identifies the source of the close relation between politics and religion in Buber's thought mainly in his early works on Hasidism (Zank, 2006: 218). Here is where Buber finds the source of one of the major themes of his social and political thought: the sanctification of the profane.

Martin Buber's approach of Hasidism is unique and evolves along with his whole thinking.¹ The evolution of Buber's interpretation of Hasidism, from the first analysis that emphasizes the mystical ecstasy and unity of the self, towards the focus - specific for the maturity period of his thinking - on the idea of community and relation with the other, is situated on the axis described by Paul Mendes-Flohr as the transition from pathos to ethos in Buber's

¹ A modified version of the analysis of Martin Buber's relation with hasidism is published in the volume *Iulia Grad - Filosofia dialogului și criza comunicării în gândirea lui Martin Buber*

thought (Mendes-Flohr, 1989: 10). If in his early writings, Buber presents Hasidism as the real, genuine, although underground, Judaism, subsequently Buber identifies the essence of the religious faith in Hasidism with the structure of the community, emphasizing at the same time that this essence is present, in a less condensed form, everywhere in Judaism. Hasidism, considered by the academia at the beginning of the 20th century as a wild superstition, represents for Buber the place where “the strongest spiritual power of Judaism” manifests itself (Buber, 1958: 48).

The fascination with Hasidism occurred in a period of crisis in Buber's youth, a period of lack of creativity, intellectual and spiritual confusion, when he felt that his life has no center and substance. Maurice Friedman remarks that through Zionism, Buber has gained new roots in the community, but only Hasidism offered him meaning and content. Reading about the founder of Hasidism, about the fervor and incessant spiritual rebirth of the pious man, Buber recognized himself in the Hasidic soul. He lived this experience when he was 26 years old. The result was giving up politics and journalism work and study, for five years, the Hasidic texts (Friedman, 1956: 65-98).

Buber found in Hasidism the significance that transcends the limits of Judaism. He believed that the truth of Hasidism is or should be of vital importance for all religions and for the whole life. Hasidic teaching is the proclaimed renaissance, first of Judaism and, in a broader sense, of human spirituality. Buber became a filter that accumulates the essence of Hasidic stories, with particular emphasis on their spirit, although losing some of their authenticity.

The Hasidic teachings infiltrate into Buber's thinking mainly through the emphasis on the equivalence of unification with holiness and on the idea of the sacredness of the world. The Hasid rejects the existence of the profane within human life. What seems profane is, in fact, still-not-holy and the sanctification of the profane is the responsibility of man. Each act of man, every decision has no

meaning in itself, but has a redeeming quality and will represent the personal contribution to the improving of the world.

An important clarification of the buberian interpretation of Hasidism is the controversy with Gershom Scholem, and particularly Scholem's critical reexamination of the interpretative basis adopted by Buber. Scholem accused Buber of arbitrariness and even limited knowledge of the selected Hasidic material and of presenting those materials in an idealized and biased manner.

Eva Jospe in *Encounter: The Thought of Martin Buber* considers that the divergence between the two authors is based on the fact that they speak completely different languages and have different approaches. Scholem is a "pure scientist", which Buber does not claim to be. For Scholem, Hasidism is a historical phenomenon, an object of the detached research. For Buber, Hasidism is "the greatest phenomena known in the history of the spirit (...) a society that lives by its faith", what is more, the answer for his own religious search (Jospe, 1978). Hasidic legend has, for Buber, a meaning that is rooted in the transformative religious qualities and values, thus promoting an ethos of action. The historical method and the philological one ignore the problem of meaning and only from this perspective the theosophical doctrines found in the theoretical writings of Hasidism could indeed be regarded as the intellectual domain of narrow elite (Urban, 2008:1).

Steven Kepnes also believes that Buber and Scholem have two different purposes, namely, on the one hand, the recovery of the fundamental vitality and on the other hand, the recovery of the past as it was in reality. The question that arises is whether the understanding obtained through interpretation and the understanding obtained by historical and philological explanation are self-sufficient (Urban, 2008: 2).

