

**Relation as Presence:
On Martin Buber's Lectures *Religion als Gegenwart***

Francesco Ferrari

Abstract:

Buber's dialogical principle can be understood as an effort to realize how and why being present (in a given "here") concretely means being in the presence (of someone or something), and hence being in the present (in a given "now"). Being there, being present and in the present is not so immediate as it seems. It is rather a journey, which requires encountering the other by the disclosure of what Buber names the I-Thou relation. This paper is devoted to this issue, with a special focus on Buber's lectures *Religion als Gegenwart* he delivered few months before he completed his major work *Ich und Du*.

Keywords:

Martin Buber, I-Thou relation, Encounter, Religion, Presence/Present

現在としての関係： マルティン・ブーバーの講義「現在としての宗教」について

フランシスコ・フェラーリ

要旨

ブーバーの対話の原理は、(とある「ここ」において) 現存する (being present) ことの具体的な意味が、いかにして、またなぜ、(誰か、もしくは何かの) 現前のもとにある (being in the presence) ことを意味し、またそれゆえ (とある「いま」において) 現在のうちにある (being in the present) ということの意味するのかを理解する、ひとつの努力と捉えることができる。そこにあるとうこと、現存することと、現在のうちにあることは、見かけほど直結してはいない。それは、むしろ、ブーバーが「我-汝関係」と名づけたものの開示とおした他者との出会いを要する旅路である。本論では、この問題について、代表作『我と汝』の完成数か月前にブーバーが行った講演「現在としての宗教」に特に焦点を当て考察する。

キーワード

マルティン・ブーバー、我-汝関係、出会い、宗教、現前／現在

Throughout his life and works Austrian-Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (1878-1965) ceaselessly aimed to find out to which extent the phenomenon of *presence in reality* is possible. He was aware that most of the time in our daily lives we are not *present*. In his essay *Zwiesprache* he sketched a phenomenological glimpse of this issue in the following terms:

“Each of us is encased in an armour, which we soon [...] no longer notice. There are moments which penetrate it, and stir the soul to sensibility. And when such a moment has imposed itself upon us, and we then take notice, and ask ourselves, ‘Has anything in particular taken place? Was it not of the kind that I meet every day?’, then we may reply to ourselves, ‘Nothing in particular, indeed it is like this every day, only *we are not there every day*’ ” (Buber 2019a, 123; italics mine).

Buber's dialogical principle can be understood as an effort to realize how and why *being present* (in a given “here”) concretely means *being in the presence* (of someone or something), and hence *being in the present* (in a given “now”). Being there, being present and in the present is not so immediate as it seems. It is rather a journey, which requires encountering the other by the disclosure of what Buber names the I-Thou relation. The core of his dialogical philosophy may be found in the *relational a priori* he formulates in the first pages of *Ich und Du* as follows:

“There is no I as such but only the I of the basic word I–Thou and the I of the basic word I–It. [...] In the beginning, is the relation” (Buber 2019b 39; 49).

Buber's relational a priori does not provide ultimate ontological centrality to the subject, nor to his-her object, rather to their encounter (*Begegnung*). Encounter is the name of the event, which rises from entering in an I-Thou relation (*Ich-Du Beziehung*), by being turned toward the other (*Hinwendung*), and through a reciprocal making oneself and the other present (*Vergegenwärtigung*), in such a way that the ultimate outcome of the relation is nothing less but the gift of reciprocal presence (Ferrari 2012; Werner 2015). Buber's relational a priori hence defines relation as presence. This is the fundament of a conception of reality as mutual belonging (*Zusammengehörigkeit*), reciprocal entanglement, and even interdependence (Du Toit 2018), that is therefore realized, politically speaking, within the community (Ferrari 2018).

