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Triologue in an Interreligious Context: Reinterpreting the Dialogue Model of Martin Buber

“All real living is meeting.”¹

“Through the Thou a man becomes I.”²

Introduction

In this article the proposal is to reflect on the structures of all dialogue by using a *Triologue*³ model: in the encounter of the dialogue partners a ‘third presence’, *Ultimate Reality*, as well as the *Ultimate Self* of each of the dialogue partners are postulated and reflected upon. Triologue, with this meaning, is a new model and is reinterpreting the concepts used in the dialogical thinking of Martin Buber (*I-It; I-Thou; and eternal Thou*, as explained in the following section on Buber). It is important to point out that for Buber, equally, a ‘third presence’ was essential in all dialogue: the *eternal Thou*, his metaphor for God.

An attempt is made here to formulate a model of *Triologue* which integrates into a multi-dimensional understanding of dialogue and consciousness the spiritual and fundamental experiences that

a) the presence of the *Ultimate Self* (comparable in meaning to the individual *Purusha* in Vedanta, which is the centre of our identity and the spiritual origin of our self-consciousness) of each dialogue partner creates a fundamental, spiritual and relational dimension in the holistic encounter of persons and creates an atmosphere of dignity

¹ Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, translated by Ronald Gregor Smith, 2nd (revised) edition published 1958, with a postscript by the author, (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 25.

² *Ibid.*, 44.

³ Dialogue in its Greek origin refers to *dia* (through) - *logos* (word/meaning). Triologue refers to *tria* (three in Greek language) and *logos* and is not simply a numerical extension of dialogue, but the Triologue model seeks to explicitly emphasise a third presence in *every* dialogue, which could be a dialogue with two, three or more participants.

and openness according to the ultimate ineffability of each person and the spiritual interrelatedness of all persons.

b) *Ultimate Reality* is a 'third presence' in all dialogue and can be experienced by the *Ultimate Self* of each dialogue partner.

These spiritual experiences do not depend on any form of concept, but our mind, responding to these experiences, operates with culturally specific concepts in order to integrate these experiences. Sri Aurobindo, one of the great philosophers and yogis of modern India, wrote extensively about the spiritual dimension of human life. Concerning direct spiritual experiences he wrote:

"These truths present themselves to our conceptual cognition as the fundamental aspects in which we see and experience the omnipresent Reality. In themselves they are seized directly, not by intellectual understanding but by a spiritual intuition, a spiritual experience in the very substance of our consciousness;"⁴

The *Ultimate Self* (the individual *Purusha*) is often neglected in the modern analysis of human consciousness for the same reason that the dialogical/trialogical situation has been neglected: it is a spiritual presence, not an intellectually identifiable object with stability in time and space and not identifiable as content of our conceptual mind.

Sri Aurobindo addressed in his writings also the tension between the experience of the spiritual dimension of the *Ultimate Self* and the mental concepts formulated to describe the Self as it is experienced in its mental or material dimension:

„..... we see that the whole difficulty and confusion into which the normal reason falls is that we are speaking of a higher and illimitable self-experience founded on divine infinites and yet are applying to it a language formed by its lower and limited experience which founds itself on finite appearances and the separative definitions by which we try to distinguish and classify the phenomena of the material universe."⁵

Many mystics and yogis across all religious traditions and times have experienced and witnessed the limitless and spiritual dimension of human life. It is impossible to name them all: some are well-known to a wide public, some are not known. An interreligious, intercultural model of dialogue and of being a person in a time of a growing globalisation has to include the profound experiences which are witnessed

⁴ Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine* (Pondicherry: All India Press, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970), 323.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 372.

and recorded in all cultures and religions, and can no longer be limited just to a Western, secular understanding of selfhood and reality.

The proposal here is to include the *Ultimate Reality* (in diverse traditions referred to as God, Brahman/Parabrahman, Allah, Sunyata, Tao, 'the Real', the Great Spirit, the primal ground of being, etc.) in the reflection about any dialogical encounter. Dialogue is reinterpreted here as *Triialogue: to include explicitly the presence of Ultimate Reality, a third, absolute and conscious dimension*. In doing so, this article will not discuss the nature of *Ultimate Reality* in itself, but reflect on the *effects* of its presence for the participants in dialogue and the dialogical event itself. The *Triialogue* model presented here includes the postulate that *Ultimate Reality* in itself is the highest and absolute form of consciousness, an *Ultimate Reality* that includes all knowledge and all capacities, and therefore also includes being the *absolute person*. At the same time, I propose here a *Triialogue* model that includes the *experience* that in the profoundest unitive mysticism *Ultimate Reality* in itself is experienced by the *Ultimate Self*, the spiritual source of our consciousness which is named *Purusha* in Vedanta, *Paramatman* in Jainism or referred to by other names for the *Highest Self* in other traditions. Such a view of the unmediated experience of *Ultimate Reality* and the capacities in our *Soul* is, for example, expressed by Meister Eckhart when he speaks about the uncreated light in the soul that comprehends God without a medium.⁶ Such experiences in 'the uncreated light' or the 'ultimate dimension of consciousness' are referred to and reflected upon in many religious traditions. Especially the Vedic and Buddhist traditions have multiple references and terminologies for such experiences of a transcendent reality (e.g. nirvikalpa samadhi experiences, enlightenment experiences).

