

## THE RELIGION AND CULTURE WEB FORUM

### **Response to Paul Mendes-Flohr's Commentary "The Desert Within and Social Renewal: Martin Buber's Vision of Utopia"**

Gregory Kaplan (Rice University)

The current impasse between Israelis and Palestinians (or, for that matter, without drawing unwarranted parallels, between terrorism and civilization) would probably not surprise Martin Buber. The question is whether he offers a viable solution to it. Reading Paul Mendes-Flohr's essay leads me to conclude that although we can learn much from Buber's social and religious vision, it is undercut by a profound tension. I find Paul's reading of Buber to be fair and accurate. Thus it leaves me to question whether Paul's apparent advocacy of Buber's claim that Utopia is the ongoing effort of realizing our existential need for mutual confirmation and intimacy in the midst of competitive and impersonal existence is not unsatisfactory. Paul concludes that Buber's vision of Utopia might serve as "the fulcrum of social renewal," because it spawns that hope which may fuel our political will for change. But on closer inspection I wonder if this vision of Utopia might actually enervate real-world political action.

With Paul's vivid definition of Buber's Utopianism as "the challenge . . . to determine a social structure that meets [the] need for community," a problem is made explicit. If we recall that Buber's early writings in part modify German social thought then, accordingly, "society (Gesellschaft)" differs markedly from "community (Gemeinschaft)."<sup>1</sup> Whereas social structure is built upon and reproduces stratified layers and inequities among its members, community

involves a mutual reciprocation “in which curiosity, mistrust, and routine will have been overcome by mutual sympathy: the one gives to the other to understand that he affirms his presence.”<sup>2</sup> Society is an impersonal structure that seeks its own preservation in contrast with mutual regard and the propensity for change (even conversion) which it requires.

How, then, can society “meet the need for” its seeming rival, community? Surely it is “more difficult,” Paul writes, to enjoin mutual confirmation “in the market place [or the parliamentary hall] . . . governed as they are by instrumental aims.” Yet Buber insists that mutual encounter affects the social exchange of power and capital just as they affect it. It is vital to see that dialogue is not averse to instrumentality. Paul not only recognizes but insists upon this (in his discussion of the role technology plays in the kibbutz, for instance). Too often the mistaken view arises that dialogical, I-Thou relationships antagonize every semblance of means-end, I-It relations. However Buber avers that the financier or politician “does in communal life nothing other than is done in personal life by the man who knows himself *incapable* of realizing the Thou purely, and yet who everyday vindicates the It, after the right and measure of that day, daily drawing the limits anew.”<sup>3</sup> Buber’s Utopianism, Paul explains, only seeks “to determine which structures *best encourage* dialogue, and the surmounting of the barriers” inherent to social exchange. It is “more difficult,” perhaps, *but not impossible* to forge community even amidst political and economic structures.

To Paul, this indicates a dimension of realism in Buber’s account, which sheds any trace of “romanticism” about Utopia. According to Buber’s principle of

sufficiency, what Utopia calls for is the greatest degree of mutual confirmation that is possible in a given situation, under the circumstances. Buber wonders, in Paul's words, "which objective social conditions *most effectively* allow for the forging of bonds of existential trust and mutual regard" ("*maximizing*" I-Thou, the "*most just* reality"). In Buber's words, as cited, Utopia "aims at changes which, in the given circumstances and with the means at its disposal, are *feasible*," promoting "a *larger measure*" of connectivity, "*as much as possible*." Thus dialogical encounter *incrementally* transforms instrumental exchange. Buber's view, adopted from Landauer, is that a dialectical realization (or "becoming [Werden]") shifts recurrently between "stability and equilibrium," a "Topia," and "a Utopian vision of an alternative, ideal social reality." The latter arises from "dissatisfaction" with the former and yet remains "bound to a concrete historical situation and social-political context," as Paul puts it. Utopian vision is not mere wishful thinking but is, rather, thoughtful (attentive) wishing.

Buber must then explain how the social structure itself generates the conditions for the possibility of its own transformation, how "the desert within" not only indicates but also facilitates "renewal." (For a Utopian vision arises in the locus of alienation from a Topia.) To do so Buber introduces a term around which the movement from Topia to Utopia (and back again) pivots. Only a "center [Mitte]" draws together the points of exchange among individual citizens. Significantly, a mutual regard for the other is not achieved through *direct* contact but, instead, within the matrix of intermediacy itself, "a devotion to a common task," in Paul's terms. It would appear as though society engenders community

even as community alters society. And so the “center” introduces a wedge separating entities in an array and yet binds them together in a unified framework. It facilitates mutual relations between creatures whose very material existence and survival are premised upon self-interested concern and means-end calculation.

