

# BUBER AND GANDHI: PROPHETIC THEOPOLITICS, INTERCULTURAL CRITIQUE, AND NON-EUROCENTRIC COSMOPOLITANISM

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## Introduction: Buber and Intercultural Philosophy

In the context of the ill-fated Weimar Republic between the fall of Imperial Germany in 1918 and the rise to power of National Socialism in 1933, two German Jewish philosophers had distinctive approaches to Asian and other forms of non-Western philosophical and religious thought.<sup>1</sup> Both Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig engaged with Chinese, Indian, and—to a lesser extent—Islamic sources.<sup>2</sup> While Rosenzweig critiqued these discourses through an Occidentally-oriented and even with a Eurocentric focus, that prioritized the role of Judaism in the Occident, Buber, in contrast, sought to engage in encounters (*Begegnung*) and responsive, though critical, dialogues (*Zwiesprache*) with figures and discourses across distinctive cultures, without submerging one's own sense of identity in the process. This essay will address the extent to which Buber's efforts, despite their limits and flaws, indicate some possibilities for a responsive and critical intercultural philosophy that does not abandon all claims to truth, justice, and the singularity of a personal life (*der Einzelne*) for the sake of a relativistic multiculturalism.

Buber's writings concerning ideas and figures connected with early twentieth-century India provide examples and test cases for reflecting on the potential and limits of intercultural philosophy. These attempted encounters present us with a number of questions. Among them, this essay will focus on the possibility of being open and responsive while being true to oneself in the encounter between self and other. Buber's call for more and further conversation across differences contrasts with the cross-cultural ethos and claims of his friend and fellow collaborative co-translator of the *Torah*, Rosenzweig, who dismissively rejected "Oriental" (the term used in that era) forms of thinking in no unclear terms. Rosenzweig's stance

towards Oriental forms of thinking can be sampled in his comment on a German enthusiast of the Bengali poet and cosmopolitan intellectual Rabindranath Tagore.<sup>3</sup> He comments,

And if there were a ‘godly’ man—as an enthusiastic German professor under the impact of Rabindranath Tagore’s teaching proclaimed—then this man would actually find himself barred from the path to God, which is open to every human being who is human (2000: 125).

In the correspondence between Buber and Rozenzweig, Buber explicitly defended Oriental forms of thought and life-worlds from similar charges made by Rosenzweig in *The Star of Redemption* (2005: 44-48). The Daoist and Confucian are not pagans, Buber (1991) remarked, although they enter into paganism insofar as they practice magic (p.275). Though Rosenzweig’s ethical personalist magnum opus, *The Star of Redemption* is a significant and ground-breaking work, it nevertheless negatively constructs the “Oriental” (e.g., Chinese, Indian, and Islamic) in distinguishing it from the Jewish monotheistic form of religious life. Buber, in contrast, does not dismiss Chinese and Indian thought as a mere pagan distance and fallenness from God. He rather extensively engages throughout his life with Daoist and Confucian, as well as Buddhist and Hindu, sources and ideas, engaging most extensively with Daoism.<sup>4</sup>

Why might this significant difference between these two, otherwise philosophically and religiously aligned, thinkers be the case? This question cannot be dismissed simply by treating it as an issue of casual accidental and subjective prejudices. It, as we shall see, concerns systematic features of their respective theopolitics, in contrast to pagan civil and political theologies, in terms of the role and mission of Judaism amidst the nations.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Rosenzweig interpreted, to summarize briefly, Judaism as the essence and guiding esoteric teaching of the history of the West, Buber perceived—as is seen in the 1912 essay “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism”—how both the Oriental and the Occidental have shaped historical Judaism and continue to shape its present possibilities. While a number of German Jewish thinkers sought to legitimate Judaism by identifying it with the West, for Buber, Judaism is already thoroughly interculturally mediated. For Buber, it is rather an Oriental way of life that had been repeatedly transformed by its exiles and transfigured by its journeys through the West, consequently becoming a bridge between the Oriental and the Occidental. Buber thus construes Judaism as a bridge between the nations and the peoples of the world (2013c: 187-203).

Buber's works also reveal an interest in Indian Buddhist and Hindu sources, such as the brief selections from the *Mahābhārata*, Baba Lal Dayal, and Ramakrishna in his 1909 collection of global confessional mystical writings *Ecstatic Confessions* (Buber, 2013) and in other references. This interest is seen throughout his corpus, including his classic 1923 book *I and Thou (Ich und Du)* that prioritizes the relational encounter and intimate interpersonal dialogue rather than the identification and unification of being one (Buber, 2002: 81).

As Rosenzweig, Buber too would articulate the differences between Jewish and Indian cultures. In doing so he distinguished the tendencies of the two religions in the 1910 lecture "Judaism and Humanity" ("Das Judentum und die Menschheit"). This essay, which was written during the same period when he was translating the *Zhuangzi* 莊子 and the literary work *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio (Liaozhai Zhiyi 聊齋誌異)* of Pu Songling 蒲松齡 into German based on the English translations of these works, contrasts Judaism with classical Hinduism.<sup>6</sup> While recognizing the height in classical Hinduism, Buber remarks,

For just as the idea of an inner duality is Jewish, so is the idea of redemption from it. True, juxtaposed against it is the Indian idea of redemption, purer and more unconditional; but this idea signifies not a liberation from the soul's duality, but a liberation from its entanglement in the world. Indian redemption means an awakening; Jewish redemption, a transformation. Indian redemption means a divesting of all appearance; Jewish redemption, a grasping of truth. Indian redemption means negation; Jewish redemption, affirmation. Indian redemption progresses into timelessness; Jewish redemption means the way of mankind. Like all historical views, it has less substance but more mobility... And when, in Jewish mysticism, the original character of the God-idea changed, when the dualistic view was carried over into the very concept of God, the Jewish idea of redemption attained the high plane of the Indian (2007, p.232; 1995, p.28).