Already during his youth, Buber engaged in a dialogue with the great doctrines of

mutual belonging and conciliation – from the thought of Heraclitus to Hasidism; from the Christian mystics of Eckhart, Cusa and Böhme to Taoism; from Neoplatonism to the poetry of Friedrich Hölderlin. Buber’s mature dialogical thought, then, offers countless resources for a philosophical foundation for reconciliatory processes. Relationally structured within a common cosmos, the human existence takes place, according to Buber, as being part of a whole, hence through a condition of ontological conciliation, from which each separation expresses a subsequent estrangement, peculiar to the so-called I-It relationship. The epithet “builder of bridges”, which Buber received from Ernst Simon, is particularly precise in this regard:

“This apt metaphor conveys the image of someone who dedicated his life and thought to crossing the chiasms that separate the domains of thought and culture from one another, to healing broken relationships between individuals as well as between groups, to restoring unity and wholeness in people’s lives. Through his life, Buber dedicated himself to overcoming the estrangement that divides people from people, the person from God, the person from his social and cultural world, the Jew from Judaism, the Jew from the Christian, the Jew from the Arab, and the nations from the nations. In fact, Buber’s writings can appropriately be read as one of the most significant attempts in modern times to combat the alienating conditions of modern life, to help man in general and the Jew in particular recover a sense of meaningfulness, rootedness, holiness, and wholeness in his own life” (Silberstein 1981, 211).

Within Buber’s dialogical framework, human beings enter in relationship with the totally Other, in such a way that the totally Other is the totally Present too. The encounter with the Divine was always lived and interpreted by Buber within a tradition, that of Judaism, but through the creative freedom of “religiosity”, and not in the observance of a “religion” (Ferrari 2014). Buber’s reading and interpretation of Hasidism, Zionism, and Scripture are also paradigmatic in this regard. Since his youth, he appreciated Hasidism as a relational religiosity, which turns every contact with Creation into a sacred gesture of union. Already at the beginning of the century, Zionism was also made his own by Buber as an expression of cultural creativity, in antithesis with Theodor Herzl’s leadership – arguments that will lead him, *mutatis mutandis*, almost half a century later, to sharp critical positions toward the State of Israel. Coherently with his dialogical turn in the early twenties, Buber turned himself intensively to the Scripture, which he read as the testimony of a series of events of encounter and dialogue between the human and the Divine in the course of history. The event of giving and receiving

the word, in the interhuman as well as in the human-Divine dialogue constitutes a fundamental dimension of Buber's entire philosophy. In such a "spoken" dimension, he individuates the most peculiar dimension of Scripture, as well as of our existence, in a ceaseless "response" to any given circumstance, therefore as "responsibility" (*Verantwortung*).

At the core of Buber's thought lies that aforementioned relational a priori, according to which the "I" becomes an "I" only in the presence which stems through the relationship with a Thou. Presence, present and relation appear to be deeply intertwined in his philosophy. This is paradigmatically witnessed also by the fact that *Ich und Du* (Buber 2019b, 39-109) was published shortly after a series of lectures Buber delivered in Frankfurt in the winter semester of 1921/22, entitled *Religion als Gegenwart*, i.e., Religion as Presence (Buber 2017, 87-160).

It was under the invitation of Franz Rosenzweig (Buber 1973, 92-93), director of the *Freies Jüdisches Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt am Main, that Buber delivered, between January and February 1922, the cycle of eight lectures entitled *Religion als Gegenwart*. Their text, typewritten by a stenographer, published in 1978 by Rivka Horwitz (Horwitz 1978), offers at first glance a *verbatim* live portrait of Buber as a committed teacher for the adult education in Weimar Germany (Van de Sandt 1977). A priceless document still today, *Religion als Gegenwart* marks above all a turning point from Buber's early mystical phase, foreshadowing the advent of his dialogical thought (Mendes-Flohr 1989). *Religion als Gegenwart* offers, in particular from the fourth to the last lecture, theoretical and semantical prodromes of Buber's imminent dialogical and relational turn. At the same time, it is impossible to ignore the permanence of *Daniel's* (Buber 2001, 183-246) terminology – which emerges time and again through Buber's renewed critical stance towards the overwhelming power of the "world of orientation" (*Welt der Orientierung*) (Buber 2017, 104) and his arguing in favor of the "world of realization" (*Verwirklichungswelt*) (Buber 2017, 123) – as well as Buber's explicit reference to the Hasidic notion of *Shekinah* as the presence of God in the world, that stems out of any genuine event of encounter (Buber 2017, 155).

