

Praying with Jesus, not to Jesus

Martin Buber in Dialogue with Christianity

By

Hune Margulies

Praying with Jesus, not to Jesus: Martin Buber in Dialogue
with Christianity

by Hune Margulies

2026

Ethics International Press, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2026 by Hune Margulies

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (Hardback): 978-1-83711-352-1

ISBN (Ebook): 978-1-83711-353-8

To Sharan

To Paul Mendes Flohr

Table of Contents

Preface	xi
Introduction: A Dialogical Understanding of The Active Spiritual Life	xv
Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy	
Martin Buber and His "Great Brother"	1
Buber On Jesus, The Jewish Thou, and the Question of the Christ	
Mario Jorge Bergoglio	9
A Pope in the Between: Encounter, Compassion, and the Reopening of Dialogue	
Thomas Merton	17
Contemplative Community and the Hidden Thou	
Jürgen Moltmann	27
Hope and the Dialogical Future	
Søren Kierkegaard	37
Subjectivity, Encounter, and the Single Individual Before God	
Karl Rahner	45
Transcendental Openness and the Horizon of the Thou: Grace, Mystery, and the Between	
Leonardo Boff	53
Liberation and Dialogical Praxis	
Dietrich Bonhoeffer	61
Religionless Christianity as Primordial Trust	
Nikolai Berdyaev	68
Freedom, Creativity, and Eschatological Dialogue: Dialogical Philosophy Illuminates Spirituality as Relational Deed Rather than Doctrinal System	

Gabriel Marcel	75
Being, Availability, and the Thou: Dialogical Spirituality as Social Deed Grounded in Primordial Relation	
Paul Tillich	85
Ultimate Concern, Existential Depth and the Dialogical Encounter	
Karl Barth	92
The Word of God as Dialogical Address	
Dorothy Day	102
Hospitality as Social Dialogical Spirituality: Hospitality Embodies Spirituality as Social Deed Grounded in Primordial Relation	
Gustavo Gutiérrez	111
Preferential Option for the Poor	
Emmanuel Mounier	120
Personalism as Social Spirituality	
Martin Luther King, Jr.	129
Nonviolence and the Restoration of the Thou	
Friedrich Schleiermacher	137
Pre-Doctrinal Consciousness and Primordial Encounter	
Reinhold Niebuhr	145
Realism and the Persistence of I-It: Christian Realism, Ethical Responsibility, and the Dialogical Encounter	
Eberhard Arnold	152
Eberhard Arnold: Intentional Community and the Fragile Between	
Carl Jung	159
Individuation and the Dialogical Self	
C. S. Lewis	167
Imagination, Ethics, and the Dialogical Encounter	

Walter Rauschenbusch	174
Social Gospel and the Structures of Relation	
Martin Heidegger	180
Dialogue, Being, and the Crisis of Modernity	
John Cobb Jr.	188
Process Thought and the Relational Cosmos	
Teilhard de Chardin	195
Evolution, Christogenesis, and the Convergence of the Relational Whole	
Enrique Dussel	203
Exteriority, Liberation, and the Ethical Primacy of the Other	
Juan Carlos Scannone	209
The People, Culture, and the Communal Face of Dialogue	
Ted Grimsrud	214
Mennonite Witness, I–Thou Ethics, and the Practice of Spiritual Relationality	
Emil Brunner	222
Encounter, Revelation, and Ethical Responsiveness	
Douglas V. Steere	229
The Peaceable Quakers: Contemplation, Dialogue, and the Praxis of Presence	
Father M. C. D’Arcy	236
Incarnation, Ethics, and the Relational Horizon	
Friedrich Gogarten	243
Theology, Secularity, and the Relational Turn	
Karl Heim	250
Science, Theology, and the Relational Integration	
Ernst Michel	257
Ethics, History, and the Dialogical Ground	

H. Richard Niebuhr	263
Christ, Culture, and the Dialogical Field	
Miguel De Unamuno	270
Saying Thou to the Tragic Sense of Life	
Introduction	
James Talarico	278
The Embrace of the Neighbor	
Final Notes and Thoughts	287
Dialogical Spirituality Beyond the Christian Case Study	
Epilogue	294
I and Jesus	

Preface

The poet psalmist asks the fundamental question: Where is the place in which we may find God?

My reading of Martin Buber's philosophy brings me to the realization that we should not seek God above nor below, not in the spirit or the flesh, not within nor without, for God is not an entity anywhere.