Similarly, in a much later work on Hasidism and modern humanity, Buber contrasts affinity and difference between two forms of identification: the embrace of self and cosmos in the words of the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*, "thou art that" (*tat twam asi*), which he considered to be an expression of mysticism, in contrast to the Jewish command to love the other like one's own self, which for Buber is primarily ethical in its intent (Buber, 1958: 235).

Interestingly, this 1958 passage states that ethical love of the other is not unworthy compared to the Indian expression of the self and

the world. This discussion echoes a youthful 1899 letter of his that concerns Jewish assimilation, which was written to his future wife, Paula Winkler. Buber acknowledged in this letter the universal scope of both this Indian expression and the idea of cosmopolitanism, only questioning their elimination of the differences, contradictions, and boundaries between individuals and peoples that are necessary for movement, life, and the encounter between person and person (1991: 67, 69). In his later mature thought, for Buber it is this identification with ideological and oppressive deployments of cosmopolitan universality as much as localized forms of particularity that impedes genuine encounters from occurring between imperfect concrete beings and their forms of life.

The differences between Buber and Rosenzweig, though much more needs to be said about this issue, should not then be exaggerated to make one a hero and the other a villain of the history of intercultural philosophy. The differences consist not so much in their willingness to differentiate Judaism, and identify themselves with their own sense of Jewish identity, but rather by virtue of the mode in which they approach the intercultural encounter and dialogue between divergent discourses and cultural, philosophical, and religious domains.

### I. Between Cosmopolitanism and Particularity: Buber and Tagore

Buber discusses several significant contemporary Indian figures multiple times in his writings.<sup>7</sup> The first figure is Tagore, which sheds light on the context of his reception of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Like Rosenzweig, whose negative remarks on Tagore were quoted earlier, Buber too expressed scepticism toward the enthusiasm for Tagore that swept Germany and Europe during this period (Kämpchen, 1991). However, unlike Rosenzweig, he differentiated his scepticism with regards to this enthusiasm from the autonomy and dignity of the thought and the person. In his remarks about Tagore, who also sought to mediate between cosmopolitan humanity and a people's identity in the context of oppression, Buber expresses both admiration and criticism such that there is an intercultural encounter and critique instead of a mere dismissal of the other.

Buber heard Tagore speak in Germany in 1921 and 1926, and met him a final time in Prague in 1926. Buber's 1928 essay "China and Us" (*China und wir*) reflects on the relevance of Confucian and Daoist teachings for the West and endorses in its conclusion an

intercultural notion of non-action (*weiwuwei* 爲無爲) in contrast to the Western obsession with political and economic power. He begins this essay with a comment on Tagore:

It happens from time to time that a call comes to Europe from the East to make common cause with Asia. I recall a remark of Tagore's. He said, approximately, 'Indeed, why do you do all this here in Europe? Why do you have all this bustle, all this industrialization, all this ballast? All of this is really quite unnecessary. Cast off all this and let us, West and East, contemplate truth in common!' That was said in a heartfelt manner. But it seemed to me removed from the reality of the hour in which we live (1957: 121).

Tagore's teaching of a common human spiritual learning and awakening is noble, and resonates with Buber's own aspirations.<sup>8</sup> However, for Buber, Tagore's vision does not adequately address the social-political and cultural problematic of modern technological civilization and the realities of power. A similar criticism is also made concerning the teachings of Confucius in the same 1928 essay in contrast to Daoist notion of 'non-action' that spoke to Western modernity by directly questioning the compulsions of power and possession.

Buber would later recount his 1926 meeting and conversation with Tagore about the Jewish role in the Middle East in the 1950 piece, "A Conversation with Tagore."<sup>9</sup> Tagore expressed concerns about Occidental modernity, the displacement of the Palestinians by Jewish settlements, and the weakening of the universal and spiritual character of the Jewish people by virtue of their firm resolve on nationalism and the desire for the establishment of a Jewish nation-state (Buber, 2019b: 366-367). The Israeli-Palestinian issue would also play an important role in Gandhi's discussions of Nazi Germany and Palestine and Buber's 1939 letter to Gandhi, a figure who Buber must take seriously as we shall discuss later (Buber, 2019c; Buber, 1991: 476-486). However, in his short recounting of his meeting with Tagore, Buber relates how the Jewish people could play a mediating role rather than a colonial one in the relations between East and West. Buber believed that the Jewish people should not merely come to an agreement with the Palestinians, but have a broader outlook for humanity itself. His belief in Palestinian-Jewish peace and binational political organization would be a constant pursuit throughout his lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Buber promoted the idea of cooperative associations between:

the peoples of the East, so as to erect with them together a great federative

structure, which might learn and receive from the West whatever positive aims and means might be learnt and received from it, without, however, succumbing to the influence of its [i.e., Western] inner disarray and aimlessness (Buber, 2019b: 366-367; Kämpchen, 1991: 96).

In this regard, both Buber and Tagore could agree that a different kind of cosmopolitanism was needed that did not promote a suprahistorical cosmopolitan viewpoint from above that belied its ostensive universalism in being bound to European particularities and colonial interests.<sup>11</sup> This other form of cosmopolitanism was indicated in Tagore's 1916 work on nationalism that critiques the "colourless vagueness of cosmopolitanism" and "the fierce self-idolatry of nation-worship," as neither can be "the goal of human history" (1917: 5).