Such experiences, according to some religious and mystical traditions, do not depend on any form of concept, but our mind responding to these experiences operates with culturally specific concepts in order to integrate these experiences. The latter point has been argued for extensively by John Hick, but Hick denied the possibility of an unmediated experience of *Ultimate Reality*. Hick, a leading scholar in the philosophy

⁶ Edmund Colledge, O.S.A. and Bernhard McGinn, eds., *Meister Eckhart. The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treaties and Defense* (London: SPCK, 1981), Sermon 48, 198.

of religion, uses the words '*Ultimate Reality*' and '*the Real*' in the discussion of religion and describes this reality and the human response to it as follows:

“our human religious experience, variously shaped as it is by our sets of religious concepts and practises, is a cognitive response to the universal presence of the ultimate divine Reality that, in itself, exceeds human conceptuality. This Reality is manifested to us in ways formed by a variety of human ideas, as the range of divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae* witnessed to in the history of religions.”⁷

Hick applies in his argument the distinction of Immanuel Kant between *Noumenon* and *Phenomenon* (thing-in-itself and thing as it appears to human consciousness) to the epistemology of religion.⁸

I agree with Hick's analysis of the conceptual part of our consciousness, but going beyond his analysis I reject his application of Immanuel Kant's epistemological model to every human experience. The *proposition in the Trialogue model* is that there can exist a non-conceptualised, unmediated, spiritual experience of *Ultimate Reality* and of the *Ultimate Self* (Higher Self or Paramatman or Purusha) of the *Other*. Their presence (*Ultimate Reality* and the *Ultimate Self* of each dialogue partner) in the dialogical/trialogical situation and their shared experience provides precisely the 'relation-situation' and the openness which are fundamental for genuine dialogue and unity in the midst of multiplicity. In the genuine 'meeting' with another person (named by Buber as '*I-Thou*' meeting) the presence of the *Ultimate Self* of each dialogue partner and the presence of *Ultimate Reality* are together fundamental for the coming-into-existence of real relation and their transcendent dimension has the profound effect of creating openness in every genuine dialogical situation.

There are many further ontological questions that could be asked concerning the proposed *Triologue model*: if *Ultimate Reality* referred to across diverse traditions is the *same Ultimate Reality*, if *Ultimate Reality* includes or does not include a personal dimension, if *Ultimate Reality* is void or full of qualities and capacities or what its ontological nature and being is, if the *Ultimate Self* is created or uncreated, if the *Ultimate Self* is changeable and if it is the same as, similar to or above the 'Soul'?

⁷ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 146.

⁸ John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1989), 240.

Such ontological questions have been subject to a vast and never ending debate since ancient times and the reflection on these questions is vigorously continued in comparative studies of the world's philosophical, religious and spiritual traditions. This article does not seek to answer these questions, given that the focus here is not the scholarly debate of the ontological nature of *Ultimate Reality*. The scope, focus and aim of this article is to propose a model of *Triologue* in order to encourage a conversation on the structure of dialogue and the 'third presence' in all dialogue, not to comprehensively define this 'third presence'. Some *postulates* are made in the *Triologue* model and have been acknowledged as such. It seems essential to note at this point that every attempt to include *Ultimate Reality* in any conceptual framework will be necessarily an always incomplete, limited conceptual approach towards an absolute unfathomable presence, as often expressed, for example, in the traditions of apophaticism and agnosticism in religious thinking.

Buber concluded the postscript of his work on '*I and Thou*' with the following words:

"The existence of mutuality between God and man cannot be proved, just as God's existence cannot be proved. Yet he who dares to speak of it, bears witness, and calls to witness him to whom he speaks—whether that witness is now or in the future."⁹

In the following sections the core concepts of Buber's dialogue model are explained and then, subsequently, how the *Triologue* model reinterprets Buber's core understanding of '*dialogue*' in the presence of the '*eternal Thou*'. The *Triologue* model goes in some of its 'reinterpreting', in its explicit conceptual framework and conclusions beyond Buber's dialogue model.