God is The Between of I and Thou

Why did Martin Buber concern himself so deeply and so lovingly with Christianity? More precisely, within the horizon of his overall philosophical project and as a Jewish thinker profoundly rooted in the poetic and prophetic sources of his own tradition, why did he seek to enter into a sustained dialogue with the Christian faith? It is essential to recognize from the outset that Buber was not interested in theological disputation as such, for theology, understood as an intellectual discipline, is a method only able to obscure the living presence of God. Buber argued that God can never become the object of a logical discourse. Theology is *about* God, where an "about" of anything can only be predicated of objects. The about is the realm of the It, not of the Thou. Theology, therefore, is about the theologian, his ideas, beliefs and presuppositions, and as such, it does not bring God's living embrace.

In this author's reading of Martin Buber, to say "praying with Jesus, not to Jesus" is to honor the heart of spiritual practice. Prayer is the between of the encounter between persons and with all beings, and it can never be a recitation outside of the encounter. In Buber's vision, the divine is never an object to be summoned or persuaded, but the *Thou* with whom we dwell in presence and dialogue. To pray with Jesus is to enter a living relationship with him, to walk alongside him,

to be both of us guided and transformed in our dialogue. It is not to send petitions to a distant figure. Prayer is the very space of the *between*, where I meet the Jesus of the mount—not as an abstraction, but as a living presence. By praying together with Jesus, life itself and the depths of spirituality unfold: not in one-sided requests, but in mutual presence, where encounter changes both who we are and how we relate to the world. Many explanations of the meaning and relevance of prayer dwell on need, on effect, on the shaping of heart and mind, or even on the promise of material blessing. Yet these approaches still assume a transcendent God “out there,” a vertical act directed toward a listening, rewarding Other. Remove that petitional assumption, and prayer becomes a mere monologue, empty of sacred vitality. Buber reminds us that we are the ones who pray, the ones who hear the prayer, and the ones who respond or deny. Prayer is nothing other than the embrace of a being: it is a meeting, a dwelling, a mutual opening in the space where the Thou is present—and where we are fully alive.

This book does not attempt to offer a historical reconstruction of Buber’s engagements with major Christian thinkers. Rather, it explores how Buberian principles can serve as an interpretive framework through which both his dialogical vision and the broader Christian spiritual tradition may be reassessed and deepened. There is no pretense here of exhaustiveness; only those thinkers are considered whom I regard as representative interlocutors capable of genuine dialogue with Buber’s thought. Many of them explicitly engaged his ideas and found themselves inspired, challenged, and at times unsettled by his insistence upon relational immediacy.

Buber was not a practicing religious devotee in any conventional sense; rather, he may best be described as a “spiritual activist,” one who sought to encounter God in the only way he believed possible—within the living embrace of a being. Buber did not study sacred texts

in order to verify inherited beliefs, confirm myths, or construct apologies for the supranatural claims upon which institutional religions rest. His dialogical critique was directed toward theological-religion in its many historical manifestations, not toward the vitality of the human-God encounter itself. The human encounter with God is the between of I and Thou. What Buber sought within the recorded religious experiences of humankind were not dogmatic formulations but intuitions of dialogue—those subtle, sometimes obscured or neglected paths of relational practice present at the origins of religious life. He searched for seeds of dialogical insight planted deep within religious traditions at the moment of their spiritual inception, when human beings stood in genuine encounter with one another and with the fullness of being. Those are the moments of inception marked by immediacy, presence, and reciprocity. Yet primordial dialogical events, as history repeatedly shows, tend to divert into theological discourse. Once explanatory systems are constructed in order to interpret the originating encounter, practice gradually yields to ritual, and living presence is codified into structure and theology. At that point the inner seeds of dialogue risk ceasing to germinate. For Buber, God emerges in the dialogue between I and Thou; indeed, in a formulation more reflective of my own interpretation of his thought, God *is* the Between of I and Thou. Buber presented dialogue as the core essence of human existence, a foundational reality within which God and spirit are contained and disclosed. If existentialism claims that existence precedes essence, then for Buber dialogue precedes existence, since the self arises only in relation. It is therefore more accurate to describe Buber not as an Existentialist but as a Dialogist, for whom relation is ontologically prior.