Tagore's 1916 novel *The Home and the World* (*Ghòre Baire*) portrayed the tensions between love for a colonized and subjugated homeland and the striving for genuinely cosmopolitan universal values.<sup>12</sup> Buber likewise questions the supposed cosmopolitan tolerance of the West and sees this tolerance in terms of a simple manifestation of a form of indifference adopted by the powerful, and cautions us on how one might mistake such an unresponsive "mutual tolerance" that could well exist "without mutual understanding" for a more genuinely cosmopolitan attitude that does not merely serve the interests of the stronger party but rather confronts its distorted and pathological forms (2002b: 28). This concern remains relevant in regard to contemporary "multiculturalism" that privileges the gaze of the suprahistorical yet still essentially Western spectator who reduces and reifies polycultural discourses to ideologically fixated national traditions and identities.

Tagore and Buber both sought a distinctive variety of cosmopolitanism that would not merely be a construction of a suprahistorical universalizing consciousness. It would be one that could speak to their own particularities and the universal aspirations of their own religious sensibilities such that it would not be merely derivative of the spirit of the West and a globalized variety of colonialism and capitalism. The call for such a genuine non-colonial and non-Eurocentric cosmopolitanism in Tagore and Buber would demand an encompassing of the diverse voices of distinct individuals and peoples across the globe, centring—in this case, or even perhaps conflating the situation in 1926 and 1950—on the peoples of Asia who would learn from the West and its version of modernity without being completely subordinated and passively subjected to it.

## II. Buber, Gandhi, and Prophetic Theopolitics

Buber had a long-standing interest in Indian thought, as we have seen, and particularly in Gandhi's political thinking and practice. He discussed Gandhi a number of times in his writings (written in Germany) in 1923, 1929, and 1930, and directly addressed him in his 1939 letter (composed in Jerusalem) to which Gandhi did not respond.<sup>13</sup> Because of his leadership of a massive political movement against British colonialism in India, Gandhi represented an intriguing unification of the spiritual and the social-political, the traditional and the modern, in a way that the literary and spiritual author Tagore did not for the European imagination. Gandhi's way of life and thought indicated alternative possibilities for a different form of theopolitics, which was radically distinct from the more common uses of religion in political theology ranging from the conservative religious visions to the secularized perspectives that dominated the Western world then and continue to do so today.

Buber begins this 1930 essay by posing the question of Gandhi's success and utility. He quotes a British officer who is reported to have stated that, "[w]hat Gandhi undertook was the most powerful of all experiments that the history of the world has known and only fell a little short of succeeding. But in him the insight into human passions was lacking" (1957: 126). From the British perspective, Gandhi lacked an understanding of human nature that would have generated a strategic victory over the British in India. This lack, as the British officer saw it, was due to Gandhi's commitment to non-violence (based on the classic Indian idea of *ahimsā* or non-harm), leading him to withdraw his support from the Indian Independence movement whenever it resorted to violence, claiming that he was willing to be a voice of one against "this monstrous majority that [he] appear[ed] to command" and this apparently opposed his own "success" (Buber, 1957: 127). Thus for Buber (1957), the question was whether political success was then "not possible without exploitation of human passions" and ought strategic success to be our primary goal regardless of the means deployed (p.126).

Gandhi was a practitioner of *satyāgraha*, of the power of the truth itself (*satya* signifies truth and *āgraha* its force). Buber portrayed how Gandhi's stance was indeed remarkable and unusual from a Western perspective: it was the statement of "a truthful man," a "minority of one voice" that is unknown "in modern Western public life" with the possible exception of Thoreau. Yet this truthfulness leaves us with the questions whether one can be truthful and political at the same time and whether Gandhi's refusal of violence is politically adequate



for the formation of political movements, institutions, and their functioning (Buber, 1957: 127)?

In contrast to the British officer's claim, Buber (1957) remarks that Gandhi did not "lack" an adequate understanding of human nature, but rather "the readiness to exploit them" (p.126). The just goal of Indian Independence did not, in Gandhi's estimation, justify the resort to violence to achieve its success, although he too admitted at times—for example in 1922 after the Delhi resolutions, as Buber would recall in his 1939 letter to Gandhi—that Indian Independence could call for the employment of violent means if no other means were possible. The pursuit of the goal of independence for Gandhi was not merely an external affair of exerting pressure on the colonial regime. Instead it demanded a more fundamental "inner transformation" such that, for Gandhi, *swarāj* signified both the self-governance of the Indian people as well as the individual's cultivation of the autonomy of "self-rule" (*swa* meaning self and *raj* meaning rule) (Buber, 1957: 127-128). Buber accordingly links Gandhi's mission with a key problem that he identified with Western modernity in his 1928 essay "China and Us." According to Buber (1957), the fundamental problem lies in the primacy of instrumental thinking in technicizing modernity that prioritizes issues of means and worldly success, while neglecting reflection on the appropriateness of the means employed (whether they are violent or not) and the ends to be achieved (whether they result in *swarāj* in Gandhi's sense) (p.125).

The question for Gandhi is not exclusively one of strategic success. It concerns, as Buber notes, a conversion experience that Gandhi has transferred from Hindu religiosity to the public political realm. Thus, in the classic epic the *Rāmāyaṇa*, Rāma is described as withdrawing into the wilderness for religious purification in preference to being crowned king, pursuing a religious hope instead of a political ambition (Buber, 1957: 128). Gandhi, following his interpretation of Rāma, pursues an "experiment" of introducing religion into politics. He does so not to theocratically dictate to the public through the religious, but to awaken and convert the public as individuals to self-governance. Gandhi's *swarāj* is accordingly conceived in relation to a modern notion of individual and communal autonomy.