Martin Buber and His Core Concepts

The human being develops through meeting and in relation. "There is no I taken in itself, but only the I of the primary word *I-Thou* and the I of the primary word *I-It*."¹⁰

⁹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 170-171.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

The 'I' of the human being cannot develop without fellow human beings and the world around it, but comes into existence always through meeting, relation and dialogue.

In the meeting with the world and fellow human beings it is, according to Martin Buber, the *attitude* of the human being that plays a decisive role in co-creating Buber's two primary words *I-Thou* or *I-It*: "To man the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude."¹¹ This sentence about the correlation of the attitude of the human being and his/her experience of and relation to the world is the introductory sentence in Martin Buber's (1878-1965) poetico-philosophical work '*I and Thou*', the first of his writings in which his dialogical thinking comes clearly to expression.¹² "To man the world is twofold..."¹³, this introductory sentence of Buber is described by the German theologian and philosopher of religion Bernhard Casper in his research about the dialogical thinking as a central concept of Buber. Casper points out that this concept of Buber, in which being is understood as relation, "is the formula of the framework, in which the whole dialogical work of Buber will be entered."¹⁴ It is the *attitude* of the human being which is co-decisive for the expression of either the sphere of *I-It* or *I-Thou*, the two central concepts in Buber's conceptual framework.

In the true meeting of *I and Thou*, for Buber, the frontiers which the human being builds up in his/her I-centred thinking are abolished, frontiers which imprison people in their 'Weltanschauungen' and belief systems, and separate them from their fellow human beings. In this sense, the principle that a genuine relation between human beings is more important and fundamental than all the divisions created by belief systems is a core principle for all genuine interreligious and intercultural dialogue and understanding.

¹¹ Ibid., 15.

¹² Bernhard Casper, *Das dialogische Denken* (Freiburg: Herder, 1967), 270-280.

¹³ Buber, *I and Thou*, 15.

¹⁴ Casper, *Das dialogische Denken*, S. 280. "..., ist die Rahmenformel, in die sich das ganze dialogische Werk Bubers eintragen wird.", translated by the author from the German original.

In the thought of Buber, the I-centred dimension of human life is the *It-world* of the *primary word I – It*¹⁵, where the human being attaches him- or herself to the securities of concepts and systems without meeting the last and deepest dimension of human life, isolating themselves from their fellow human beings and the world around them. This limiting isolation is overcome according to Buber in the world of relation of the *primary word I - Thou*, in the genuine meeting of *I and Thou*. In this meeting the human being becomes a *person* in the face of the ‘Other’, real dialogue takes place and the *eternal Thou* of God speaks to the human being in the reality of the world.¹⁶

The essence of the meeting of I and Thou happens in the *sphere of the ‘between’*. This is for Buber a primal category of human reality.¹⁷ According to Buber,

“what is essential does not take place in each of the participants or in a neutral world which includes the two and all other things; but it takes place between them in the most precise sense, as it were in a dimension which is accessible only to them both.”¹⁸

The *event* of the ‘between’ is, as Buber sees it, a phenomenon which is not sufficiently explicable in psychological or sociological terms. For Buber it is an ontological event. In poetical but nevertheless precise language, Buber describes his ontological understanding of the ‘between’:

“the dialogical situation can be adequately grasped only in an ontological way. But it is not to be grasped on the basis of the ontic of personal existence, or of that of two personal existences, but of that which has its being between them, and transcends both. In the most powerful moments of dialogic, where in truth ‘deep calls unto deep’, it becomes unmistakably clear that it is not the wand of the individual or of the social, but of a third which draws the circle round the happening. On the far side of the subjective, on this side of the objective, on the narrow ridge, where I and thou meet, there is the realm of ‘between’.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 16-18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 17-19.

¹⁷ Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1947), 203.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 203-204.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

When Buber speaks of genuine dialogue, he points towards the sphere of 'between'²⁰. It is in the sphere of the 'between', in the meeting of *I and Thou*, where genuine dialogue takes place.²¹ He points towards the presence of the *eternal Thou* in such genuine dialogue encounters in poetical words:

"In every sphere in its own way, through each process of becoming that is present to us, we look out toward the fringe of the eternal *Thou*; in each we are aware of a breath from the eternal *Thou*; in each *Thou* we address the eternal *Thou*. Every sphere is compassed in the eternal *Thou*, but it is not compassed in them. Through every sphere shines the one present."²²