Buber did not predicate attributes of God, only an It can have attributes while God is eternally a Thou, nor did he accept claims of transcendental revelation as final theological certainties. His critique, therefore, cannot be confined to particular doctrinal systems such as Judaism, Christianity, or other faiths. At the same time, he worked

lovingly through Christianity, frequently invoking the words of Jesus as a privileged locus for articulating his dialogical insight. If one were to replace the Bible with another text regarded to be revealed sacredness, the Buberian critique of post-primordial religion remains structurally unchanged, because the dialogical principle stands in tension with religious formalism wherever it appears. It is important to return to the point that Buber's intention was not to invalidate one set of theological claims in favor of another for his project was to propose an alternative spiritual paradigm, one in which no extant religion fully finds its proper or resting place.

In summary, why, then, was Buber interested in a dialogue with Christianity? Beyond the historical fact that Christianity occupies a central place in the religious imagination of the Western world and thus inevitably shaped his reflections on religious life, three reasons may be advanced. First, numerous creative and prominent Christian thinkers actively sought engagement with Buber, discovering in his work an articulation of their own yearning for encounter with the God of their faith. Second, Buber discerned in several of these thinkers authentic instantiations of the search for dialogical presence. Third, and perhaps most fundamentally, he recognized within certain strands of Christianity repositories of profound spiritual insight. It was not Christianity's theology, nor its Judaic origins, nor even its divergence from them, that he was concerned with. Rather, this book argues that the dialogical insight Buber articulated can indeed be found within Christianity, though often eclipsed—not by the religion *of* Jesus, but by the religion *about* Jesus, and by the theological structures and practices that grew around his sacred memory.

Introduction: A Dialogical Understanding of The Active Spiritual Life

Martin Buber's Dialogical Philosophy

If existence precedes essence, relationship precedes existence.

If ethics is first philosophy, I-Thou dialogue is first ethics

This work does not seek to reinterpret Christianity through the lens of Martin Buber, nor does it attempt to construct a revised Christology, propose a reformulation of Christian theology, or adjudicate confessional disputes within ecclesial history. It does not aim to revise doctrinal formulations, redefine dogmatic claims, or measure religious orthodoxy against the categories of dialogical thought as though Buber were a new magisterial authority. Rather, its purpose is philosophical and spiritual in orientation. It seeks to illuminate how Buber's dialogical philosophy contributes to a broader understanding of spirituality itself, taking Christianity as a sustained and particular reference point through which the conceptual and existential dimensions of relation, presence, address, responsibility, and the Between may be examined with greater clarity and depth. The aim, therefore, is not to subject Christianity to evaluation or correction. It is to show how dialogical philosophy discloses aspects of spiritual life that precede, underlie, and silently inform religious systems, offering a lens through which the lived experience of encounter and relation may be apprehended in its foundational primacy.

Three conceptual foundations guide this inquiry: primordiality, moments of inception, and social dialogical spirituality. Each of these offers a distinct yet interrelated way of understanding the structural

and experiential dimensions of relational existence that constitute the terrain of authentic spirituality.

Primordality

Primordality refers to the existential condition that precedes religion, though it must not be confused with something anti-religious or reducible to naturalistic explanation. It designates the foundational openness in which human beings stand before reality in direct and unmediated relation, prior to doctrinal articulation, ritual stabilization, or institutional codification. It is the encounter that exists before theology speaks, before liturgical forms solidify, and before ecclesial or bureaucratic structures impose interpretive order upon experience. For Buber, this condition is expressed most clearly in the I–Thou relation, wherein the human being becomes an “I” only in relation to a “Thou.” Relation, in his understanding, is not incidental to being but constitutive of it. The I–Thou precedes the I–It, just as the Between precedes system. Religion, in its historical development, emerges as a crystallization of this primordial encounter. It preserves memory of the Eternal Thou even as it risks replacing living relation with objectified forms. The danger is not inherent to doctrine itself, but to the reduction of presence to concept and of encounter to formulation. Primordality thus signifies the lived dimension of relation prior to formal religious expression. It indicates a spirituality that is structurally prior to religion without implying temporal precedence, for it is not a chronological stage but an ontological ground.

In this sense, Buber’s voice resounds clearly. The decisive spiritual reality is not creed but meeting. The primordial event of address cannot be replaced by system without loss. Religion may bear witness to this event, but it cannot generate it.