Buber's question therefore becomes: "Does religion allow itself to be introduced into politics in such a way that a political success can be obtained?" This question entails a fourfold distinction and relation between the political, conceived as instrumental means and ends, and the religious, understood as a way and as a goal. While



the political concerns worldly history and its historically recorded failures and successes, the religious concerns an orientation and direction that is not limited to the question of success and cannot, in principle, receive a “historical consummation” or fulfilment (Buber, 1957: 128).

Gandhi’s version of theopolitics is thus a political theology in which the religious cannot be reduced to and is repeatedly deployed to contest the political. Gandhi’s strategy is, according to a recent work, a religious “anti-politics” (Mohan and Dwivedi, 2018). Contesting the political for the sake of justice resonates, in this account, with Buber’s interpretation of the Jewish prophetic *ethos* that resists political history without being able to fulfil itself in established states and positive laws. Buber perceives in Gandhi’s words and actions a confirmation of a different model of the relation between religion and politics than the theocratic vision of the religious determination of society or the secular exclusion of the religious. The religious is not primarily concerned with such forms of success and power. It becomes visible not in the forced imposition of religious and moral perfection, as perfectionist accounts contend, but rather in “other signs than that of success. The Word is victorious, but otherwise than its bearers hoped for” (Buber, 1957: 128). This ‘otherwise’ of the divine word does not speak and become visible through success and perfection. Instead, it is indicated in its very imperfection. Buber writes,

The Word is not victorious in its purity, but in its corruption; it bears its fruit in the *corruptio seminis*. Here no success is experienced and recorded; where something of the kind appears in the history of religion, it is no longer religion that prevails, but politics of religion, that is, the opposite of what Gandhi proclaimed: the introduction of politics into religion (Buber, 1957: 128).

For Buber, prophecy is thus not a form of ethical perfectionism based on the cultivation and expansion of the self. It is rather ‘imperfectionist’ (a concept I explore further in Nelson, 2020) in addressing the realities of the ethical occurring in human finitude and imperfection instead of falsely idolizing a moralistic ideal of perfection. Buber contends that Gandhi too cannot be a pure ethical perfectionist. Despite Gandhi’s moralistic tendencies, this imperfectionism must be to some degree Gandhi’s view as well insofar as he cannot solely contest the political through religious truth and convert the public into purely spiritual individuals but must deal with humans as they are with the diversity of their practical concerns and everyday interests. The paradox of theopolitics arises

once again, as Gandhi must work with the political forces and parties struggling for Indian freedom who have other motives and aims. So as Buber sees it, Gandhi “is chained as political actor to the ‘political,’ to untransformed men... who long for political success” (1957: 129).

For Buber, Gandhi’s efforts at spiritual and physical self-criticism, mortification, and purification point a way that many of his compatriots and “we” (e.g., Europeans) can learn from yet cannot follow. So as Buber sees it, Gandhi’s mission consequently has the “tragic character” of

the contradiction between the unconditionally of a spirit and the conditionally of a situation, to which situation, precisely, the masses of his followers, even of the youth belong. This is the tragedy that resists all superficial optimistic attempts to bring about a settlement; the situation will certainly be mastered, but only in the way in which at the close of a Greek tragedy, a theophany... (1957: 129).

This tragic situation, and the necessity of long-struggle and suffering, is due to the theopolitical paradox arising from the fundamentally religious character of Gandhi’s mission that refuses any merely strategic success.

Gandhi wishes to not simply convert the Indian people to non-violence and individual and national self-determination. He would like to convert the hearts of the British occupiers as well, such that they not only perceive external Indian resistance to their rule, but also recognize their own injustice and the suffering that they have done in India. Gandhi, intends India’s colonizers to realize this fact and hence offer the Indian people their political independence. To this extent, Gandhi’s vision is not that of a religious politician or the use of religion for political purposes. Gandhi is rather for Buber a fundamentally prophetic figure. One who prophetically foresees divine possibilities transpiring within history—which cannot be fully realized in political institutions or in worldly history—through the suffering, purification, and conversion of a people (Buber, 1957: 130).

However, though Buber praises Gandhi for refusing the overextension of the political and its standard of utility, he sees Gandhi as someone who is compelled to remain a political actor, risking the conflation of the religious and the political, of the way and of success, in undertaking a “pilgrimage with political intent” (Buber, 1957: 130-131). These questions of mediation and success constitute the aporetic paradox of the “ordeal of religion” that is endured rather than resolved. It loses its soul by withdrawing from politics, and the building of community, as well as by losing itself

in the political sphere and its concerns with instrumental strategic success (Buber, 1957: 131).

In the second of the three sections of “Gandhi, Politics, and Us,” Buber interrogates the political dimension of Gandhi’s project by comparing it with that of “his opponent, the great patriot” Chittaranjan Das.<sup>14</sup> Das was a rival of Gandhi and influenced the controversial nationalist independence fighter Subhas Chandra Bose.<sup>15</sup> Buber was impressed by Das’s proposed three-fold policy of an active “inner boycott” of British councils, the creation of an anti-colonial Asiatic league of peoples, and the realization of *swarāj* not through the adaptation of modern Western democracy but rather the recovery of traditional Indian village-life as centres of autonomous social organization on the basis of which a higher consultative power would be formed (Buber, 1957: 132-133). This account of Das’s programme resonates with Buber’s anti-Marxist advocacy for kibbutz socialism, as an anarchic self-organizing “socialism of freedom,” during this same period in which works such as *Paths in Utopia* were published first in Hebrew in 1946 and subsequently in English in 1949 (Buber, 1949).