More in detail, as we apprehend from a handwritten document sketched by Buber himself, *Religion als Gegenwart* was originally thought as the encompassing title for a series of five books, within which *Ich und Du* was merely drafted as its "prolegomena to a philosophy of religion" (see also Buber 1973, 66). The ambitious project, reported in Horwitz 1978, 210, was so articulated:

Bücherreihe: Religion als Gegenwart.

- I. *Ich und Du.*
- II. *Die Urformen des religiösen Lebens.*
- III. *Die religiöse Person.*
- IV. *Die Religionen.*
- V. *Die religiöse Kraft und unsere Zeit.*

Unfortunately, the plan was never accomplished. Ironically enough, *Ich und Du* will become Buber's masterpiece, the manifesto of his dialogical thought, while *Religion als Gegenwart* will remain its almost forgotten conceptual laboratory (for a brilliant exception: Huston 2007, 193-208). Nevertheless, three decades later, in autobiographical recollections such as *Zur Geschichte des dialogischen Prinzips* (Buber 2019c, 233) and *Begegnung* (Buber 2016, 305), Buber himself will make justice to *Religion als Gegenwart*, recognizing a crucial moment for the final editing of *Ich und Du* in the eight lectures he delivered few weeks before at the *Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt.

We can read *Religion als Gegenwart* as a tireless effort to defend the religious phenomenon (*das Religiöse*) against exogenous (the first three lectures) and endogenous (from the fourth to the last one) threats. The question of religion, which was deployed throughout Buber's first writings by redefining Simmel's antithesis between religion and religiosity (Ferrari 2014), is now raised by facing the universality of the religious phenomenon (*das Religiöse*) and the plurality of the historical religions (*die Religionen*) as the manifold, everlasting process of shaping the "form of God" (*Gottes Gestalt*) (Buber 2017, 158). As we shall see, Buber's definition of religion as presence, introduced in the second part of his lectures, finally offers the author's counterargument to the "dangers" (Moore 1996, 167-198) that religions may constitute for the religious phenomenon as such. With Daniel Breslauer's words:

"Buber's lectures entitled Religion as Presence [...] probe the meaning of religion in human life and explore the varied dimensions of human experience, concluding that human beings discover God through their interaction with one another, through their discovery of presence and being present, through the meeting of an I and a Thou" (Breslauer 1990, 15).

In the first three lectures, the Jewish philosopher proceeds *ex negativo* (Buber 2017, 96), affirming the need to set religion as something unconditioned, that is, free from all those

reductionisms that, aiming its functionalization, call into question and even undermine its autonomy. Buber resolutely faces and criticizes a wide range of attempts to turn religion into “something relative” (Buber 2017, 90), which goes from its instrumentalization in favor of individual biological needs to its abuse operated by nationalisms, which put collective groups against each other in the name of God; but also, in a subtler and more insidious way, from the assimilation of religion to a mere product of a given culture to its supposed dependence on ethics.