Social Dialogical Spirituality

The I–Thou is not a mystical abstraction, nor is it merely an elevated spiritual moment reserved for exceptional experiences. In keeping with Buber’s insistence, I–Thou signifies the consistent refusal to relate to others as Its. It is not withdrawal from the world but an orientation within it. It becomes, therefore, a social program in the deepest sense, though not a program reducible to policy. It calls for the creation of a society founded upon personhood rather than utilitarian instrumentalization. Where primordiality articulates the foundational relational stance, social dialogical spirituality concerns its enactment in the lived world. Buber insists that authentic relation cannot remain interiorized or confined to private consciousness. It must reverberate outward into human relations and social structures. Spirituality, if genuine, manifests in responsibility, ethical engagement, and communal presence. Verification occurs not through solitary ascent or abstract meditation, but through relational deed. Hospitality, justice, mutual recognition, creativity, and courage become the tangible expressions of dialogical life. Christian theology provides a rich and varied tradition in which these dynamics appear in multiple forms. Through engagements with figures such as Rahner, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, Merton, and Boff, Buber’s philosophy clarifies the relational core of spiritual life without dissolving theological specificity. It emphasizes participation rather than objectification, relational fidelity rather than devotional isolation, and shared address within the Between rather than hierarchical petition directed toward a distant objectified divinity. This perspective is captured in the book’s title, *Praying with Jesus, Not to Jesus*, which gestures toward a spirituality grounded in relation rather than doctrinal absorption. The human being is understood primarily as participant in living relation, not as isolated believer accumulating religious propositions.

Moments of Inception

Moments of inception designate those original and immediate instances in which the I encounters the Thou without mediation, objectification, or instrumentalization. Such moments may occur in relation to another person, to the world, or to the Eternal Thou. They are fully present, unrepeatable, and resistant to quantification. They mark the beginning of relational reality and ignite genuine dialogical existence. These moments are pre-conceptual and ontologically prior to ethical, religious, or social frameworks. They constitute raw existential openings in which the self meets the other authentically before reflection or categorization intervene. For Buber, such moments are primary to life itself. They form the genesis of authentic dialogue, spiritual presence, and ethical action. Dialogical philosophy is therefore not merely conceptual architecture; it is practical orientation. It invites the human being to live in readiness for such inception. To understand more fully what moments of inception signify within primordiality, one may turn to Buber's categories of will and grace. There is the will to orient oneself toward the Thou, and there is the grace that arrives only through such orientation. Yet grace is not something separate from orientation. It is the event of relation itself. The will prepares the space; grace is the advent of encounter. Here a fruitful parallel emerges with the Japanese Buddhist concepts of *jiriki* and *tariki*. *Jiriki*, or self-power, corresponds to disciplined intentionality and readiness. It reflects the turning of the self toward openness, attentiveness, and responsiveness. This aligns with Buber's notion of will, which structures readiness for encounter and disciplines the I to refrain from objectification or domination. *Tariki*, or other-power, corresponds to the spontaneous and unmerited advent of encounter. It mirrors grace, which cannot be produced by effort yet becomes possible only where readiness exists. In this interplay, will and grace, *jiriki* and *tariki*, define one another. Readiness without openness risks coercion. Expectation without readiness risks passivity. The human being

both disposes itself toward presence and receives the unexpected gift of encounter. In this dialectic, relational ontology reveals itself as simultaneously disciplined and receptive, intentional and responsive.

The Fundamental Word and the Structure of Human Reality

At the heart of Buber's philosophical vision lies a claim whose simplicity conceals ontological audacity. Human existence is not first isolated consciousness confronting neutral objects. It is an unfolding reality whose deepest meaning is realized in relation. The human being does not emerge as a self-contained entity that subsequently enters encounter. It is constituted as I in the act of addressing and being addressed. The primary words I-Thou and I-It are not grammatical constructs. They are existential postures. They represent ontologically charged stances through which the I positions itself in the world. The I that speaks I-Thou is not identical to the I that speaks I-It. The latter operates within experience, calculation, and utility. The former opens into presence, responsiveness, and mutuality. In I-Thou, the other is encountered as irreducible and alive. The encounter may be brief, yet its resonance is enduring. The I-It relation remains indispensable. Through it societies function, technologies operate, and knowledge is transmitted. Yet when I-It becomes absolute, alienation follows. Persons are flattened into functions. Roles replace presence. In contrast, I-Thou opens space for undivided attention and mutual recognition. Here the human becomes fully itself. Buber's spirituality unfolds from this ground. It is the lived concretization of primordiality. The I-Thou encounter constitutes the inception of spiritual life. All religions are secondary expressions of this original event. They attempt to preserve, articulate, or ritualize what was first immediate and living. If one considers the life and teaching of Jesus through this lens, one sees a figure whose presence exemplifies primordial relational reality prior to institutional codification. Jesus precedes Christianity. His significance lies not in the religion constructed around him

but in the unmediated encounters he enacted. He cannot be contained within doctrinal system, for he belongs to the realm of living address.