### III. The Political Limitations and Ethical Promise of Gandhi’s Mission

Das’s third point surely reminded Buber of Israeli kibbutz self-organizational socialism described in his own work, *Paths in Utopia* and is, therefore, seen by Buber as akin to the “high pinnacle of political man” in the positive sense of minimizing the powers of the centralized bureaucratic state “through politics itself” and thus allowing genuine communal life to organize itself and flourish (Buber, 1957: 133). Buber contends that Gandhi missed the transformative potential of Das’s revolutionary project in rejecting all three points and maintaining in this context—through what Buber criticizes as a purely political and impoverished argument—that *swarāj* merely signifies the desired Indian constitution (1957: 133).

The one-sidedness of Gandhi’s vision, which was criticized from the perspective of an anarchistic ethical community, goes beyond the question of a genuinely emancipatory *swarāj* and is articulated by Buber in terms of another limitation: Gandhi depicts India as being in desperate need of preserving its own civilization against the materialistic Western lack of civilization and thus his vision ultimately positions itself as standing against modernity itself. As Buber sees it, for Gandhi, East and West could only be reconciled in this account

insofar as both come to reject modernity as a failure. Buber, however, calls for, what can be described as, an intercultural transformation of modernity that cannot be escaped but can be modified if individuals and societies are open to learning from one another without losing their singular sense of their own identity.

In contrast to Buber's appreciation of Tagore's non-Eurocentric cosmopolitanism and modernism, he identified Gandhi with an Indocentric anti-modernism that comes to limit the scope of his thinking as it precludes possibilities of the formation of other alternative modalities of modernity or even of a specifically Indian modernity.<sup>16</sup> Such an alternative Indian modernity, which adopted from the past though in conversation with present conditions, would be more capable of creating the conditions for "national salvation" than a retreat into previous forms of thought and life.

In this context, Buber raises two aspects of modernization that Gandhi did not adequately address. First, as Buber also argued in "China and Us" two years earlier, there is no escape from the growth of industrialization and technological civilization. In this context, he asserts that Gandhi's spinning-wheel cannot "be preserved in any realistic way," as modernity is now a global human destiny both as "its highest task and its decisive test" (1957: 135). For Buber, this extreme test must be passed rather than evaded, as suggested in Gandhi's vision, if humanity is to have a future. Second, Buber contests Gandhi's description of modernity as fundamentally "materialistic." The materialism that concerns Gandhi expresses deeper crisis conditions in Buber's analysis. The answer to this crisis is the recovery of the ethical in the encounter and dialogue with the other in the midst of modern technological civilization itself. This ethical recovery, according to Buber, ought to be the truth of Gandhi's mission in India: to cultivate humans capable of self-rule and who are "in step with God" in that they can "hold their ground" even under the conditions of modernity (1957: 135). Buber's notion of theopolitics—in contrast to what Buber considered essentially pagan civil and political theologies—is fundamentally ethically oriented in anarchically or freely realizing the good in inter-human relations as described in his 1923 work *I and Thou*. It is the achievement of local and more global communities through deepening dialogical and embodied relationships. *I and Thou* articulates how the good immanently transpires in encountering and engaging others, including non-human others as evident in his examples of encountering the irreducible life of the tree and the gaze of the cat.<sup>17</sup> Ethics is simultaneously the cultivation of individual

autonomy that requires genuine community and responsiveness in encounter and dialogue with others, both human and non-human (God and nature), as he articulates it in *I and Thou*.

Is Gandhi's experiment to overcome the separation of religion and politics, which is emblematic of yet not limited to modernity, fruitful according to Buber's 1930 analysis? Buber proposes that we cannot merely follow Gandhi's way and model; nor can Gandhi actualize it given the overwhelming forces of modernization (1957: 137-138). However, it is the tragedy of prophets—who Buber calls us to esteem and honour in their very imperfection and necessarily lack of political success as only false prophets succeed in politics—that the religious in principle cannot be politically fulfilled even as the religious is necessary for the ethical formation and flourishing of communities. The religious occurs as a test for public political life, if it is not to be abandoned to damnation (1957: 136).

The exemplary prophets of Israel such as Isaiah do not rule. They proclaimed the coming of the kingdom of righteousness and justice in distinction from, and in relation to, the existing political order that lacks justice. Prophetic critique contests states and parties, and the theopolitical kingdom of God is glimpsed in working on the human kingdom. Buber notes,

We cannot prepare the messianic world; we can only prepare for it. There is no legitimately messianic, no legitimately messianically-intended, politics (1957: 137).

Accordingly, inside and outside of Judaism, such forms of prophetic, if not messianic critique, indicate that public life and the life of labour are simultaneously deformed and redeemable through—returning to the core implications of *satyāgraha*—the truthfulness and genuine responsibility exemplified in Gandhi's practice of his spiritual vocation in the midst of the imperfection of political affairs, and independently of measuring it solely by its strategic successes or failures (Buber, 1957: 136-137).

#### IV. Gandhi and the Fate of the Jewish People

The role of critique in intercultural encounters remains a controversial one. To what extent can one be interculturally responsive to others while engaging in criticism? This problematic is evident in Buber's 1930 essay and in his 1939 letter to Gandhi. Buber's practice of intercultural dialogue—in this case concerning the theopolitics of resistance—is suggestive in calling for both attentiveness as well as

argumentation and criticism in the encounter with the other.

Buber once again critically engages with Gandhi later in the decade in response to his discussions of the “Jewish question,” which Gandhi had addressed at various points in his career, including in relation to National Socialist Germany prior to, and after, the Second World War.

Jewish intellectuals responded in particular to Gandhi’s contentious short essay “The Jews” published in *Harijan* on 26 November 1938. This piece was written in the context of the National Socialist persecution of the Jews and *Kristallnacht* that devastated Jewish lives, synagogues, and properties throughout the German Reich on the 9<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> of November 1938. While recognizing the cruel reality of Jewish suffering, “the untouchables of Christianity,” Gandhi contended here—as he would again after Auschwitz—that German Jews should remain in the land of their birth, even under conditions of extreme exclusion and oppression, and practice *satyāgraha* to the point of death and martyrdom in opposition to Nazi persecution (Fischer, 1997: 390-391).

