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A Call in the Wilderness

A Critique of the Naive Philosophy of Friends

OTTO M. BOETES

Many of the thoughts expressed in this essay arose as challenge to (rather than inspiration from) sitting in Friends Meeting for Worship at Pendle Hill where harmony, poetry and peace were predominant and Christ absent, because he was out in the world with all those suffering. I speak of the naive rather than the tragic philosophy of Friends because Friends have not passed to that stage yet. There is so much romantic illusion in Quakerism: optimism about the chances we still think we have against the growing power of the "over-state" and its culture in which we participate.

I am convinced that we have much to learn from Martin Buber who as a Jew saw more deeply into the abysses of our time. He can help us explore part of the way to go in order to get rid of our illusions. But he cannot lead us all the way; we have to do it ourselves according to our condition.

THE "MEETING" AS THE CENTER OF REALITY

What Buber has to say about the "Inbetween" illuminates how the form of our Quaker meetings for worship relates to the concreteness of our everyday meetings with others.

"Where two or three are gathered in God's name He is in the midst of them." In this togetherness everyone has his own condition, his own problems, his own responsibility, his own life to live. No one can impose his way of thinking or life upon others. He who speaks, speaks out of his own conviction, distress and hopes, and those who hear listen to the true voice of the other, trying to understand their own responsibility to this unique event or call. Thus personal views and feelings are shared, and this sharing helps each to become the person that

each of us is meant to be. In our meeting for worship there is no discussion about right or wrong as a universal device, but only a seeking for God's appeal to us in our personal lives. In this unique unitedness the Presence of God is the only reality. From it springs revelation and renewal of faith and life.

When we take this vision of the Presence of God in the midst of the presence of men as "the" reality in all its immediacy, it may be that we understand what Buber means by stating that this reality is more real than anything else which may be derived or split off from it. For Buber reality does not consist of a number of individuals in their surroundings trying to *make* contact with each other (or failing in it, as Sartre says). Nor is reality made up of a totality of ideas and images we derive from our sense-impressions of an "objective" world. Reality for Buber is precisely that immeasurable and innumerable "Inbetween" in which all of us and all things and living creatures participate before they are perceived and analyzed as separate individuals and objects, as if each of them had its being in itself. It is only in and through this "Inbetween" that we exist, before any articulation "about" our existence can be made. So we are connected with each other and rooted in the Inbetween, which is the very basis of all. Any real contact with others, with nature, with spiritual entities, with the world of things springs from it, before separation is introduced. It is in the immediacy of the Inbetween, of the "Meeting," that the reality is present to us as we are present in it. Thus Buber shows us how our idea of meeting for worship expands to include all real meeting with men, nature, things and whatever has reality.

When we hold this fast, that all reality is meeting and that God is speaking through all these meetings and is claiming our responsibility, we are at the heart of Buber's philosophy. So Buber carries the basis of "our" meeting for worship as the communion of the "Inbetween" much further and sees it as the basis of the lives of men. The immediacy of our meetings, before our rationality tears them into manageable pieces — is there anything more concrete in life?

Buber says that all religions sprang from an original revelation, an encounter of unique importance to a man, a certain time, a people. The prophet responds in his way, not being a funnel, but a responsible man. The fire of revelation however is too severe for men to carry it on in all its splendor; it makes life dangerous, unforeseeable, and man wants to preserve himself, mastering his life. Then revelation is made less harmful, it is institutionalized, all kinds of securities come into it; thus religion gradually becomes a tranquilizer (opium to the people, Marx would say). But there remains always the danger that suddenly the fire that smoulders may burst out, break its boundaries and set people afire. We have in our meetings for worship such a possibility of new revelation in the immediacy of the encounter, not hampered by liturgy or creed or officials. Sometimes, however, I feel that we have in that very meeting for worship, and the way we carry it on, something that secures us from being really touched by the Eternal Thou, perhaps our friendliness and politeness, our tolerance and our peacefulness.