The Between and Ethical Reality

Identity, in this framework, is not pre-given substance but dialogical emergence. The Between (*das Zwischen*) is neither abstraction nor psychological projection. It is the living locus in which relation unfolds. It appears when both parties risk presence. It vanishes when one reduces the other to It. Ethical life emerges naturally from this structure. Responsibility is not obedience to abstract law but responsiveness to presence. In the face-to-face encounter, morality is no longer external imposition. It becomes intrinsic feature of relational existence. Presence within I–Thou is subtle and expansive. It is not mere emotional intensity or physical proximity. It is undivided openness to the reality of the other. Even asymmetrical relationships—teacher and student, caregiver and patient—may inhabit this space when recognition replaces domination. Yet Buber reminds us that I–Thou cannot be sustained indefinitely. Every Thou becomes It in memory and reflection. Life demands engagement with I–It. The tension between immediacy and structure is unavoidable. What remains essential is readiness for renewed encounter.

The Eternal Thou

Buber's philosophy emerges not as system but as orientation. The divine is the eternal Thou, encountered not as object but as ground of relation. Every finite I–Thou gestures toward participation in a larger relational horizon. To speak Thou to another is already to enter into relation with this eternal depth. To be eternal is not an attribute of time everlasting, it is a quality of the relationship. In other words, God can never be an It, because God is eternally a Thou. Prayer, then, becomes

dialogical address. Faith becomes lived trust. Revelation occurs as event rather than as mere transmission of propositions. Spiritual life unfolds within encounter rather than within abstraction.

Social Extension and Education

Authentic community, for Buber, arises from living relation rather than from mass organization. Institutions remain necessary, yet they must remain accountable to the preservation of the Between. Schools, congregations, and political assemblies must cultivate conditions in which relational presence remains possible. Education exemplifies this dynamic. Teaching is not transmission of information but facilitation of encounter. The discipline of study prepares readiness. Insight arrives as grace. Moments of inception occur when relational consciousness awakens. Justice and solidarity emerge not as procedural mandates but as lived expressions of dialogical awareness.

Resilience of Dialogical Spirituality

Even rupture and failure do not negate dialogical possibility. Reconciliation and renewed attention constitute new inception. Dialogical life persists through fragility. It requires recurring consent to presence and continuous cultivation of readiness.

Conclusion

The synthesis of Buber's dialogical philosophy with the grammar of will and grace, interpreted through moments of inception and extended into communal life as social spirituality, presents a comprehensive anthropology of relational existence. The human being becomes I in responsive presence. The eternal Thou grounds every encounter. Communities flourish when structured around relational

fidelity. Spiritual fulfillment is realized not through possession or abstraction, but through attentive and ethically charged engagement sustained by readiness and grace. Each encounter opens luminous possibility. Each moment of inception discloses depth. In the Between, identity emerges, responsibility arises, and the sacred dimension of relation is realized again and again, as every meeting begins anew.

Martin Buber and His “Great Brother”

Buber On Jesus, The Jewish Thou, and the Question of the Christ

“In Jesus we do not have a teaching, still less a system of doctrine, but a human life that is the event of mutual Presence... Jesus really lived here on earth the eternal meeting of God and man, and so he stands in the forefront of all who seek the living relation.”

Jesus Within Buber’s Dialogical Poetry

Martin Buber, in his writings, famously calls Jesus his “great brother,” a phrase that first appears in his essay on Jesus in *Zwei Glaubensweisen* (*Two Types of Faith*, 1950), yet the significance of this appellation unfolds most fully across the many references to Jesus scattered throughout his magnum opus, *I and Thou*, where Buber’s reflections occupy a distinctive and often misunderstood place in modern religious thought, for here a Jewish philosopher, deeply devoted to the renewal of Judaism within a non-orthodox, non-institutional framework, approaches the figure of Jesus with both reverence and intellectual rigor, refusing either to assimilate him into Christian dogma or to dismiss him as alien to Jewish faith, and instead engaging him dialogically, as a historical person, as a Jewish teacher, and as a living presence whose life and words disclose the profound depths of human relation to God, so that Jesus, in Buber’s lens, is neither metaphysical anomaly nor ethical reformer in isolation, but paradigmatic witness to dialogical existence, standing in radical immediacy before God and calling others into that same immediacy, and within this chapter, we explore Buber’s writings and teachings on Jesus across their theological, philosophical, and interreligious dimensions, showing how Buber affirms Jesus without succumbing to Christological absolutism and

how his reading illuminates the contours of dialogical spirituality in ways that transcend confessional boundaries.

