THE SILENCE OF GOD IN THE THOUGHT OF MARTIN BUBER

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One of those who have taken most seriously and most literally the idea of a silence of God is Martin Buber. It forms, with those of an "eclipse of God" and a "decomposition of the word" (W I,159/IK 168/IS 119),[1] a family of ideas that plays a central role in his account of the religious life of humanity. "Let us ask ourselves," he says, "whether it may not be literally true that God formerly spoke to us and is now silent." In the present paper I wish to think about this question with Buber. Except in the initial section, the views I will be developing, though not uncritically, are for the most part those I take to be Buber's, not in every respect my own, though I think them attractive.

1. Cessation of Prophecy

In posing the question, "whether it may not be literally true that God formerly spoke to us and is now silent," Buber refers to Isaiah 45:15:

> Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself,
> O God of of Israel, the Savior.

That self-concealment is possible for God and that God can be silent are ideas that certainly have a place in Biblical conceptions of God. The prophets speak of a silence of God that is a divine judgment on sin. Amos speaks of it as a spiritual famine:

> "Behold the days are coming," says the Lord GOD,
> "when I will send a famine on the land;
> not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water,

but of hearing the words of the LORD.
They shall wander from sea to sea,
and from north to east;
they shall run to and fro, to seek the word of the LORD,
but they shall not find it" (Amos 8:11-12).

Likewise certain elders who "came to inquire of the Lord" but were seen as defiled by idolatry received from Ezekiel the answer, "As I live, says the Lord GOD, I will not be inquired of by you" (Ezek. 20:1-3,31).

The silence of God envisaged in these oracles is of course a cessation or suspension of the gift of prophecy. The prophets thought of such cessation as a calamity and a judgment, but it has not always been so regarded. It can seem safer if God stops talking, or at least stops saying anything very new. As we approach the question of the silence of God we might do well to ask ourselves how sure we are that we want God to speak to us. As a child I asked why God did not speak to me as I was told God had spoken to Abraham. It was a complaint. It was also a childish thought. I'm sure I was not considering seriously some of the things the Bible reports God as saying to Abraham, such as "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love.... and offer him ... as a burnt offering" (Gen. 22:2). As no one has understood better than Kierkegaard,[2] there is something scary about the idea of direct, personal communication from God, as well as something wonderful about it.

The idea also holds a threat of disturbance for religious institutions. It is not for nothing that Elijah addressed Ahab as "you disturber [עכר] of Israel" (I Kings 18:17). Many who have revered Elijah in later ages have not been eager for such disturbance of their own institutions and authorities. The tension between institutional and prophetic or charismatic expressions of religion is a familiar theme in the history of religion. Institutional resistance to the idea of God continuing to speak can of course be self-serving; but profound allegiance to a vision already granted and wisdom already attained can also motivate fear of apostasy, fanaticism, and craziness in purported new revelations. It is therefore not surprising that belief in the cessation of prophecy has found strong institutional support – the belief that God *has* spoken but finds it

unnecessary to do so any more, having left us an authoritative record of that original speech.

This belief combines with a sort of rationalism to form the following view of our relation to God's speaking. I believe the view was very influential in Protestant Christian thought of the eighteenth century, but I do not mean to discuss its history here. God is seen as having spoken in Jesus and through the prophets and apostles. We can verify this past revelation rationally, by examining its "evidences" – chiefly the records of miracles that accompanied and authenticated the revelation. We can grasp the content of God's past speech by reasonable methods of interpreting the texts. A present gracious influence of God's Spirit may be necessary for us to arrive at correct belief and understanding, but attention is overwhelmingly focused on the texts and evidences of God's past speech, and authority is exclusively sought there, rather than in any present contact with God.

Views of this sort certainly still have their adherents, but much of the religious thought most characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the West has found it unsatisfying, for at least two reasons. Epistemologically the historical evidences on which it relied have been undermined in the view of many, largely through developments in historical scholarship. Religiously also, the aspiration for living relationship with God may balk at renunciation of importantly new self-disclosures of God.