The hallowing of all aspects of life is something Friends have always proclaimed against all who make a split between things spiritual and things secular. There is no escape from the world; God speaks to our condition in our specific situation. It is the sacrament of everyday life. Buber stresses this idea very strongly, saying that God not only demands our cooperation, He wants, even needs us. The prophets of Israel were not persons coming to men to say what God was going to do unto them, thus proclaiming the inescapable things to happen, but men who called people back to God. They confronted them with their responsibilities, which lie in creating righteousness and brotherhood among men. So they called people to convert, to turn back after having split off their souls and lives from the true reality of life, after having begun a separate life as self-sufficient subjects opposing all other men as objects.

This call may come to us at a specific time, but in fact it is always there, when we meet other human beings, looking for help or just not knowing what they are looking for. Herein

lies the responsibility of men towards each other to respond to "that of God in every man." This needs a turning to the true reality of the Inbetween in its immediacy of meeting. When we hear God calling through it we can become His partners, for He needs us as men need us and we need men.

THE I-THOU RELATION

Reading and rereading Buber one can discern two ways of pointing to "I-Thou." The first is that about which we can only stammer. It is the sudden Presence, a thief in the night, a burning fire that overwhelms us. We may seek it or try to escape it, but it comes in unpredictable moments. We cannot get hold of it, we may even try to avoid or void it, because it deprives us of our ordinary securities. It may happen anywhere and at any moment, it strikes us as a lightning. These are the moments of revelation, the moments of inspiration and of the real Presence of God, when life is renewed, faith is created and suffering met. Here is encounter, confrontation, even conflict. Such moments may lead to a new way to go in our personal and our communal lives; new movements may spring out of it; but the beginning is a break in continuity. It means revelation and re-creation *in an unredeemed world*.

On the other hand Buber often describes the I-Thou relation in terms of much more continuity, in terms of love, of overcoming conflict, of building real community, of rebuilding mankind, . . . as though this was *the onset of redemption*. Most interpreters of Buber stress this aspect; some of them even speak about the I-Thou *relationship*.

Buber presents his I-Thou vision as the way to overcome the alienation which pervades the life of almost everyone in our technological society. The two aspects of the I-Thou relation represent two different modes of overcoming: there is the way *back* to the primal world of personal relationships, of organic-immediate meeting, of natural community, where we can be in harmony with everything, accepting things as they are; and there is the way of the prophets, the witnesses of the flashing revelations, of the cruel encounters, confrontings with a Pres-

ence in which man has to decide in the crucial questions of life and suffering. The second aspect, the harshly demanding one to which the Old Testament prophets and Jesus in the wilderness and on Golgotha bear witness, is especially important for us Friends to come to terms with. Buber, too, sometimes seems to want to stress the harmonious element, but he was much more deeply aware than are most Friends of the element of conflict and tragedy in the spiritual life. We see this in his recognition of "the evil urge" as something to be acknowledged, integrated and redirected. Our sexuality and aggressiveness and other traits of character which we normally (according to certain norms) label "evil" and thus condemn and try to repress are part of our lives, and those energies can be directed toward the goal of making our lives worth living, working for justice and human brotherhood. Here our emotions, our strivings, our whole being become activated; here also conflict and confrontation become indispensable features of life. To wholly appreciate this would be to become even more conscious than Buber himself ever seems to have been of the inadequacy of a commitment to the building of personal relationships and intimate communities which allows us to hide from the ever-expanding and menacing It-world.

THE OPTIMISM OF FRIENDS

One could say that Friends consist of a majority of upper-middle-class people engaged in some kind of educative or social work, sustained by those Friends who are engaged in business and always feel some guilt in "making money." There happens to be a silently-understood symbiosis of the two groups on the basis of the widely known tolerance for personal standpoints and commitments among Friends in general. And it flourishes, doesn't it? Many things can be done, financed and carried out. The input of Friends in the socio-cultural field is not to be neglected. Even in small countries the handful of Friends is known to be there. They are liberal-progressive and even sometimes initiate things, where more tradition-bound groups stick to their inherited forms. The optimism and self-confidence (in all humility, of course) that accompany their efforts at

constant improvement complete the picture of "our kind of people." Of course we also see the dangers in modern society, even more than others see them, but our efforts give us a feeling of progress. The seemingly growing opportunities for personal commitments and responses where the old moral and religious systems decline and vanish give us a growing sense of responsibility and of opportunity for progress, meeting the challenges of our time.