Jesus as a Jewish Teacher

Buber insists repeatedly that Jesus must be understood within the context of Judaism, resisting interpretations that detach him from his Jewish matrix or portray him as founder of a religion in opposition to Israel. This brings us to the oft referred to dichotomy between the religion *of* Jesus and the religion that was founded *about* Jesus. Jesus, in Buber's understanding, stands firmly within the prophetic and apocalyptic currents of Second Temple Judaism, sharing certain concerns with Jewish scholars such as Leo Baeck, who emphasized the Jewish character of Jesus' teaching. Yet Buber's interest is not primarily historical apologetics but existential interpretation, attending less to chronology than to relational intensity, for in his reading Jesus does not abolish the Torah but radicalizes its inward dimension. Jesus brings to fruition the prophetic emphasis on sincerity of heart, justice, and mercy through the proclamation of the Kingdom of God, and the Sermon on the Mount, in particular, manifests this interiorization of command in a way that converges with Buber's insistence that authentic relation with God originates not in ritual observance or legalistic adherence but within the living encounter between persons. Buber, attentive to the singularity of Jesus' spiritual life, recognizes in him an immediacy of relation to God that surpasses conventional piety and commands attention not for doctrinal novelty but for the extraordinary intensity of his encounter with the divine.

Jesus and the Eternal Thou

At the center of Buber's philosophy lies the distinction between I-It and I-Thou, articulated most fully in his *I and Thou*, wherein God is

encountered not as object but as the eternal Thou, never to be reduced to concept. Eternal Thou is not predication of an attribute of God referencing everlastingness in time or infinity in space, it simply means that God is eternally a Thou for it can never become an It. Since God, within this interpretation, is the between of I and Thou, the between, by definition, cannot become an It, for at that moment it ceases to be. When Buber turns to Jesus, he reads him as one who lived in radical I–Thou relation with God, addressing God as Father not through metaphysical speculation or formulaic recitation but in immediacy. Prayer, in Jesus' life, is not abstract liturgy but living presence, and the parables, far from conveying theological abstraction, disclose the intimate relation of human beings with God and with one another, showing that the Kingdom of God is not deferred to a future apocalypse but present wherever divine immediacy breaks into ordinary life. In this sense, Jesus embodies for Buber what it means to stand before God without mediation, deriving authority not from institutional office or hierarchical claim but from the authenticity of relation itself.

The Kingdom of God as Relational Reality

The Kingdom of God, central to Jesus' proclamation, is interpreted by Buber not primarily as a purely eschatological event, but as the sphere of divine immediacy entering history. The kingdom is realized wherever human beings participate in transformative relation to one another through love, justice and compassion. In this reading, the Kingdom resonates with Buber's understanding of authentic community, for human communities flourish when grounded in I–Thou relations. Buber remains careful to avoid conflating historical institutions or nations with the Kingdom Jesus proclaims, just as he warns against objectifying God, cautioning against any attempt to institutionalize divine immediacy in ways that would collapse encounter into system.

Jesus and Law

Contrary to certain narratives portraying Jesus as opponent of the law, Buber emphasizes continuity rather than rupture, asserting that Jesus challenges legalism—obedience devoid of inward presence—rather than the Torah itself, intensifying the prophetic call to wholehearted love of God and neighbor. In doing so, rather than abolishing, Jesus internalizes and radicalizes the Torah's ethical demand, situating love at the center of both Jewish law and his own teaching. Buber explicitly rejects supersessionism, affirming that Jesus speaks within Israel without replacing it, and that the ethical demands of the Torah find their fullest expression, in dialogical terms, in relational fidelity rather than in external observance alone.

The Question of Messiahship

Buber approaches claims Jesus' messiahship with careful restraint, acknowledging that Jesus may have conceived of himself eschatologically while resisting doctrinal assertions of divinity that risk transforming the living teacher into an object. Such objectification would shift the encounter from I-Thou into I-It, fixing dynamic relational immediacy into static metaphysical proposition, and while Buber does not deny Jesus' spiritual authority, he insists that the decisive dimension lies not in ontology but in relation. Thus his reading diverges from classical Christology, for where traditional theology posits exclusive mediation between God and humanity, Buber affirms that God remains immediately accessible as Thou to all, so that no historical figure, however luminous, may supplant the immediacy of divine encounter.