Both of these reasons are at work in the thought of Kierkegaard, for instance. His Philosophical Fragments is an extended argument for the thesis that faith in a divine revelation in history cannot be adequately grounded without a direct, present cognitive contact with the deity. And it is a major theme of his Fear and Trembling that the frightening possibility of receiving direct, individual, novel commands from God is what makes it possible for Abraham to have a really personal relationship in which he "says 'Thou' to God in heaven."[3] In Kierkegaard's view, the solution to these problems is in a present contact with a self-disclosing God; and the present contact with God has a similar importance for modern theologians as diverse as Schleiermacher and Barth.[4]

This emphasis on a living present contact with God is present also in

Martin Buber's thinking about revelation, in a Jewish and very individual mode. His development of the theme is in my opinion one of the most philosophical and most interesting. The idea of a silence or eclipse of God plays an important part in it. It is for Buber not a welcome silence but a calamity, as it was for the prophets, though his conception of God's speaking is quite different from that of the prophetic oracle, as we shall see.

2. Buber's Account of Revelation

Buber's conception of revelation is one of the most emphatically *episodic*. Revelation, he declares, "will tolerate no perfect tense" (W 1,191/E 18). He expresses this in a vivid image: Luther and Calvin [he wrote] believe that the Word of God has so descended among human beings that it can be unambiguously known and must therefore be exclusively advocated. I do not believe that; the Word

> of God crosses my vision like a falling star to whose fire the meteorite will bear witness without making it light up for me, and I myself can only bear witness to the light but not produce the stone and say "This is it" (W 1,179B 7).[5]

This episodic character of revelation flows naturally from Buber's conception of God as "the eternal Thou ... the Thou that by its essence cannot become It" (W 1,128/IS 75/IK 123).

This is not the place for a comprehensive exposition of Buber's theory of I-Thou and I-It relations, but I will have to explain parts of it as we go along. I-Thou relations, according to Buber, are characterized by a peculiar immediacy of real relationship, an immediacy that is not just in our minds but in the relation *between* the partners. They are also characterized, however, by certain attitudes of the I, such as a complete concentration on the Thou, and by certain forms of consciousness rather than others.

In particular, Buber relegates experience (*Erfahrung*) to the world of It (W 1,80f./IS 5f./IK 55f.). It is only experience in a certain sense that Buber means to treat in this way;[6] but what sense is that? I believe it must be understood against a Kantian background. For Kant *experience*

is possible only as we organize the data of our senses to see them as giving us information about a world which is structured by space and time, which consists of objects that we classify under concepts, and which is ordered by causal regularities. By experience, in the sense in which he excludes it from the world of Thou, Buber means therefore awareness of things as classified under concepts and ordered in systems of space, time, and causality. These features of the world of Kantian experience are explicitly excluded from the world of Thou. "Only It can be ordered. . . . The Thou knows no system of coordinates" (W 1,98L/IS 30f./IK 81). When a being "is now again describable, analyzable, classifiable, the intersection of manifold circles of laws," it is no longer Thou but has become It (W I,89/IS 17/IK 68). To classify and organize something in these ways, Buber thinks, is not to be aware of it in its wholeness and uniqueness as one must if one is aware of it as Thou.

Buber is therefore in agreement with Kant, up to a point, when he says that "the eternal Thou ... cannot be experienced" (W I,154/IS 112/ 1K 160f.). Kant also denies that God can be experienced, and for both Kant and Buber this is because God is not the sort of thing that can be subject to the forms of space and time, and the causal and other categories, that are necessary for Kantian experience. Buber parts company with Kant, however, when they come to the question whether and how one can have faith in a God that cannot be experienced in this way. For Kant there is no sense in which God can be experienced, but God can be *thought*, with formal consistency, under some of the most abstract of concepts, and God's existence can rationally be postulated in an act of moral faith. For Buber God "cannot be thought" (W 1,154/IS 112/IK 160f.), but God can be *encountered*, and the encounter is broadly experiential, though not in the Kantian sense.[7]