Buber looks more deeply into those challenges of our time. To be sure, he states: "Where there is danger, saving power grows too," but he also voices a constant warning against the assumption that things will inevitably work out: "In sick ages it happens that the it-world, no longer irrigated and fertilized by the living currents of the You-world, severed and stagnant, becomes a gigantic swamp phantom and overpowers man. As he accommodates himself to a world of objects that no longer achieve any presence for him, he succumbs to it. Then common causality grows into an oppressive and crushing doom."

In spite of the general optimism of Friends, feelings of a menacing collapse of society steal upon some of us. Especially in the United States, where violence, hate, fear and mistrust are almost everywhere, sensitive people are becoming desperate about the future of our culture, as sensitive Europeans already were before the second world war. Those are paralyzing thoughts, and mostly we succeed in withstanding them and we double our efforts at improvement. These efforts may be carried out within the system by participating in it, as most of us do.

THE ACTIVISM OF SOME FRIENDS

Other Friends, however, have come to a stage in which they see that there is something wrong in the fundamental basis of our society and culture. They see that we are being ruled by one model of thought: that of domination. In all aspects of life man has to a great extent lost the opportunity to live his own life, to be himself in his relationships with those belonging to his life. There is a great longing for real community, where we don't need to be afraid of things being

inflicted upon us, where we are not being watched by Big-brother. "Liberation" is now a word which expresses man's longing for humanity.

But domination is the essence of our technical era: we are computerized, conscripted, conditioned by mass-media (and worse if we are black, Vietnamese, Biafran, Bengali, dropout, addict or hippie).

The idea of social action and of social change has come up in the last few years. It is an old but completely renewed concept. It means essentially that individuals (not directed or dominated by others, not even by a progressive elite) have to take responsibility for their own lives. Social action means radical revolution (better: conversion) against specific phenomena of domination. It is however essentially not restricted to certain areas or aspects of life, *e.g.*, the war in Indochina, but spreads over all aspects: it is a *lifestyle*. So we see that the anti-war movement is just one phenomenon, the first one that made us aware of domination and repression. Some others related to it are black liberation, student democracy, women's liberation, gay liberation, and all kinds of revolts against the rigid standards of religious and moral hypocrisies. This idea, this lifestyle, which reminds us of the non-violent anarchists of former times, is spreading as a counter-culture among those groups alienated from our culture of domination and oppression. These activist Friends form a small minority, in a queer way tolerated among Friends.

They try to do their social change in a sensible way and in cooperation with people of like background and ideals. They try to develop more effectiveness in their actions, constantly evaluating what they have found and encountered. Sometimes social action has "success," but you have to be very inventive, because the forces of domination against which you are fighting try constantly to close the gaps you have found in their system. So progress is many times hampered and pushed back by the counter-measures of the established institutions. The effectiveness of social action is a problem in the long run, even when there are short-run "successes." Looking to Gandhi or to Martin Luther King we sometimes can point to successes,

but what is left over from Gandhi's work in India, what from King's in the United States? Here the tragic aspect of life comes again to our minds, the tragic aspect which Buber also knew about and could not solve. Must the statement of Buber: "Where there is danger, saving power grows too," be reversed into: "Where there is resistance, repression grows too"?

Here we come to a point that many Friends will never reach, because they have chosen a far "better" way — not getting into "trouble" with the world.

THE MYSTICISM OF MORE FRIENDS

Many Friends stress personal relationships and are not inclined to engage in the organizational and the political field, because these are held to be more technical, more second-hand and not of direct value for real human life itself. These Friends tend to move away from the world at large and to seek in the "depths" of existence, where mysticism has its realm of universal and eternal Truth. Yet they may be generous in giving help and relief in a personal philanthropic way when calamities strike others. The "mysticism" of Friends is of a specific kind: it arises out of meeting with others and ought not to be seen as a loosening of the primary ties with which men are bound together as human beings in ordinary life. Most mysticism, however, is precisely loosening those ties with reality. The aim is complete union or identification of the soul with God, seen as the Absolute Subject. This kind of mysticism Buber is very clear about: he calls it an escape from reality.