Into this wavelength, Buber tenaciously rejects any endeavor to reduce religion to a psychological experience too. Throughout his entire third lecture, discussing notions like Schleiermacher's “feeling of absolute dependence” and Otto's “creatural feeling”, the Jewish philosopher harshly refuses to identify a feeling as the *locus revelationis* of the religious phenomenon, and he defines the latter as the connection that arises out of a “bond of being” (*Seinsbindung*) (Buber 2017, 97). Not without an open confrontation with that withdrawal into the self, which characterizes the concept of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*) (Buber 2017, 110-111), Buber also rejects the notion of soul (*Seele*) as something separated from the external world, that would exist *inside* the human being. Significantly, he redefines it as “the relationship of the human being to the world, to things, to essences, to men, to being, to himself. [...] A bridge between the human being and the world” (Buber 2017, 107). Referring to four concrete examples of genuine relation (love; nature; artistic creation; decision), through which he will unfold a phenomenology of the encounter from the fourth lecture, the philosopher firmly announces: “all this must not be understood psychologically, that is, not as something that happens *in* the human being, but as something that happens between (*zwischen*) the human being and an existing Thou” (Buber 2017, 133).

The lectures *Religion als Gegenwart* constitute a turning point in Buber's thought. From then on, the Jewish philosopher will be committed to the lifelong task of developing a relational ontology of the between (*zwischen*), according to which something happens *between* us, *with* us, *to* us, and not just *in* us. This becomes clearer in the second group of the lectures. His critical stance on the term “experience” does not target only its aforementioned psychologistic connotation of “lived experience” (*Erlebnis*), but also its epistemological dimension of “empirical knowledge” (*Erfahrung*). Fostering division (*Trennung*) instead of boundary (*Verbindung*), both (*Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung*) jeopardize that sense of belonging to the continuity of being, which is, according to Buber, profoundly distinctive of the religious

phenomenon. The former, through a disproportionate self-reference. The latter, through a series of processes, which lead to perceive the other as something separated, and, relatively soon, as an object (*Gegenstand*).

Noticeably, Buber names those processes not just “experiences”, but rather “It-experiences” (*Es-Erfahrungen*) (Buber 2017, 117). The fourth lecture thereby inaugurates an everlasting juxtaposition in Buber’s philosophy: namely, the one between an “It” (*Es*), which is perceived as a separated object of experience, and a “Thou” (*Du*), which encounters us as someone (or something) with whom we are bond in a relation (*Beziehung*), that, as such, does not require knowledge, but rather realization (*Verwirklichung*) (Buber 2017, 128). Notwithstanding the repeated use of this term, which represents a clear echo of his pre-dialogical writings, combining it, also, with the newly developed I-Thou relation, adopting the syntagma “world of realization” (*Verwirklichungswelt*) as a synonymous for the “Thou-world” (*Du-Welt*) (Buber 2017, 123), it is indisputable that, throughout *Religion als Gegenwart*, Buber’s thought and terminology are heading towards one of his imminent major work.

His moving away from that mystical accent, which had marked his early writings, is also reflected now (Buber 2017, 137-138) by his arguing that the relation between I and Thou does not mean an ecstatic process of unification (*Vereinigung*), but rather their facing each other (*Gegenüberstehen*) (Buber 2017, 123) in a polarity, whose elements never subsume each other, but are mutually present (*gegenwärtig*) (Buber 2017, 127). The fundamental antithesis between It-experiences and Thou-relations is set, therefore, between turning the other into an object (*Gegenstand*) with a given content (*Inhalt*), which has nothing but past, and being exposed to the presence (*Gegenwart*) of the other, that, impossible to be encompassed into any description, donates nothing but presence and present (Buber 2017, 129).

The juxtaposition between presence (*Gegenwart*) and object (*Gegenstand*) and the one between relation (*Beziehung*) and experience (*Erfahrung*) suggest that the issue of presence is not just a theoretical one, but it is rather a concrete question of primary human interest. In the lectures *Religion als Gegenwart*, Buber addresses it individuating a correlation between “presence” and “relation”, which involves three instances: 1. the condition of being-present (here); 2. that of being-in-the-present (now); 3. the one of being-in-the-presence of someone or something, i.e. in relation with the other. How these three dimensions are intertwined is expressed in the clearest way by the following passage from the fifth lecture:

“There is presence in life to the extent that and only to the extent that there is relation, there is Thou, there is relation to a Thou. From this relation, only from such a relation

does presence arise. When something comes to encounter us and stands in front of us, the exclusive presence arises" (Buber 2017, 128).