God is not the only Thou. Many sorts of being can be Thou for us: human beings, and also animals and plants and other natural beings, and those expressions of human *Geist*, of human thought and culture, that Buber calls *geistige Wesenheiten* (spiritual beings). All of these others can become It for us. When we cease to relate to them as Thou, we find in the world of It, the world of Kantian experience, and we can describe, objects that we can identify with the beings to which we formerly related

as Thou. But God cannot become It. When I lapse from I-Thou relation to God, Buber thinks, I cannot find in my experience of the world of It, and cannot strictly speaking *describe*, anything that can be identified correctly with God – with the eternal Thou with whom I was formerly in relation. In a sense there is no God in the world of It.

Not that Buber thinks our awareness of the eternal Thou as such is illusory. On the contrary, he maintains that there is a "glance of the being" toward God that is "entirely unillusionary," that is attested by faith, and is "not to be proved" but "only to be experienced" (presumably in a non-Kantian sense of 'experience') (W I,597/E 127). He seems thus not to wish to evade issues of truth, but there is certainly a noncognitivist aspect to his theology. God never becomes It, and only about It can there be straightforward assertions, descriptions, analyses, and arguments. The sort of cognitive content that belongs to theological doctrines is not essential to the relationship with God that Buber prizes most. "It is not necessary," he says, "to know something about God in order really to mean *[meinen]* God, and many a true believer knows indeed how to speak *to* God but not *about* him" (W I,523/E 28, emphasis added). Similarly Buber says about himself,

> "If to believe in God means to be able to talk about him in the third person, then I do not believe in God. If to believe in him means to be able to talk to him, then I believe in God (Schilpp 24).

To be sure, this is a one-sided expression of Buber's views, uttered in a context of response to a fundamentalist apocalypticism. He has quite a lot to say, in a way, *about* God – but only in a way.

Revelation, likewise, has for Buber no cognitive content. It takes place in "the moment of the supreme encounter" (W I,152/IS 109/IK 157). He "know[s] of no [revelation] that is not the same in the primal phenomenon." In the encounter itself God says nothing that would differentiate one revelation from another.

> The word of revelation is: I am there as who I am there. What reveals is what reveals. What is is there, nothing more.

> The eternal source of strength flows, the eternal touch waits, the eternal voice sounds, nothing more (W 1,154/1S 11 If./ IK 160).

There is something individual in each revelation, though it is not a difference "in the primal phenomenon." It is not a cognitive content. It is rather the way the revelation changes the human partner. The revelation

> is this, that the human being going out from the moment of the supreme encounter is not the same as he was when he entered it. . . . The human being receives, and receives not a 'content' [*Inhalt*], but a presence, a presence as strength (W 1,152f./IS 109f./IK 157f.).

This presence contains a confirmation, but not an explanation, of the meaning of life.

> You do not know how to exhibit the meaning, and do not know how to determine it; you have no formula and have no image for it ... [What does it want from us ... ? Not to be interpreted – we're not able to do that – it wants only to be *done* by us (W I,153/IS 110/IK 159, emphasis added).

The meaning that is revealed is thus primarily practical rather than theoretical. It is guidance for action and for life, and in the *doing* of the guidance the meaning, though not interpreted is authenticated [*bewahrt*] It is not a practical principle, precept, or law, however. The revealed meaning guides, I take it, by changing the human agent, not by imparting a *belief* about what ought to be done.

> [A]s the meaning itself does not admit of being transmitted, nor of being expressed as a generally valid and generally acceptable knowledge, so [likewise] its authentication cannot be passed on [*tradiert*] as a valid ought [*Sollen*], it is not prescribed, it is not inscribed on any tablet ... Everyone is able to authenticate the received meaning only with the uniqueness of his being and in the uniqueness of his life. As no prescription can lead us to the encounter, so also none

leads from it (W 1,153/IS I 11/IK 159).