For many Friends these words may seem like a judgment on Quakerism, because many times in our meetings for worship we can hear utterances which are of exactly that type of mysticism Buber calls an escape from reality. Buber is confronting us with the dangers of our ego-tripping, even when we do this in communal form: specifically, when nothing is coming out of it which addresses our lives and the world we live in. When we are honest we may confess that we often, and therefore too often, are "edified" (or deified by ourselves) in meetings for worship where all is pure unity, harmony, beauty, tranquility, while the world around us cries: "My God,

why hast Thou forsaken me?" The Jew Martin Buber calls us back to the world, like a prophet, not announcing something beautiful, or something cruel destined to happen inescapably, but calling us to turn, to testify and to work because there is no time but this present and no other place than the world we live in. Against all those mystifications Quakers have actually known that God speaks to our condition; ego-mysticism is nothing but conditionlessness.

THE "PSYCHOLOGIZING" AMONG FRIENDS

In recent decades some "modern" Friends have preoccupied themselves with another kind of mystification, *i.e.*, psychology, to "solve" man's problems (through Freudian, Jungian, or some other type of analysis). Many a modern psychological system is nothing more than a secular successor to a theology that puts the real problems of men into a sphere outside the reality of the immediate world of action, encounter and meeting. Just as in traditional Christian theology, the solution of problems is moved from the world of living into a world somewhere beyond immediate reality, into a phantom "inner" world, the so-called "soul." It is not at all strange that psychology was initiated to deal with the problems of the sophisticated "higher classes" who lived an artificial life. The "findings" there were applied in social work. So social workers tried to handle social problems as inner psychological problems of people not able to cope with their poverty, forgetting that the first cause could be poverty itself. Buber states in the second part of *I and Thou* that the world of our modern institutionalized society is so dominating and unpersonal that people have formed a counter-realm of their feelings, to recover and to hide themselves from the realm of institutions. So we find many people in our world today who feel lonely, alienated, frustrated and helpless, and we try to help them by using psychology, while the real causes lie in the world of unreality around us, the world of mechanized institutions and rules in which we cannot find a way to live together. The lack of real community, of caring for each other, the untruthfulness, the injustices, the violence and the repression inherent in our soci-

ety cause all these breakdowns. Buber is right when he points to this world of "it" as the basis of our alienation.

Those bringing the conflicts in society into the open are not "causing troubles" but realizing them in the only field where they can fulfil their purpose and can be solved: the immediacy of lived life as a struggle for freedom and justice. Here we touch again on Buber's idea of healing through meeting; he surely thought of the immediacy of the meetings between men, even in conflicts, as capable of breaking through the polarizations within men and within society.

THE "SOCIOLOGIZING" AMONG FRIENDS

Friends have often played a role in a specific kind of politics, *i.e.*, reconciliation. In the conflicts between groups organized in institutions they have tried to dissociate themselves from "taking sides," to transcend the conflict as such, to make clear its background, and to develop possible alternatives for its solution. Nobody and no party will deny the value of these mediations, but still they can only prepare something to happen between the parties themselves. For *they* are the ones who are in the conflict; theirs is the great task, not to be passed over to another, to take a step, perhaps the first positive one in the conflict, perhaps a real response to a step taken by the opponent. In any case, steps have to be taken by both parties, even by the one that to an "objective eye" has the "greater part" of righteousness on its side. Sometimes it is even harder for the "righteous side" to take the first step. And who does not consider himself to be on the right side?

In our culture we have become so technical and "scientific" that we can hardly avoid looking at conflicts, personal or communal or political, as objective "problems" to which psychology or sociology can give us the solution. As we can "psychologize" the world, according to Buber's view, we can also "sociologize" the world: making objective problems to be handled scientifically out of these conflicts. Buber calls this "reification," making an it-world, which is just the opposite of realization. The real problems of a conflict, thinking along with Buber, are finally to be decided only by those involved in

it, and each can decide only his own side of it. There is no general, objective picture of a conflict, as there is no general, objective picture of the world. The world is made by our acting, and we cannot pass it over to others or sit aside talking about "the eventualities of history."