Gandhi was aware in November 1938 that the “calculated violence of Hitler may even result in the general massacre of the Jews,” and still insisted that

...if the Jewish mind could be prepared for voluntary suffering, even the massacre I have imagined could be turned into a day of thanksgiving and joy that Jehovah had wrought deliverance of the race...For the God-fearing, death has no terror. It is a joyful sleep to be followed by waking that would be all the more refreshing for the long sleep (Gandhi, 1999: 241).

For Gandhi, the persecuted must embrace and love their persecutors, even Adolf Hitler himself, who Gandhi wrote a letter in an attempt to covert his heart. An active non-violent practice of resistance, appealing to the pressures of the international community and—more importantly—the hearts of their persecutors in order to convert them, was the only legitimate means (ethically and pragmatically considered) with which the Jewish people could contest their continuing oppression.

## V. Oppression, Suffering and Ethical Imperfection

Suffering and pain make a crucial convergence point in the intercultural conversations between German and Indian philosophy as is evident in Arthur Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Max Scheler, among others.<sup>18</sup> Buber reflected on this thematic throughout

his works. The question of individual and collective suffering is also a point of departure in Buber's 1939 letter to Gandhi that concerns the fate of the Jewish people in the midst of National Socialist persecution and the dilemmas of Jewish settlement in Palestine (1991: 476-486).

Gandhi and Buber are both concerned with questions of oppression and suffering in their respective texts. Buber (1991) raises the problematic role of the co-sufferer in the beginning of his letter with an expression of appreciation for the friend who could advise and encourage the sufferer. He "knows what suffering is," and "knows that the sufferer is more in need of comfort than of counsel," but nevertheless a friend can "give good counsel and genuine comfort" if the friend has "the wisdom to counsel rightly and that simple union of faith and love which alone is the open sesame to true comforting" (p.476). In this case, the voice of the friend from afar hurts rather than heals, as it fails to bring appropriate council and genuine comfort to the sufferer in the particularities of the situation in Nazi Germany, and indeed brings with it a voice of blame and reproach (p.476).

According to Buber, sufferers should accept and reflect on just criticism and reproach. The sufferer is not outside of the communication that calls for giving an account of oneself. However, the situation and plight of the sufferer cannot be ignored, and communication must address this as well, apart from addressing abstract general noble principles. The unjust accusations of the person "of goodwill," who does not see the plight of the sufferer in the fateful hour of desperate need of being "persecuted, robbed, maltreated, tortured, murdered," force a response.

Gandhi's comparison of the situation of German Jews in 1938 and those of the South African Indians in the 1890s, appealing to the early form of *satyāgraha* practiced against the British regime in colonial South Africa, fails to recognize and distinguish the radical nature (both quantitative and qualitative) of the Nazi persecution of the Jews that concludes with the torment and slaughter of the concentration camp.<sup>19</sup>

For Buber, there are fundamental differences between South Africa and Germany that make *satyāgraha* ineffective in the latter. The first concerned the very right to resist in virtue of being human beings who could claim rights. Whereas Indians had lesser rights and access to rights under British rule, "they were not deprived of rights, they were not outlawed" (Buber, 1991: 477). The Nazi regime systematically deprived the Jews and other minorities of all rights



whatsoever to the point that they were denied, in Hannah Arendt's words in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the "right to have rights" in a form of community (1951: 177).

Second, *satyāgraha* is effective if it can transform the hearts of "unfeeling human beings in the hope of gradually bringing them to their senses." *Satyāgraha* has a threefold sense of the strength of spirit, the power of truth, and testimony. The racist colonial British regime was capable of many horrors and yet was not, at least in Buber's estimation, "a diabolic universal steamroller" in which testimony received no acknowledgment, martyrdom had no effect, and a conversion of the heart could not be expected (Buber, 1991: 478).

Third, South African Indians could rely on support from India, and had a strong sense of a homeland with which they could identify and find sustenance. The Jewish people were a dispersed and homeless people. Further, Gandhi denied German Jews any route of escape by demanding that they remain in Germany practicing *satyāgraha* until they faced their expected demise. There is a cruelty of the abstract moral principle in Gandhi's ethical perfectionist message to German Jews that would, as a "friend" from afar and in the name of a noble *ethos*, prescribe and seal their fate.

Buber poses in this context the fundamental question: who can demand that others undergo such sacrifice and martyrdom? Gandhi's ethical perfectionist argumentation, in which individuals and groups can realize a moral theopolitical principle to the point of extreme self-sacrifice, is contested by Buber's ethical imperfectionist discourse that acknowledges the radical prophetic demands of peace and justice in the midst of the facticity, historicity, and constitutive imperfection of human life.

If Gandhi's call for the Jewish people to sacrifice their lives is his most problematic point, his concern for the fate of the Palestinian people is his strongest point given the subsequent history of the region. The other question at stake in Buber's disagreement with Gandhi concerns the emerging state of Israel. Gandhi supported the Arab possession of Palestine, a "right of possession" contested by Buber (Buber, 1991: 483). Buber argues in response that Israel is not merely a distant lost past homeland, where the Jewish people have no claim to gather or dwell as Gandhi stated. It is not only past but also a futural ethical and prophetic theopolitical promise. Relying on his religious understanding of the notion of Israel rather than purely pragmatic political considerations, Buber contends that it signifies "the land as a divine mission" and "the existence of a free

Jewish community in this country [British controlled Palestine]” in which Jews and Arabs could both dwell in genuine peace “in common service to the land” (1991: 480-482).