The significant differences between Buber's perspective on Hasidism and that of Scholem, but also the elements that constitutes the common ground for the two approaches are highlighted by Moshe

Idel. He considers that Buber describes Hasidism in a positive light, as a sui generis form of mysticism. Scholem, on the other hand, represents the historical-philological school that tries to locate Hasidism on the broader plan of the Hebrew messianic and mystical tendencies (Idel, 2001: 14).

The transition of Martin Buber's thought from the mystical period to the dialogical one is present also in the attitude that Buber adopts towards Hasidism. If in 1908, in *The Life of the Hasidim* Buber writes that the true life of the man of the ecstasy is not among men, in 1928 Buber describes Baal Shem as the founder of a "realistic and active mysticism", a mysticism for which the world is not an illusion. It is a mysticism which "preserves the immediacy of the relation, guards the concreteness of the absolute and demands the involvement of the whole being." (Buber, 1958: 180) Two decades later, Buber argues that although for some, asceticism is the way they to detach themselves from the world, asceticism should not confiscate human life. "A man may only detach himself from nature in order to revert to it again and again, in hallowed contact with it, find his way to God." (Buber, 1958: 144)

From the very beginning, for Buber, Hasidism was not "a teaching realized by its adherents, but a way of life". Thus, a valid form of literature emerges, which is "developed out of the simple necessity to create a verbal expression adequate to an overpowering objective reality." (Buber, 1958: 25) This literary form allows Buber to describe the Hasidic life so as to become visible both as a reality and as a teaching. Buber became aware that the essence of this way of life can act on man even today, when human beings are in crisis.

For Buber, the important trait of the crisis of the modernity is "the secularized form of the radical separation between the sacred and the profane". The sacred became a concept empty of reality. His inheritor is the "spiritual". "The spirit is hedged in and its claim on personal existence is warded off through a comprehensive apparatus; one can now enjoy it without having to fear awkward consequences." (Buber, 1958: 39) An important aspect of this division

is the atrophy of men's capacity to relate to each other and the progressive evasion of man from the encounter with God in the world, opposed to the Hasidic teachings of "the holy intercourse with all beings." (Buber 1958: 40)

This form of delivering the Hasidic message is not speculative theology, but is the way Buber considers to be appropriate in order to offer the teachings of Hasidism to modern man. The attempt to free the Hasidic teaching from the confessional boundaries by making it a teaching for humanity involves a great deal of arbitrariness, but Buber takes this risk in order to "speak to the world what I have heard". (Buber, 1958: 42)

Buber's major interest for Hasidism marks profoundly his social and political thought and shapes its main directions. In an attempt to describe his position in relation to the crisis of the modern world, crisis caused by the radical separation between the sacred and the profane and by the decline of man's capacity to relate genuinely with the other, Buber approaches the complex relation among the political, the social and the religious spheres.

The social principle and the politics of dialogue

The major test for religion, says Buber, is precisely the problem of success. Here is where the "narrow ridge" must be found, to use one of Buber's favorite expressions. "If religion withdraws from the sphere where this question is asked, it evades its task, despite all hosts and sacraments of incarnation; and if it sinks into that sphere, then it has lost its soul." (Buber, 1957: 131)

Despite this difficult relation, to affirm the incompatibility between religion and politics means for Buber „to abandon public life to damnation here and now, to separate the private and the public phases of life, to confirm the spirit in its very incapacity in our time for being translated into conduct, for being made public." (Buber, 1957: 136)

In *On the validity and limits of political principle*, Buber defines the political principle as the practical axiom that prevails in the opinion of an important part of the modern world according to which the public regimes are the legitimate determinants of human existence, since the political environment is an essential condition of man and it does not exist for the sake of man, but vice versa. Therefore, from this viewpoint, man is essentially Caesar's. (Buber, 1957: 213)

Buber rejects the differentiation between the two provinces of the same sphere. Ontologically, the human person consists of a union of two spheres, but it is not the distinction between the sphere of the soul corresponding to God and the sphere of the body that belongs to Caesar. The distinction crucial for Buber's thought is the distinction between wholeness and separation. Even though human life cannot be carried out only in the sphere of wholeness, but is tied to separation, all that is done within the sphere of separation gains legitimacy from the sphere of wholeness. Correspondingly, the political gains its legitimacy from the social principle.