The encounter with God is momentary. One goes out from it as well as into it. It is this, and Buber's insistence that one takes no content from the encounter, that make his conception of revelation episodic. If I stopped at this point, however, I would give a very one-sided account of Buber's view. For he does not want to see encounters with the eternal Thou as isolated interruptions in a life with It. "In the signs of the life that happens to us we are addressed," Buber says; and the address is episodic. "If we name the speaker of this speech God, then it is always the God of a moment, a moment-God." But more or less as the authorial voices that address us, poem by poem, when we read, attentively, many poems by the same poet may combine "into the one polyphonic existence of the person," so likewise "out of the moment-Gods there arises for us with a single identity the Lord of the voice, the One" (W 1,187f.B 14f.).[8]

The concern for continuity of relationship with God is accommodated in *I and Thou* by Buber's theory of *form*. Though the eternal Thou cannot become It, "nevertheless we are always making the eternal Thou It again, . . . making God a thing." This is not arbitrary; we do it "in accordance with our essence." Buber affirms "the objectified [*dinglich*] history of God, the procession of the God-thing through religion and its marginal products.... the procession away from the living God and back to him again," and identifies it with "the way." And he speaks in this context of "enformment" [*Eingestaltung*] (W I,154f./IS 112/IK 161).

The "forms" of which Buber speaks most explicitly in this context are faith and ritual. Faith "supplements [*ergänzt*] ... the acts of relation" with "temporal extension"; ritual "originally supplements the acts of relation" with "spatial extension" (W 1,155f./IS 113f./IK 162). In Buber's version of the history of religion these forms are normally born alive but tend in time to die. When alive, they bridge the worlds of Thou and It.

> Form is ... mixture of Thou and It. In faith and ritual it can harden into an object; but from the essence of relation that lives on in it, it turns ever again into presence. . . . In true prayer ritual and faith unify and purify themselves into living relation (W 1,158f./IS 118/1K 167).

The forms die when they become a substitute for the acts of relation that they originally supplemented, replacing authentic prayer so that "it becomes ever harder in [the religions] to say Thou with the whole, undivided being" (W 1,155f.,159/IS 113f,118/IK 162,167).[9] It is in the context of this death of religious forms that the silence of God has its principal place in Buber's thought.

3. Silence of God

The idea of a silence of God is for Buber an alternative to the image of an eclipse of God, which furnished the English title for one of his most theological books (E). Buber left no doubt that he meant by these terms to refer to a real event, an event that he thought was hiding God from the self-consciously modern eyes and ears of the mid-twentieth century. More than one explanatory factor can be discerned in Buber's accounts of the event; they are clearly not meant to be mutually exclusive.

What is it that we mean [Buber asks] when we speak of an eclipse of God that is occurring even now?

> With this simile we make the enormous assumption that we are able to glance [up] to God with our "mind's eye," or rather being's eye, as with our bodily eye to the sun, and that something can step between our existence and his as between the earth and the sun (W 1,597/E 127).

The disturbing factor, in this account, seems to be neither in "our existence" nor in God's, but "between" the two; and this interpretation is confirmed when Buber says that the eclipse of God

> is not a process that can be adequately comprehended in terms of the changes that have taken place in the human mind. That the sun is eclipsed is something that occurs between the sun and our eye, not internally in the eye. [10] ... [S]omething is taking place between heaven and earth (W I,520/E 23).

What could this factor be, *between* us and God, that cuts off our vision of God? Buber calls it "the character of the world's hour

[*Weltstunde]* in which we are living" (W I,520/E 23). I find it hard to read that as anything but a process in *human* history, a *social* or *cultural* and thus still a human fact, though perhaps not in the *individual* human mind. Buber's conception of it is evidently close kin to his idea of the death of religious "forms." He offers an explanation of the eclipse of God in terms of the dominance of I-It over I-Thou relations. The I of the I-It relation, he says, has usurped the mastery of the present historic age. In so doing it eclipses God, cuts off from us the possibility of relation to God, because "it is ... only the relation I-Thou in which we can stand to God" at all (W I,598/E 128).