THE MORALISM OF ALL FRIENDS

Perhaps the most dominating characteristic of Friends is our moralism. The picture people outside the Society of Friends have of us is that of a highly respectable kind of people, and we also think the same way about ourselves. For is it not true that many good things have been and are still initiated and carried on by Friends? Are not we a group of people with high moral standards, a people of high moral personality-level? Those living in close connection with or even in a group of Friends sometimes are able to see and experience the dominating power of the "Quaker way of life," the moral pressure exerted on Friends to react always in friendly, kindly, humble ways. The burden of this moralism, the denial of the "evil urges," the repression of them, makes for insincerity.

Many Friends, however, seem to feel very happy in this atmosphere. We sometimes meet Friends who really seem to live as in a past century, long ago when life was not so complicated, when it was still possible to live in all immediacy of meeting, without enmity, jealousy, or fear of each other. And really we can believe that there are still such persons, living now and not perverted by the materialistic struggle of each against all so dominant in our culture. But in others we can feel much hidden moral aggression, reproach and conceit in their high level of morality. And the highest level of this moralism is false humility. I cannot help feeling insincerity in this unshakable and hidden self-righteousness. Such people are so much the victims of a dominating system of moral standards that have done away with the evil urges in themselves. Their self-restraint is nothing more than the internalized power of domination and submission to it, with an aureole of humble saintliness. So our Society becomes one big hierarchy of persons of different levels of morality who ask: "How far are

you? I am so far, and besides that I am humble about it." The domination of this moral system is obvious, but we as Friends very strongly adhere to it, because we have already come so far in it compared with others.

THE NIHILISM OF FRIENDS

The most severe objection against the philosophy of Friends is our nihilism, called "tolerance." Almost every notion can be expressed among Friends if done with "personal conviction." It is considered to be a curse to oppose people, a violation of their "freedom"; everybody is considered to be honest and of good intentions. So it is a fact that there were Friends, strongly convinced that they were not allowed to lie, who therefore gave information to the persecutors of Jews which led to arrests and exterminations. Apart from this cruel example, there are instances by the million in which we are paving the way to hell with good intentions, not realizing that it is obvious that any oppressive power or culture paves its ways with moral standards, good intentions and "duties." And we are so innocent that we think it is only the good intentions and personal convictions that "count," as if the real world were a world of "innerness"; while the victims are exposed in the world "outside," that does not matter compared with the world "within." Friends, like most "Christians," adhere to a phantom-world in which we are concerned about our "souls," where we can all be "pure" if we do things with the right intention. So "non-violence," originally an opposition to any violence exerted on men in the real world, is made an attitude, an intention, a phantom part of the "inner world," and so made harmless to the existing law and order of oppression and violence. In this way Friends evade real confrontation with the things happening in the world. They do their best, try very hard, but by accepting people's convictions as they are, as if they were part of a holy inner world, they evade a fight that could be more real — more real in its direct connection with what is actually happening in the world as an outcome of these convictions and good intentions. This escapism from real commitment to struggle against the horrors of a real world we

had better call nihilism, because on this basis anything can be called good if only it is done with "good intentions."

A CALL IN THE WILDERNESS

I remember a day in 1943. Amsterdam, occupied by Nazi Germany. An air-raid alarm at noon, Sunday, everybody at home. No planes, but German soldiers in the streets, going into the houses looking for Jews. Everybody opens his door and shows the soldiers he is not a Jew, nor hiding Jews. No Judas is needed for we all have our identity cards. The tramcars, otherwise forbidden to Jews, are full of them: destination "no-one-believes."

And we did nothing.

There was a time when churches and cloisters were sanctuaries, real sabbatical places where persecuted people could hide and give themselves to the custody of the priests, who could help them find their way to confess their guilt and carry their punishment, or be reconciled and forgiven. This was possible because everybody knew that God was inescapable. In our days of the so-called "death of God," the worldly authorities have taken over all authority and *they* now are inescapable, without reconciliation or forgiveness.

The totalitarian technical state of today knows of no sabbath, of no sanctuary. It has no waiting-room to decide, no Gethsemane, but immediately passes over to Auschwitz, to the automated war in Indochina, to Biafra, East Pakistan and what we have and what we shall have...