By describing his conception as a "religious socialism", Buber states the need for a change that would come from the relational sphere. For Buber, the religious socialism implies the mutual involvement of two terms. The first term, religion, designates the person's relationship with God, which can reach full reality only in the desire for a community with the human race. The second term is society, the transformation of humanity into a community, which cannot develop without starting from a common relationship with the divine center. "Unity with God and community among the creatures belong together." (Buber, 1957: 112)

In shaping his religious socialist view, Buber draws on a specific meaning of the concept of utopia, which is deeply influenced by the anarchist vision of his close friend, Gustav Landauer. The concept of utopia described by Buber is constructive, based on existing social realities, and intensely unromantic, because it does not seek a return to paradisiacal origins, but "the humanization of the materiality of the civilized world". (Zank, 2006: 227) The utopian impulse contains

“the seed of renewal” of society from within. Buber proposes a nonteleological perspective on history, but paradoxically a messianic one, although he rejects the idea of a sudden end of history caused by divine intervention. For Buber, messianism is rather a “regulator ideal” and not the force that changes profoundly the fate of mankind.(Zank, 2006: 226)

Nevertheless, Buber points out the danger of the confiscation of the utopian impulse by the political principle. For Buber, utopia represents an important instrument of social action within the sphere of the political principle. As long as the utopists resist the temptation to attain the political power and remain under the tutelage of the social principle, the political effects of the utopian impulse are possible and legitimate. (Zank, 2006: 229)

The utopian example that Buber describes as a “non failure” is the kibbutz in Palestine. This experiment did not failed because the task assumed by these rural communities is “constructive and topical”, and the change intended is feasible in the specific context (Zank, 2006: 226). Another important characteristic of this experiment is that it did not follow a predetermined plan, because, as Buber says, “the ideal gave an impetus, but no dogma; it stimulated, but did not dictate.”(Buber, 1956: 136) The common center, essential for creating a genuine community is, for this particular example, precisely its common task.

The structural difference between the two spheres, the social sphere and the political one, must be thought in terms of the relationship between unity and multiformity. The society does not unite divergent groups. It develops the common element, but cannot impose it. Only the state can do this by punitive and propagandistic instruments. Consequently, the unifying power of the state comes from the fact that the individual feels threatened by others.(Buber, 1957: 173) The characteristic of the relation between the two spheres is a growing inequality, the political having more power than it is required by specific situations. This disproportion is the meaning of the political power: the excess in the capacity to make decisions. This

political surplus, justified by internal and external instability, represents the difference between the two spheres.(Buber, 1957: 175)

The result of this inequality is a “permanent reduction of social spontaneity”. Buber defines the social spontaneity as the cultural vitality and unity of the nation. And this spontaneity is permanently impaired by the political surplus. A society that rebels against the political surplus is a society that has exceeded its internal conflicts, says Buber. The most valuable instrument for this purpose is the opposite of political propaganda, namely education, conceived essentially as education for dialogue.(Buber, 1957: 175)

Buber is a deeply religious thinker, and this is clear if we consider the analysis of the relationship between religion and politics. If religion involves goal and way, politics implies purpose and means. The political purpose is characterized by the fact that its fruition is equivalent to success and is strictly historical, while the religious goal remains at the phase of “pointing the way” and never enters history.(Buber, 1957: 128)

As L. Silberstein affirms, Buber’s social and political theory was tested first in the ‘30s, by the dramatic conditions of the Jewish community in Germany. But Buber became a true social critic once he arrived in Israel, where his criticism was directed against a reality that had political power, unlike the Jewish community from Europe, which lacked the political power. (Silberstein, 1989: 263)

Buber’s prophetic vision on history becomes obvious especially if we mention the philosopher’s relation with the Zionist movement. He was a strong advocate of non-political, spiritual Zionism, conceiving Zion as a „sacred mission, a command to find a just society and to initiate the Kingdom of God”(Buber, 1984: 7), the beginning of a new kind of human society.