Encounter and Decision

Jesus' call to discipleship—"Follow me"—exemplifies existential decision, demanding concrete response that Buber interprets not as

institutional recruitment but as summons to relational fidelity, where discipleship becomes participation in Jesus' stance before God. This summons is not mere imitation of behavior but sharing in immediacy, intersecting with existential concerns reminiscent of Kierkegaard yet reframed communally, emphasizing that each human must make a decisive commitment to respond to the address of the Thou, for neutrality before such a call is impossible within the framework of dialogical existence.

Jesus and Love

Central to Buber's reading is Jesus' ethic of love, which encompasses the enemy, calls for forgiveness without limit, and manifests solidarity with the marginalized, expressing radical openness grounded in recognition of every human as Thou. Buber neither sentimentalizes nor simplifies this ethic, acknowledging the difficulty of sustaining I-Thou relations amid conflict, as demonstrated by Jesus' own life, which culminates in crucifixion, revealing the cost, suffering, and ultimate fragility of dialogical community while simultaneously testifying to the enduring truth of relation.

Crucifixion and Suffering

For Buber, the crucifixion is not a metaphysical transaction reconciling humanity to God, but the consequence of prophetic faithfulness within a hostile world, an expression of unwavering relation in the face of human rejection, so that suffering becomes testimony rather than failure. Jesus' suffering illustrates that fidelity to the divine and to the relational call of neighbor is not guaranteed comfort but courageous adherence to immediacy.

Resurrection and Presence

Buber does not assert resurrection dogmatically, yet he acknowledges that Christian faith treats it as the enduring presence of Jesus, and when interpreted dialogically, resurrection signifies the lasting impact of relational authenticity, demonstrating that a life lived in full presence leaves traces that transcend temporal limitations. This is a transforming existential orientation rather than metaphysical ontology where the figure of Jesus awakens ongoing relation to God in those who encounter him.

Jesus and Judaism

Buber's reflections model interreligious engagement, affirming Jesus as a brother within Israel while remaining faithful to Torah and covenant, exemplifying encounter without assimilation and illustrating the ethos of dialogical openness that underlies his entire philosophical project.

Teaching and Pedagogy

As a teacher, Buber observes, Jesus instructs through presence rather than system, using parables as invitations rather than doctrinal expositions. Jesus exemplifies dialogical pedagogy wherein authority arises from authenticity and relational engagement rather than hierarchical imposition. This fits within Buber's overall preference for Haggadah (legend,) rather than conventional theology.

Jesus and the Between

Ultimately, Buber presents Jesus as one who lived intensely within the Between—between person to person, between God and human-

ity, between prophetic tradition and apocalyptic expectation, between solitude and community—yet he carefully resists transforming this Between into exclusive mediation, affirming that every person retains capacity for direct relation to the eternal Thou. Jesus reveals possibility without monopolizing access, inviting encounter rather than commanding doctrinal submission.

Convergence and Tension with Christian Theology

Points of convergence between Buber’s and Christian interpretations include love, compassion, forgiveness, relational centrality, and existential decision, while points of tension—such as rejection of ontological divinity, resistance to exclusive mediation, and refusal of supersessionism—do not function as dismissal but as relationally ethical boundaries within dialogical respect.

Jesus as Witness to Dialogical Existence

Within Buber’s philosophical vision, Jesus stands as exemplar of what it means to live entirely before God, his authority residing in relational depth rather than metaphysical status, calling human beings to immediacy with God and neighbor alike. Jesus’ s life demonstrates that courage, attention, and fidelity define authentic existence, rendering Buber’s engagement with Jesus integral to the broader project of dialogical spirituality, showing that relation transcends confessional boundaries without nullifying either tradition.

Conclusion: The Jewish Thou and the Christian Question

Buber’s reflections on Jesus reveal a thinker committed simultaneously to fidelity and openness, remaining rooted in Judaism while engaging Christianity lovingly, portraying Jesus as a Jewish teacher

who lived radical immediacy before God and summoned others to share in it. For Buber, Jesus exemplifies I–Thou faithfulness without allowing any historical figure to replace the eternal Thou, and in this balance—the encounter without appropriation or rejection—Jesus becomes not a doctrinal battleground but a dialogical partner. In Buber’s eyes, Jesus’ life testifies to the possibility that human existence, when wholly oriented toward God and neighbor, *which is one and the same*, becomes luminous with presence, and such radiance remains, in Buber’s thought, the very heart of dialogical spirituality.