In 1939, and in contrast to the subsequent history of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that Gandhi foresaw, Buber in contrast, perhaps overly optimistically envisioned a land with two historical claimants with mutual interests who could be reconciled (Buber, 1991: 482). Buber retained the view expressed in his 1912 essay, “The Spirit of the Orient and Judaism,” previously discussed, where he was of the opinion that the Jewish people were, and can be, a bridge between the Orient and Occident, and the Arab and the Western worlds. Israel is not a land of conquest but of service that can convert—unlike Nazi Germany—the other’s heart (Buber, 1991: 484).

## VI. Persecution, Resistance and Prophetic Justice

Buber maintained a theopolitical conception of prophetic justice, which is not identical to the abandonment of force, in contrast to Gandhi’s advocacy of the primacy of non-violent means that he presents in an unconditional form. Buber notes both Gandhi’s occasional allowances for the possibility of resorting to the use of violence (as in 1922) and his more characteristic view presented in his letter to the Jewish people that it is impermissible. In his letter to Gandhi, Buber remarks,

I am forced to withstand the evil in the world just as the evil within myself. I can only strive not to have to do so by force. I do not want force. But if there is no other way of preventing the evil destroying the good, I trust I shall use force and give myself up into God’s hands (1991: 486).

Buber contends that we cannot deny others or ourselves the use of force if there is no other way to respond to evil. Evil here denotes the social-political oppression and persecution that calls forth resistance.

Buber is, of course, not the only thinker to reject Gandhi’s claims that violence never has its right and can only perpetuate the cycle of violence. However, Buber’s case is more complicated than a critic of non-violence insofar as he recognized the greater ethical dignity and force of pacifism. As is also seen in the discussions of resistance in Emmanuel Levinas a few decades later, Buber recognizes both the ethical primacy of peace and the role of violent resistance in the face of violent oppression. Buber is committed to a limited rather than absolute non-violence in accentuating the prophetic orientation towards peace and the possibility of an uncoerced communicative

dialogue and reconciliation while concurrently considering the necessity of violence on behalf of others in response to violence done to them.

Violence is an injustice; yet there are injustices worse than violence such as allowing the murderer to continue to murder and the tyrannical state to terrorize. For Buber, violence is not justifiable as conquest, control, and self-assertion for the sake of the self or the community, which calls forth an ethical response and prophetic critique for the sake of the persecuted, the oppressed and the conquered. Nonetheless, if violence is not necessarily always the worst wrong, which it is not given the institutionalized practices of annihilation and enslavement, its prohibition cannot therefore, be as unconditional as propounded by Gandhi. For Buber, Gandhi's words "are inspired by most praiseworthy general principles" yet they do not address the situation of the one addressed.<sup>20</sup> The persecuted Jewish people should not be condemned by Gandhi if they struggled against National Socialist violence with violent rather than non-violent resistance.

Gandhi's journalist biographer Louis Fischer reported that Gandhi, in 1946, told him in relation to the Holocaust that the Nazi destruction of the Jewish people, with whom he expressed great sympathy, "is the greatest crime of our time. But the Jews should have offered themselves to the butcher's knife. They should have thrown themselves into the sea from cliffs... It would have aroused the world and the people of Germany" (Fischer, 1997: 391). This controversial statement arises from Gandhi's absolute commitment to non-violent resistance.

Already in 1939, Buber could not accept Gandhi's conclusion that resisters need to either non-violently persuade the heart of the Nazi or accept individual and mass martyrdom. This case of intercultural, political theological, and ethical disagreement is not merely a conflict of two distinct worldviews. The conflict is rather due to a difference in their theopolitical prophetic perspectives, a view that was already suggested in outline by Buber in his 1930 essay. According to his theopolitics of prophetic justice, violence becomes justifiable through resistance against violence and the need to resist in defence of the violently persecuted and for the sake of establishing a peace that cannot be attained by purely non-violent means.

In Buber's discourse of prophetic peace, one can advocate the use of violence in resistance and revolution and in defensive war. Gandhi is surely correct that such a conception of peace, or any form of conditional pacifism, cannot be a genuine form of resistance as

*satyāgraha*, defined as the abandonment of violence, which Gandhi understands, as is evident in his reading of Kṛiṣṇa's teaching in the *Bhagavad Gītā*, as a purer form of struggle and war rather than mere military duty (Desai, 1946). Gandhi takes this classic Hindu text to affirm a spiritual lesson for the self in its struggles with itself instead of advocating violence. In contrast, Buber's argument takes an intercultural turn when he states that the *Bhagavad Gītā* teaches just war and a disciplined use of force. This is a justice that is second to love that must keep the violence of justice in check so as to "fight for justice" and "to fight lovingly" (Buber, 1991: 486). That is, instead of embracing unconditional non-violence (which Buber maintains is Gandhi's typical position despite occasional departures from it), Buber concludes that evil must be resisted with justice and love must guide any recourse to violence and war if it is not to become and repeat the evil it would avert.

#### Conclusion: Buber and Intercultural Philosophy

In conclusion, we might ask: did an intercultural encounter and dialogue occur in Buber's interpretations of Gandhi and does it indicate aspects of the possibilities and limits of intercultural communication and philosophy? How can one be open to the other while remaining oneself within the encounter? Is there a form of cosmopolitan universality that is not a mask for colonial and Eurocentric domination and that can do justice to the concrete diversity and individuality of particular forms of living? These are questions posed from the ongoing intercultural turn in philosophy that has its sources and inspirations in thinkers such as Buber who risked engaging Indian, Chinese, and other discourses typically ignored in the prevailing paradigm of Western philosophy that has limited possibilities of thinking and discussion.