Buber's relational ontology finds in the encounter with the Thou the *conditio sine qua non* of presence. Human beings are ontologically relational beings, who are capable of being present and in the present only under the premise of the encounter with the other.

Within this wavelength, introducing the developmental model of the "inborn Thou" (*eingeborenes Du*) (Buber 2017, 123), Buber will argue that the separated conscience of the I is just a secondary product, which stems only after breaking the *a priori* relation with the Thou. Relations are not accidents in Buber's philosophy. On the contrary, they ontologically shape subjects and their access to the world. It is worth noting, nonetheless, that in the *Religion als Gegenwart* lectures the fundamental alternative is set between a "Thou-" and an "It-" world (*Du-Welt; Es-Welt*) (Buber 2017, 123), in a kind of essentialistic fashion that the author will revise in *Ich und Du* by setting a fundamental antithesis among the I-Thou- and the I-It-*relation*.

Human beings receive presence from the encounter with a Thou. Yet, such a presence, just like the instant (*Augenblick*) of the relation from which it stems, has no continuity in time (Buber 2017, 154), and therefore seems fragile and fleeting, constantly on the verge of disappearing in the It-world of orientation. Acknowledging that "according to the essence of the Thou, the relation cannot remain in the presence" (Buber 2017, 140), given the apparent lack of connection between the Thou-moments (*Du-Momenten*) (Buber 2017, 131), Buber takes seriously into account the issue of the permanence of presence. In order to bridge a discontinuity, which seems to be as an insurmountable one, there is a necessity, he argues, for a Thou that, given its unconditional nature, does not decline into an It.

Buber identifies in a divine principle the unshakable foundation to the *continuum* of the Thou-moments: "the absolute Thou (*das absolute Du*) that, according to its essence, cannot become It" (Buber 2017, 131). Introducing the notion of "absolute Thou", that will be renamed soon as "the eternal Thou" (*das ewige Du*) in his imminent major dialogical work, Buber provides a clearly theological foundation to his relational ontology, and determinates *ex positivo*, finally, the genuine reality of religion in the relation: relation with a Thou that never turns into an It.

"There is, apparently, no continuity in the Thou-World, therefore, no present that does not become past. Then, there is no permanent, life-filling presence. This is the funda-

mental question from which we can understand what is legitimately called religion: it is the question of the continuity of the Thou, of the unconditionality of the Thou” (Buber 2017, 131).

The religious phenomenon is therefore defined as a “pure relation” (*reine Beziehung*) (Buber 2017, 133) with a Thou, whose essence is perpetual presence. Buber’s determination of religion faithfully follows the double track of the correlation between presence and relation he sets in the fifth lecture of *Religion als Gegenwart*. On the one hand, he acknowledges that “religion is presence, a present, which, according to its essence, cannot become past” (Buber 2017, 146). On the other hand, he promptly recognizes that “the simple being-confronted (*Gegenübertreten*) is what all religions have comprehended, time and again, as the real in its reality” (Buber 2017, 136), so that religion constitutes the paradigmatic example of the I-Thou relation.

Along this way, Buber defines the religious phenomenon as the event *par excellence*, in which the rise of presence reveals itself as indissolubly correlated with the occurrence of the I-Thou relation. By defining religion as presence, the Jewish philosopher focuses on the relational, responsive, dialogic character of the religious phenomenon, whose key figure is to be found in that instant of the encounter with the absolute Thou, which has been called revelation. Significantly, he qualifies it as a transforming force that, requiring a receptive counterpart from the human being, inaugurates a gift-giving relationship, whose outcome is not a content, but rather presence: “the human being receives, and he does not receive a ‘content’ (*Inhalt*), but rather a presence: a presence as strength (*Gegenwart als Kraft*)” (Buber 2017, 152). Genuine outcome of the revelation is not something that can be expressed once for all, but rather an everlasting dialogue with an “entirely personal meaning” (*ganz persönlichen Sinn*) (Buber 2017, 155) that, stemming from the encounter with the absolute Thou, is not imposed as a universal commandment, but opens, on the contrary, to an individual law: “everyone has to prove it with his strength, in his way, in his limits, in his language, in his life, in his place where he stands and in the moment in which he stands, in the uniqueness of his life” (Buber 2017, 149).