For Buber, the nation is not an end in itself and the unique history of Israel requires a supranational perspective, because “this land was at no time in the history of Israel simply the property of the people; it

was always at the same time a challenge to make of it what God intended to have made of it.”(Buber, 1989: 19) Thus, for Buber, the problem of the survival of the Jewish people should not be put only in physical and military terms, but also in moral and religious terms.

For Buber, the Zion is a supranational mission which aims to replace the politics with the power of the spirit and which has the potential to initiate new relationships between nations. The authenticity of Zion is tested, in Buber's view, by Israel's attitude toward Arabs.(Buber, 1989: 9)² He was the advocate of a bi-national Palestine and he objected to the politics that use power in order to expand power, affirming that the only necessary politics is dialogue, “a lasting understanding in all areas of public life.”(Buber, 1989: 9) The only solution for the conflict envisaged by Buber is the changing of the framework of discussion from the political to the interhuman, from imposing on others to dialogue.

Buber was true to his philosophical conception, even if it meant attracting criticisms. By intending only to “point the way”, the philosopher adopts the style of the poetic meditation and refuses the techniques of the critical discourse. He avoids the rigors of the traditional academic research and challenges the reader to answer intuitively to his sensitivity.

His thought can be characterized as a “narrow ridge”, one of Buber’s favorite expression which designates the narrow path between various forms of abstraction or, as stated by Maurice Friedman, it was “a way of adhering to the concrete”, the manner in which he faces the “contradiction between the unconditional character of the spirit and the conditional nature of a situation.”(Friedman, 1996: 3)

“Undeterred by disappointments past and present” – that’s how Nahum N. Glatzer characterizes him-, Buber assumes the difficult position involved by his idealistic vision. However, he counterbalances the uncertain ground on which he places the human

² Martin Buber - *On Zion*, ed. cit., p. ix

being, by outlining a surprisingly realistic answer for the question “what is to be done?”: we have to avoid easy, once-for-all solutions and we have to accept the demanding “ever anew” that leave us with only one certainty: the dialogue.

References

- Buber, Martin. 1990. *A Believing Humanism. My Testament, 1902 – 1965*, Humanity Books, , New York.
- Buber, Martin. 1958. *Hasidism and Modern Man*, Horizon Press , New York.
- Buber, Martin. 1984. *On Zion. The History of an Idea*, Syracuse University Press, New York.
- Buber, Martin. 1996. *Paths in Utopia*, Syracuse University Press, New York.
- Buber, Martin. 1957. *Pointing the Way*, Harper & Brothers, New York.
- Friedman, Maurice. 1956. *Martin Buber. The Life of Dialogue*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Idel, Moshe. 2001. *Hasidism- între extaz și magie*, , Hasefer, București.
- Jospe, Eva. *Encounter: The Thought of Martin Buber*, în *Judaism*, Vol. 27, Nr. 2, 1978.
- Herberg, Will. 1956. *The Writings of Martin Buber*, Meridian Books, New York.
- Mendes-Flohr, Paul. 1989. *From Mysticism to Dialogue. Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought*, Wayne State University Press, Detroit.
- Silberstein, Laurence J. 1999. *Martin Buber's Social and Religious Thought. Alienation and the Quest for Meaning*, New York University Press, New York.
- Urban, Martina. 2008. *Aesthetics of Renewal. Martin Buber's Early Representation of Hasidism as Kulturkritik* Chicago, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Zank, Michael. 2006. *New Perspectives on Martin Buber*, Mohr Siebeck, Tubingen.