Mario Jorge Bergoglio

A Pope in the Between: Encounter, Compassion, and the Reopening of Dialogue

Introduction

A man chooses for himself the name Francis and in some ways the world changes. This chapter does not attempt to assimilate Bergoglio into a Buberian system, nor to blur important theological distinctions. Instead, it seeks to show how Buber's fundamental tenets—relation as ontological priority, the Between as locus of divine disclosure, the critique of objectification, and the fragility of presence—provide a clarifying lens through which Bergoglio's project may be understood with greater depth. The goal is not to collapse difference but to illuminate convergence at the level of spiritual structure.

Francis and his People

To speak of Mario Jorge Bergoglio in light of Martin Buber is not to suggest a direct line of philosophical dependence, nor to imply that Bergoglio consciously appropriated Buber's categories. There is no evidence of systematic borrowing, nor is such borrowing necessary for the argument advanced here. Rather, the task is interpretive. It is to ask whether, beneath the explicit theological language and ecclesial commitments that shape Bergoglio's thought, there can be discerned a relational grammar that resonates with the dialogical insight at the heart of Buber's philosophy. My contention is that such resonance is real and illuminating. Although Bergoglio does not speak in the vocabulary of I–Thou and I–It, his pastoral, social, and spiritual vision repeatedly returns to the primacy of encounter, the irreducible dignity

of the other, and the spiritual fecundity of presence. In that return, one may perceive a practical embodiment of dialogical spirituality within the life of a global religious institution.

The Anthropological Convergence: The Human as Encounter

At the center of Buber's philosophy stands a radical anthropological claim: the human being does not first exist as an isolated subject who subsequently enters relation. The self arises in meeting. "All real living is meeting" is not poetic exaggeration but ontological assertion. Identity is not possession but participation; the self is constituted in the address and response of I and Thou. Bergoglio's anthropology, though articulated in theological rather than philosophical terms, moves along remarkably similar lines. When he insists that the Church must go forth, must accompany, must draw near to the wounded and the marginalized, he is not merely advocating pastoral strategy. He is expressing a vision in which human dignity is realized in relational proximity rather than in abstract moral categorization. The oft-cited image of the Church as a "field hospital" does more than evoke compassion; it redefines the space in which spiritual life unfolds. A hospital is not primarily a tribunal. It is a site of encounter, vulnerability, and embodied presence. In my interpretation of Buber, dialogue precedes even what existentialists call existence. The self emerges in the Between. Bergoglio's pastoral practice reflects a similar priority. The human person is not first a bearer of doctrinal conformity or deviation. He or she is first a being who stands before another, wounded, searching, and capable of response. The pastoral encounter thus becomes constitutive rather than secondary. Doctrine remains present, yet it is refracted through the living immediacy of the face-to-face meeting.

This convergence does not erase theological distinctions. Buber refrains from systematic dogmatic elaboration, whereas Bergoglio

stands firmly within the doctrinal tradition of Catholic Christianity. Nevertheless, at the level of lived anthropology, both resist reduction of the person to abstraction. Both oppose the transformation of living beings into cases. Both insist, in different vocabularies, that the human being becomes fully human only in authentic relation.

Mercy as Dialogical Event

Perhaps the most striking parallel between Buber and Bergoglio emerges in the latter's sustained emphasis on mercy. Mercy, in Bergoglio's discourse, is not merely an ethical recommendation; it is the very heart of the Christian proclamation. Yet mercy, as he describes and enacts it, bears structural resemblance to Buber's I-Thou relation. For Buber, God is not an object among objects, nor a metaphysical hypothesis to be affirmed. God is encountered in the Between of genuine dialogue. In a formulation closer to my own interpretation of Buber, God is not merely present in dialogue but is the Between itself. Divine reality discloses itself wherever presence replaces utility and address replaces classification. Mercy, in Bergoglio's practice, functions analogously. When one person stands before another without reducing that other to sin, failure, or social status, something more than ethical leniency occurs. A space opens. Judgment is suspended, not in the sense that moral discernment disappears, but in the sense that the other is first received as Thou. Mercy becomes the protection of the Between.

Bergoglio's repeated warnings against rigid legalism can thus be read dialogically. Legalism reduces persons to objects within a moral system. It transforms encounter into assessment. Mercy, by contrast, restores the primacy of relation. It insists that before one speaks about a person, one must stand before that person. In Buberian terms, mercy interrupts I-It and reawakens I-Thou. This is not sentimentalism. Buber never equated I-Thou with emotional warmth; dialogue can be