This paper has traced how Buber's appreciation and critique of Gandhi has its own specific issues and stakes. Gandhi's inspirational and transformative mission is praised by Buber, but it also appears to be limited by its tendencies toward perfectionist moralism (in particular, when it would deny the Jewish people the right to violently resist National Socialist violence), its lack of the anarchistic self-organizing tendencies advocated by Das, and the anti-colonial and non-Eurocentric modernism and cosmopolitanism found in Tagore.

In addition to issues of the adequacy and inadequacy of his specific interpretation of Gandhi, Buber's interpretive strategies themselves should be interrogated insofar as they have significant implications

for the theory and practice of intercultural hermeneutics, indicating paths of encountering others (*Begegnung*) and engaging in communication, disagreement, and debate (*Zwiesprache*) across diverse philosophical and theopolitical discourses to potentially arrive at greater philosophical understanding and ethically oriented living in the midst of everyday life in its “imperfection” in contrast to the hierarchical perspective of ethical perfectionism. Both arise out of critical self-encounters and self-reflection as well as the encounter with others and other discourses that can throw our own self-regard and presuppositions into question.

Philosophical knowledge, according to Buber, adopting a notion from his teacher Wilhelm Dilthey on this point, is self-knowledge that is disclosed in self-reflection (*Selbstbesinnung*) (Buber, 1947: 147). As in the pluralistic philosophies of Dilthey and Georg Misch, another student of Dilthey, such knowledge and fundamental self-reflection cannot be restricted to the forms of concept-formation dominant in the Occident. It can, and does occur, in diverse human milieus.<sup>21</sup>

An interpretively sensitive, yet a critical, intercultural philosophy cannot be a discourse that refuses to question the other or their presuppositions, as in forms of multiculturalism that presuppose cultural essentialism and refuse all disagreement, even as one should be guided by reverence, respect, and an openness to questioning and revising one’s own traditions and presuppositions.

### Notes

1. On the history of the Weimar Republic and its crises, see Kolb (2004).
2. For an account of their thought and its resonance, compare the sketch of twentieth-century Jewish philosophy in Putnam (2008).
3. For an overview of Tagore’s German reception, see Kämpchen (1991).
4. Buber’s Chinese translations and writings have been published in Buber, 2013b. There are a number of works exploring Buber’s engagement with Daoism and Chinese thought: Eber (1994: 445-464); Friedman (1976: 411-426); Herman (1996); Nelson (2017: 109-130); and Wirth (2020: 121-134). On the fascination with China among Central European Jewish intellectuals, see Li, (2016: 94-108).
5. On the concepts of theopolitics and political theology in the context of Buber’s thought, compare Brody (2018); Lesch (2019: 195-208).
6. Originally published as Buber (1910) and Buber (1911). On Pu Songling’s life and literary works, see Zeitlin (1993).
7. For a reflection on the connections between these three figures, see Köpcke-Duttler (1989).
8. On the development of Tagore’s political thought, see Nandy (1994); Mukherji (2017).
9. Buber (2019b: 366-367). English translation in Buber (1969: 183-185). For a

- discussion of the context and the encounter between Buber and Tagore, see Kämpchen (1991); Roy (2016: 30-42).
10. For an overview of his thinking, see the pieces and articles collected in Buber (2019c).
  11. This sense of “suprahistorical” (übergeschichtlich) is Nietzsche’s initial use of it in his 1874 second untimely meditation “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” in Nietzsche (1988: 239-330). The colonialism of Western cosmopolitanism and universalism is a frequent topic of anti- and de-colonial literature.
  12. The novel *The Home and the World* (Tagore, 2005) became a topic in German intellectual circles, as indicated by the review of Lukács (1922), which wrongly identified the revolutionary Sandip with Gandhi. Martha Nussbaum explores these tensions, and arguably goes too far in problematizing anti-colonial nationalist responses to colonialism, in Nussbaum, (1996: 3-17). Also compare her more recent account of cosmopolitanism in Nussbaum (2019).
  13. Except for the letter to Gandhi, these texts have been published in Buber (2019). They include “Martin Buber-Abende: Besprechung. 6. Dec. 1923 (p. 201) “Religion und Politik” (17. 2. 1929) (p. 290), as well as “Gandhi, Politik, and wir” (pp. 340-350) that was originally published in the journal *Die Kreatur* in 1930. The letter to Gandhi has been republished in Buber (2019c: 150-162). There is an extensive literature concerning Buber and Gandhi. For instance, see Dekar (2007: 21-30); Fiala (2016: 133-148); Ramana Murti (1968: 605-613). Concerning Gandhi’s relation with Jews and Judaism, see Shimoni (1977).
  14. Buber (1957: 132). On Das’s political activity and thought, see Ray (1927).
  15. On the relation between Das and Bose, compare Kearney (1984: 37-47).
  16. Buber (1957: 134-135). For a portrait of Gandhi that complicates Buber’s picture of him as an Indocentric antimodernist, compare Guha (2013).
  17. Note his descriptions of encountering the tree and the cat in Buber (2002: 7, 93); Buber (1982: 7, 97).
  18. These are three German thinkers who focused on the role of suffering and pain in Indian Buddhist and Hindu philosophy and religion while giving it contrasting interpretations. Compare Gupta (1962, pp.32-40); Dumoulin (1981: 457-470); Scheler (1974: 121-163).
  19. Buber (1991: 477). On Gandhi’s activities in South Africa, also see Guha (2013).
  20. Buber (1991: 476). Note that Gandhi did not always endorse such an uncompromising idea of non-violence, although it is typically his preferred position in his mature thought.
  21. Compare the neglected pioneering work of intercultural philosophy by Georg Misch in Misch (1926) and my analysis of this work in Nelson (2017) chapters one and four.

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