Yet, Buber is aware that human beings have developed and shaped their relation to the absolute Thou not just through these personal events of encounter, whose outcome is a “presence as strength”, which goes beyond any given content and is, therefore, constantly on

the verge of fading into nothingness, but rather through the mediation offered by historical religions. The seventh lecture is opened with the explicit recognition of a constitutive tension between the religious phenomenon and historical religions: “it becomes particularly difficult and tough at this point, where we are now, to counterpose what we have recognized as the essence of the religious process to the religion and the religions, how they unfolded in human history” (Buber 2017, 143).

Aiming to offer continuity to the fleeting instant of revelation in time and space through faith and worship, historical religions operate, according to Buber, by providing sapiential and prescriptive contents to the instant of revelation, as “expressed knowledge (*ausgesagtes Wissen*) and ordered action (*gesetztes Tun*)” (Buber 2017, 149), which end up by replacing the encounter with the absolute Thou. In this process, they expose (and are exposed) to the risk of dealing with the absolute Thou “as a content, as something that can be shown, expressed, treated, experienced, as something we can have a lived experience, as an object” (Buber 2017, 153). Historical religions operate a “change from the presence of the encounter to forms, images, and concepts” (Moore 1996, 253). Whereby the religious phenomenon constitutes the paradigmatic example of the I-Thou relation, historical religions seem to act fostering and perpetuating, in a diametrically opposite way, the dynamics of the I-It relation, moving in the It-world the absolute Thou, which, according to his essence cannot become an It. The Jewish philosopher acknowledges this dynamics as nothing less than the tragedy of the human spirit: “I see the history of religions, that is, the history of the displacement (*Versetzung*) of God into the It-world, as the tragedy – not a tragedy, but the tragedy – of the human spirit” (Buber 2017, 148).

Buber's sharp critique of institutionalized religions does not throw the baby out with the bathwater. It points a way, on the contrary, according to which the religious phenomenon should constitute neither an unconditional submission to any given authority nor a mystical privileged moment. According to the Jewish philosopher, as we apprehend also from his interpretation of Hasidism, religion is about letting enter the absolute Thou in the middle of the circumstances of daily life, here and now: “in its innermost foundation, every religious reality is a matter of the here and now, and not a matter of an historical event, which is unique and incomparable according to its essence” (Buber 2017, 151). Challenging any dichotomic way of thinking, in particular the antithesis between sacred and profane times and spaces, and also every form of religious authority, Buber's conception of religion articulates a dialectic between a receptive (letting the presence of God enter) and an active moment (entering in relation). Presence and present stem from of the relation between I and Thou. Corresponding-

ly, the I-Thou relation provides the strength to enter and to realize that present, which faces, unique and unrepeatable in its appearance, every human being.

Religion as presence proves, finally, to be the paradigmatic example of the I-Thou relation which is capable to redeem any given present from the risk of being a mere fleeting instant, turning it into accomplished reality. Religion as presence may, therefore, even revert the sublime melancholy of the human existence, according to which every Thou must become an It, by establishing a pure relation, which elevates any It into a Thou. Along this way, religion as presence finds the foundation for its accomplishment in the (I-Thou) relation as presence:

“The pure relation can be fulfilled universally, the relationship to the absolute Thou can be proven in the becoming Thou of every It, in the elevation of all things and beings to a Thou. The great capability to say Thou affects all beings”. (Buber 2017, 154).

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