> This selfhood [*Ichheit*] that has become all-powerful, with all the It around it, can naturally acknowledge neither God nor any genuine absolute which manifests itself to humans as of non-human origin. It steps in between and shuts off from us the light of heaven (W I,598f./E 129).

This hypertrophy of the I of I-It is evidently conceived here as a historic, social, cultural process; but an I and a selfhood (especially those of I-It) must surely also have a seat in the human individual – indeed, in the individual mind. There is human responsibility, individual as well as social, for the eclipse. Buber says that "whoever refuses to endure the efficacious actuality of the transcendence, our over-against, as such, collaborates on the human side of the eclipsing" (W I,520/E 24).

The human side is not all there is to it, however, and the responsibility, in some sense, is not all ours. For Buber also gives an account of the interruption of divine-human relations in terms of what God does, as contrasted with human processes; and it is to this side of the matter that his use of the image of the silence of God belongs. Here we may quote in full his posing of our question:

> Let us ask ourselves whether it may not be literally true that God formerly spoke to us and is now silent, and whether this is not to be understood as the Hebrew Bible will have it understood, namely that the living God is not only a self-revealing but also a "self-concealing" God (W 1,551/E 66).

Human responsibility plays some part even in the silence of God; Buber thinks one should consider "what part our not hearing and our not having heard has played in that silence" *Ecl* 69). Still the emphasis in this account falls on God's self-concealment.

The possibility of self-concealment of the Thou is important to Buber's conception of revelation, and indeed of I-Thou relations more generally. "The Thou meets me by grace – by seeking it is not found" (W 1,85/IS 11/IK 62). Buber asserts that about any Thou, but with special emphasis about God, because it is especially important that God cannot be controlled by us. The name 'God', he says, has been reserved for "transcendent beings," which "by their essence [are] not given to us as knowable object" but which "stepped into relation to us ... Selfwilled came the Coming One out of the secret of his withdrawnness – we did not make him come." That divine independence from our control "has always distinguished religion from magic."

Buber would certainly not deny us all responsibility for the revelatory interaction. God cannot be compelled, but also does not compel, in Buber's view. God may be influenced, though not compelled, by us. It may be important to God "whether the human being yields or denies himself to him, and so the human being, the whole human being, with the whole decision of his being, may have an immeasurable share in the divine revealedness or hiddenness at any time."

But God is not subject to our cognitive control. On this point Buber is as insistent as Karl Barth, even if he does not assign the initiative in divine-human relations as one-sidedly to God as Barth does. For this reason revelation cannot be reduced to discovery. Neither can the apprehension of revelation be reduced to recollection; it is at least partly for the sake of its elusiveness in relation to our cognitive control that revelation must be momentary or episodic for Buber (as in a way also for Barth). For the same reason Buber speaks disparagingly about "concept-clarifying thinking" about God through which a divine appearance might be "thought as effected or co-effected" as by a "modern-magical influence."[11]

A self-revealing God can also be self-concealed. One who comes self-willed to meet us may decide not to come. One whose speech we do

not control may choose not to speak. If we do not hear God, therefore, it may not be simply that we are deaf or inattentive; it may be that God is silent. Even if we are deaf or inattentive, I think Buber would add, all the more may God be silent too. And if God is silent, we cannot make God speak. All we can do about it is try to become attentive again, "to endure it as it is and at the same time move existentially toward a new transformation in being, move toward the becoming heard again of the word between heaven and earth" (W I,553/E 68). We can only *wait*, expectantly.