Buber’s pragmatic criterion of success for Utopia – that it makes “a structural influence on the amorphous urban society” – is likewise, ironically, an idealistic substratum of Topia. To cite Buber’s favored example, the kibbutz seeks to improve Jewish society; but the implied prerequisite for this improvement is the very existence of a society that welcomes the kibbutz. The question remains, of course, what common task might serve to implement Utopia under different (topian) conditions. Buber would plausibly assert that it depends upon the circumstances. Then we should ask whether there are minimal if not maximal standards that indicate a “center” at work. Buber’s pointed dispute with Levinas adumbrates the problem. Even a materially just society lacks full reciprocity, because a desert remains, alas, within. (Levinas would reply, to wit, that so long as I have a spiritual need then the other’s material need continuously arises: clothing the naked and feeding the hungry are only first steps.) Surely we must ‘do more’ than nourish our physiological cravings. But how would Buber’s vision of Utopia motivate even Levinas’ putatively minimal terms of justice?

This question exhibits the tension in Buber’s conception, as Paul eloquently defends it. Buber implies that renewal is an unending task and the “commonality” of the center is a shared vision of hope, a thoughtful wishing. And

yet renewal is at least partially enacted “in the midst of simple, un-exalted, unselected reality.” Inasmuch as Utopia functions as a regulative ideal it serves “to determine our actions in the here-and-now.” By the same token, however, a regulative ideal, strictly, cannot be realized or implemented in “the daily stuff of reality” – *not even* as much as possible (citing Paul in the foregoing passages). The question is whether Utopia is, functionally, a liminal disruption of Topia or, substantially, a possible but always as-yet unachieved Topia. (Is terrorism perhaps the “dark side” of Utopia since it seeks demolition but proposes no viable alternative, while totalitarianism is the unhappy face of Topia?) On the one hand, Utopia as the partial work of hope, the incremental betterment of Topia, is an evolutionary concept. On the other hand, Utopia as the utmost goal of hope, the radical displacement of Topia, is a revolutionary concept. Utopia evidently reconciles these contradictory terms.

The tension surfaces in Paul’s sensitive reading of Buber’s appreciation for the kibbutz. Far from romantic, the kibbutz “did not fail” because it responded with concerted efforts “to the needs, and the demands of the situation”: it put faith to work (citing Buber). However on the measure of a “criterion of success” by which such a community “would exert ‘a structural influence on the amorphous urban society,’” Paul notes that even Buber may have demurred. The problem, as Paul concedes, is not even so much that this Utopian “experiment” would itself “eventually . . . fold in to new Topia.” The problem runs deeper insofar as the lasting impact of the kibbutz on Israeli society is arguably negligible. Israeli society, for better and for worse, has mostly left behind socialist politics and

economics for partisan democracy and free markets. It is therefore not entirely certain how (or if) the kibbutz has helped to surmount the obstacles facing Israeli society. If the success of the kibbutz is not verifiable, Buber may well retort, neither is its achievement falsifiable. Indeed, the mere effort alone ought to arouse newfound hope that anything is possible. (For this reason Buber poignantly deems it “a signal non-failure.”) But this optimism downplays the unfortunate possibility that the kibbutz has not really met the criterion of success which Paul’s reading of Buber has determined for it.

Lest I be misunderstood, I fully support the aspiration underlying this conception of Utopia; I concur with the emphasis laid on the concrete effort rather than on a detached idealism. But I (regretfully) doubt whether the worthy process results in the desired product of renewing society. Specifically, the greatest promise of Utopia strikes me as a noticeable weakness. For Utopia is at once grounded in reality and yet simultaneously unrealizable. It cannot emerge wholly from reality, for it envisions an alternative to it; likewise, it cannot diverge entirely from reality, or it remains inapplicable. While Utopia accepts the conditions of life, it modifies them as well – or does it subvert them? Is it preferable to read the concept in light of Hegel’s *Aufhebung* or Kant’s categorical imperative or neither? Buber’s *Paths in Utopia* finally invokes a “line of demarcation” between Utopia and Topia which is measured by “a Supreme Court unexampled in kind” from which, I presume, the UN and The Hague –indeed any worldly institution – fall short.<sup>4</sup> This invocation of a universal and eternal court of justice which remains unworldly or, at least, unhistorical refers us to a Messianic

idea. Significantly, though, Buber's Messianism, as Paul rightly claims, steers between an "ultimate *eschaton* of absolute perfection" and an "abrupt ... cataclysmic" termination – thereby eluding Gershom Scholem's famously articulated options.<sup>5</sup> This lack of *telos* and of supernatural intervention abjures any positive conception of the Messianic, however, which is just what a solution to the day's political stalemates requires. And so while a Utopian hope is meant to revivify the political will to renew society, it may leave us with little more than a "hope against hope" (Romans 4:18) and the otherworldly expectations that Saint Paul – despite the moving counter-testimonies of Bloch, Buber, and our own comrade, Paul Mendes-Flohr – assumed it must have. I fear that Buber's vision of Utopia may lead us on a road to despair over our potential for improving the world.

---

<sup>1</sup> See Paul Mendes-Flohr, *From Mysticism to Dialogue: Martin Buber's Transformation of German Social Thought* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989).

<sup>2</sup> Cited by Paul from Martin Buber, "Distance and Relation."

<sup>3</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 98-99.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Buber, *Paths in Utopia*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (Albany: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 134.

<sup>5</sup> See Gershom Scholem, "Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism," trans. Michael A. Meyer, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 1-36, on apocalyptic and restorative versions of Messianism.