But what can we do?

Can "social change" do something? Or is there only change for worse? Are the victories, the progress we make, only a refining of the legislation, the procedure to which men must conform and adapt?

The persecution of the Jews in Europe by Nazi Germany is a pure example of how the law of domination functions: registration of the whole population is a harmless thing to begin with. Then gradually you push some people out of

certain facilities. Finally, select and divide them into all kinds of categories, from important people with certain prerogatives down to the lowest: the first to be transported to the transit-camps. They may even believe that it is a transit to Israel, being exchanged for prisoners of war. The upper classes will cooperate with the system, hoping to be exempted from it. They did even within Auschwitz! "*Divide et Impera.*" A group may be treated unjustly; we can try to place them in a better category or reclassify the system, making a new exemption, a new code. For every disease we make a new code, not realizing that every code makes a new disease.

Our economic system functions in the same way. We try to get good jobs, better pay, to make promotion. So by participating in the rat-race we produce the chains of enslavement for the weaker today and for ourselves tomorrow. So we do in "education": the enmity of all against all has become the basis of our motivation. In consumption, it is the drive to keep up with the Joneses.

So our penal system is a constant selection into categories so that we may control society by law and order. At the moment this system is no longer concerned about repression of individual "criminals" but more about the deterrence of groups from being involved in law-and-order-menacing engagements. Thus the methods of war and occupation are more and more applied on our "own" population.

One day in 1944 a high German officer was murdered in a village in Holland. Three hundred men of the town were murdered the next day. This happened in Holland, this happened in Vietnam, in Biafra, in Pakistan, in South Africa, in Israel, and this will happen again and again. Today there, tomorrow here! But there are exemptions and we try to be in that number, and in trying we sustain the system.

Laborers not able to do well, or working in a firm going bankrupt, are dismissed. There are, however, always exemptions and we try to be in that number, and in trying we sustain the system.

There is an advertisement: "Why not drop out? It costs you nothing except low wages and unemployment later on."

There are, however, exemptions and we try to be in that number, and in so trying we sustain the system.

The whole world of regulations is made up of exemptions and exceptions for the time being. We try to escape from things going on in the world, but the system is getting hold of the whole society and in trying to rescue ourselves we use its regulations and confirm them.

As white, fairly wealthy and educated people, we may feel this is not true. But today: the poor, the drop-outs, the addicts, the blacks, means tomorrow: the rich, the educated, the decent, the white.

Looking today to the war problem, the poverty problem, the race problem, the drug problem in our society, and to all the repression and violence forced into these areas (one need not be black to see that), one cannot believe that this will turn good by itself. We can try to escape for a moment, and that is exactly what everybody is doing, for we are all objects, the rulers and the ruled in this irreversible process. Everybody is scared to death. Therefore peace negotiations about Vietnam go together with new plans for Cambodia, disarmament talks together with the development of new weapons, talk about pollution with driving our cars. The sorcerer's apprentices are at work and

we are doing it ourselves.

"*Wir haben es nicht gewusst*": we did not know it. This sentence has been repeated over and over again and will be repeated over and over again. "It can't happen here," we say, but it will! It is already happening.

Some people begin to realize that this irreversible process can only be stopped by a "great refusal" to cooperate in it: to drop out, to form alternative forms of communities, to warn others, to raise consciousness about what we really are doing in our culture. This means confrontation, the fierce stand against the overwhelming power of the it-world: speak truth to power. Some will be called to do this, but they can do so only on the basis of a *confronting* encounter that has taken place in their lives, which we cannot define in universals once and forever,

but by which they are moved and renewed and through which they know how to prepare against the further dangers they are still to meet.

But there is also the *meeting*, the building of new community, the solidarity with those persecuted, those desperately alienated, who need a sanctuary in which they can lay down their heads for a while and need not be afraid. *And we need them*, for they know about the alienating forces that penetrated their lives, that were inflicted upon them by our society, our culture, our morals, our "religion." When these persecuted ones come to us, let us hope they cannot say: "Man, man, why hast thou forsaken us?"