So *is* God silent? Buber certainly suggests an affirmative answer, but I think he can hardly give it without qualification. It is not just that he himself speaks as one who has met God as Thou, not just that he speaks of a "quiet" or "silent" [*stille*] revelation "that occurs at all places and all times" (W I,158/IS 116f./IK 165f.). At bottom it seems to me that the connection between revelation and ethical guidance, in Buber's thought, is too close for God's voice to be totally silent where ethical insight is available, as surely it still and always is to morally serious and attentive humans. This is implied, I think, in the way that Buber summons us to attentiveness. "Every concrete hour ... is speech to the attentive," he declares; and "the sounds of which the speech consists ... are the events of the personal everyday" (W 1,189f./B 16). It is to these events that we must be attentive, Buber indicates, if we are to respond in a way that fulfils our true human responsibility. Who speaks in these events or "signs" of ordinary life? Buber has asked that question just a page or so before, and answered that it is the "moment-Gods," and arising from them "the [one] Lord of the voice."

This is as it should be. Attentiveness is one of the central marks of I-Thou relationship. If Buber's generalized idea of encountering all sorts of beings as Thou is attractive anywhere, surely it is attractive as an account of the attentiveness, openness, and responsiveness with which we must meet life's occasions if we are to respond to them with ethical sensitivity and insight (though we may think there is also an important place for analysis and reasoning in ethics). And according to Buber "every particular Thou is a glimpse through to" the eternal Thou (W I,128/IS 75/IK 123). If in nonobjectifying attentiveness we are seeing and

appreciating the value of any being, we are also in some way seeing or hearing God. That is what Buber seems to mean, and I think it is important to the attractiveness of his view that he should mean that. But then God is not silent when any of us truly appreciates anything, which surely happens in some degree to billions of people every day.

Is there then no silence of God, no eclipse of God, after all? Buber wants to say there is, and the key to his meaning may be the distinction he draws between the "quiet" revelation "that occurs at all places and all times" and "the mighty revelations to which the religions appeal" (W I,158/IS 116f./IK 165f.). I take this to be at least partly a distinction between the individual and the social. The "progressive growth of the It-world" (W I,102/IS 37/IK 87) may make it harder for human individuals to meet God as Thou, but they can and many, perhaps most, of them do, at all places and times. These encounters are revelations insofar as the individuals are transformed in them and authenticate them in action.

The "mighty revelations," however, transform realities that are social as well as individual, giving birth, for example, to new forms of faith and ritual. The "spiral" of degeneration and rebirth that Buber traces (W I,160/IS 120/IK 168) is primarily a history of these social religious forms, and associated forms of cultural life. Individuals who live in dead religious forms may still speak to God in personal prayer, and may still receive divine guidance in "quiet" revelation; but they will nonetheless experience the eclipse of God and silence of God in the social dimension of religion, and for guidance regarding important issues of communal life they may have to wait for revelation that has not yet been received. It is in this sense that I would understand Buber when he speaks of "the darkening, so familiar to us, of the supreme light, . . . the revelationless night of our Existence," and says,

> It is the night of an expectant waiting [*eines Harrens*] – not of a vague hope, but of an expectant waiting. We await a theophany of which we know nothing but the place, and the place is called community (W 1,180/B 7).

The view thus suggested has considerable religious plausibility. There are surely members of many religious communities who find rich

meaning in their own individual life with God, but feel that they and their whole communities are sunk in darkest perplexity as to the form and meaning and direction of the communities' life. Even if God is not silent in their own daily lives, they may still be waiting for a divine word for their communities. Likewise in these years of a world suddenly become comparatively formless following the collapse of Soviet communism, we may wish and wait for a divine word for the whole human community. Buber would rightly insist that we are not to expect it in the form of a new religious doctrine that would win universal acceptance (cf. Schilpp 23-25), but we may hope for insights and visions that might give form to more just and peaceful ways of dealing with economic and political matters, in a time when definitions we have lived with all or most of our lives are crumbling into exciting new opportunities and frightening new uncertainties.

There is a problem of consistency that remains to be dealt with. On my reading is Buber saying that God is always speaking on certain (rather individual) subjects, but sometimes falls silent on other (more social) subjects? And is that consistent with Buber's denial that revelations have "content," and his affirmation of the sameness of all revelation? Even the "mighty" and the "quiet" revelations whose difference I have been discussing are "essentially the same" [*wesensgleich*], Buber says (W I,158/IS 116L/IK 165f).

I believe in fact that Buber's thesis of the sameness of all revelation is tenable in the context of his theory only if it is carefully qualified. If some revelation is given and some withheld from the same persons at the same time, there must be some difference between what is given and what is withheld, and I take this difference to be analogous to a difference in content. What Buber certainly can consistently say on the negative side is, first, that there is no difference of content in "the primal phenomenon," as he puts it, or in the encounter itself as lived; and second, that no verbal formulation exactly expresses what has been revealed. (I am not sure myself that he *ought* to say the first of those things, but he consistently can.) Consistently with these claims he can explain differences between revelations in terms of differences in the effects they have on the human partners – differences in the way they are

transformed, and hence differences in the way they "authenticate" the revelations in action.

So far, so good. But can Buber then deny that *God* gives different guidance (perhaps on different subjects) in different revelations? (I'm not sure he wants to deny that, but can he consistently deny it if he wants to?) He can if he means to attribute all the differences of transformation and action to our human contribution to the history. But he surely does not and should not mean that. In the creation of new religious forms through the "theophany" of mighty revelations, he says, "it is not independent power [*Eigenmacht*] of the human being that operates here, nor is it purely God's passing through [*Durchgang*], it is mixture of divine and human" (W 1,158/IS 117/IK 166). And that is what we must think if we are to suppose that absence of a "mighty" revelation might be silence of God. For if all differences in the human transformations and actions springing from revelations are to be attributed solely to our human contribution, then if new forms are not being born from the "quiet" revelations that are occurring all the time, and if communal issues are therefore not being addressed by these revelations, the explanation for that must lie entirely in ourselves, and not in a voluntary silence of God. If the idea of a silence of God is to have any bite in this context, we must suppose that God does indeed give different guidance in different revelations, however much that guidance is mediated by the transformation of the human persons involved in them.

4. Evil

Thus far I have not brought the silence of God into explicit connnection with the theological problem of evil, beause Buber does not do so in the texts with which I am familiar. It is striking that in these texts, some of them written in the decade following the Second World War, a silence or eclipse of God is attributed, not to horrendous evils not prevented by divine power, but to the growing power of the "world of It." There are reasons for this in Buber's thought. He is not interested in defending a doctrine of divine omnipotence; and if he hears God speaking it will be in noncoercive encounter with a Thou, not in the effects of natural or supernatural power forcing history into paths of justice.

Moreover, what I have said about Buber's idea of the "quiet" revelation "that occurs at all places and in all times" suggets that he should think that God is *not* silent in the midst of great evils, so long as sufferers or witnesses recognize the horrors for what they are. It is very important for our understanding of Buber that I-Thou relations are *not* all "warm fuzzies." It is not only the good but also the evil that must be addressed with the openness of the whole heart if it is to be recognized for what it is, and evaluated truly. Like a Thou, the horror "fills the firmament [*Himmelskreis*]" (cf. W I,83,130/IS 8,78/IK 59,126). It is when cruelty and its victims are objectified, fitted as all-too-ordinary items into the ordered world of everyday, that it becomes easy to do the most terrible evils. Surely a truthful vision of moral horror belongs to Buber's world of Thou, if there is such a world at all.

I think it follows, on Buber's view, that God, the eternal Thou, speaks to us in every really truthful vision of great evil. Not that evil tells us about God, but that God speaks to us about evil – as indeed God spoke to the prophets of old. I think that is right. I have more interest than Buber had in affirming omnipotence, but I am sure that we should expect to hear God speaking in the recognition of good and evil, in open-hearted attention to what they really are, much more than in the ambiguities of history read as evidence of the purposes of the power that lies behind it.[12]

So the ubiquitous "quiet" revelation can take place in the recognition of evil. But what about the silence of God that Buber does believe in – the silence that is associated with the death of religious "forms"? Can it arise from a problem of evil? Here I think Buber's emphasis on the growing power of It is one-sided. Religious forms are surely vulnerable to external contingencies of history as well as to internal degeneration. The meaning of traditional religious forms will be at least subtly altered in a context of rapid cultural change. And in calamities religious forms too can suffer violence. What happened to the "forms" of the pre-exilic religion of Israel when king and temple were lost? What happens to the religious forms of a community that is forced underground in persecution? And what has happened to the various religious forms in which our grandparents lived, by the end of a century that has violently destroyed

some of them, and has disappointed expectations of so many? Can such questions as these leave us, as Buber put it, "in the public catacombs" awaiting a theophany of which the place, we may hope, is to be called "community"? (W I, 180/B 7)

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NOTES

[1] References separated by a slash are to the German original and one or more English translations of the same text. Except in the case of Schilpp, I quote, in principle, in my own translations, unless otherwise noted, but I have been helped by the cited translations. The works of Martin Buber are cited by the following abbreviations:
B = *Between Man and Man*, trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1965).
E = *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, trans. by Maurice S. Fried-man et al., (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957).
IK = *I and Thou*, new trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Scribners, 1970).
IS = *I and Thou*, 2nd ed., trans. by Ronald Gregor Smith (New York: Scribners, 1958).
Schilpp = Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedman, eds., *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*. with Buber's autobiography and reply to critics (vol. 12 of *The Library of Living Philosophers*) (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967).
W = *Werke*, Erster Band, *Schriften zur Philosophie* (Munich and Heidelberg: Kdscl-Verlag and Verlag Lambert Schneider, 1962).

[2] See his *Fear and Trembling*, especially the second "Problem."

[3] Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *The Sickness unto Death*, trans. by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 88. Mainly because I cannot bring myself to give up 'Thou' in translating Buber, I here prefer the older (and more poetic) Lowrie translation to the newer (and doubtless more authoritative) Hong version, which otherwise gives the same sense to the phrase I quote; see Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and Repetition, trans. by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton

University Press, 1983), p. 77.

[4] The personalization of relations with God is not a theme of Schleiermacher, but his emphasis on present, experiential consciousness of God is obvious. For Barth as for Kierkegaard, real apprehension of past revelation as such must run through real present contact with God, though Barth is perhaps more cautious about the novelty of God's present self-disclosure.

[5] With a couple of exceptions in the first sentence, I follow Ronald Gregor Smith's rendering of this passage, which seems to me more felicitous than a more literal translation would be.

[6] He indicates this explicitly. though without any very helpful discrimination or clarification, in his "Replies to My Critics" in Schilpp, p. 689n.

[7] In this contrast I am in fundamental agreement with Emil L. Fackenheim, "Martin Buber's Concept of Revelation," in Schilpp, pp. 273-77.

[8] In much of what I quote in this paragraph it has seemed best to me to follow Ronald Gregor Smith's forceful translation, even where a slightly more literal rendering would be possible.

[9] There is an obvious analogy between Buber's account of the life and death of religious forms and Paul Tiliich's roughly contemporary theory of the life and death of religious symbols, but this is not the place to explore any relation there may be between them.

[10] *nicht in diesem darin.* The translation of E ("not in the sun itself") is impossible; on grounds of both gender and word order, the reference of *diesem* cannot be to the sun (*die Sonne*).

[11] All the quotations since the last citation in the text are taken from W 1,558f./ E 74-76.

[12] I have argued this point in a different context in "Platonism and Naturalism: Options for a Theocentric Ethics," in Joseph Runzo, ed., *Ethics, Religion, and the Good Society* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), pp. 22-42.