Reflecting on this *mysterium* led him to write about God in paradoxical expressions²³, for example when he pointed towards God as the "wholly Other; but He is also the wholly Same, the wholly Present."²⁴ As much as Buber wanted to point towards God as the fulfilment of human life and human relations, as much he was reluctant to include God in any concept or conceptual framework about the world and human life, because for him God is the unfathomable presence. He wrote:

"The man can advance to the last abyss, where in his self-delusion he imagines he has God in himself and is speaking with Him. But truly though God surrounds us and dwells in us, we never have Him in us. And we speak with Him only when speech dies within us."²⁵

God, *the eternal Thou*, is for Buber a *mysterium* that we experience also in the experience of the world and the *Thou* of the 'Other'. But we cannot reach him by analytical reflection, as he points out:

"God cannot be inferred in anything - Something else is not 'given' and God then elicited from it; but God is the Being that is directly, most nearly, and lastingly, over against us, that may properly only be addressed, not expressed."²⁶

²⁰ Ibid., 203-205

²¹ Ibid., 203

²² Buber, *I and Thou*, 130.

²³ Ibid., Postscript, 167-168.

²⁴ Ibid., 104.

²⁵ Ibid., 134.

²⁶ Ibid., 105-106.

We cannot speak *about* God properly, we can only speak *to* God (in silence, as cited above in Buber's paradoxical statement). According to Buber, God is *directly over against us*, but at the same time we experience God *in* human relationships:

“The extended lines of relation meet in the eternal Thou. Every particular Thou is a glimpse through to the eternal Thou; by means of every particular Thou the primary word addresses the eternal Thou. Through this mediation of the Thou of all beings fulfilment, and non-fulfilment, of relations comes to them: the inborn Thou is realised in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the Thou that by its nature cannot become It.”²⁷

What could be seen as a contradiction, is Buber's way of expressing in paradoxical statements that God and the reality of human life are always greater than ontological concepts²⁸ and, as God is the *absolute Person* and *absolute Presence*, God can be both: being present in human relationships and being directly over against us.

Human thinking *is* only a fragment of the fullness of human reality and therefore can express only a fragment of it. That is why, according to Buber, reality can never be fully expressed in any terminology and all he can do is to *point towards* reality:

“I must say it once again: I have no teaching. I only point to something. I point to reality, I point to something in reality that had not or had too little been seen. I take him who listens to me by the hand and lead him to the window. I open the window and point to what is outside. I have no teaching, but I carry on a conversation.”²⁹

He stresses that not the sphere of *abstract thinking* but the sphere of *relation* is the genuine human situation, therefore he never attempts to develop a speculative transcendental-philosophical system. His aim was to describe human reality in personal and dialogical categories, not to develop abstract philosophical, metaphysical or sociological systems, which according to him had a major, negative impact on the I-centred modern culture of his time. Rejecting both collectivism, which is without respect for the single person, as well as I-centred individualism, which is without awareness of the basic relation with the *Thou* of the Other, Buber wrote:

²⁷ Ibid., 99.

²⁸ Martin Buber, “Replies to my Critics”, in *The Philosophy of Martin Buber*, eds. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice Friedmann (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1967), 701.

²⁹ Ibid., 693.

“This collectivizing of the person is joined in history to a basically different undertaking in which I too participated and to which I must therefore confess now. It is that struggle of recent decades against the idealistic concepts of the sovereign, world-embracing, world-sustaining, world-creating I.”³⁰

The dialogical thinking and dialogical personalism of Martin Buber became highly influential in a relational understanding of the human being and later in the development of communication theories in the twentieth century. Such a relational ontology made a fundamental contribution to opening of new avenues for the development of conceptual frameworks for interreligious dialogue and understanding. The focus on the *I-Thou* meeting and the personal ‘*sphere of between*’ is important whenever we look at the basic attitudes needed for genuine interreligious understanding and co-operation and reflect on how essential such a sphere is for genuine dialogue between persons of different cultural and religious backgrounds. This sphere comes into existence when two persons meet, in openness to each other, not preoccupied with judging the ‘Other’ primarily according to each person’s own religious convictions or belief systems, fundamentally being aware of the ‘Other’ as a fellow human being, in respect for the singularity, uniqueness and ‘otherness’ of the ‘Other’. This *event* of dialogue is, according to Buber, not *made* by one or the ‘Other’ of the partners in dialogue, it involves both simultaneously in an active and passive way.³¹

The Contribution and Limits of Buber’s Dialogical Thinking

If every concept or system by necessity falls short of appropriately describing the human situation according to Martin Buber, we have to ask what is specifically new and better in the dialogical thinking of Buber?

To look deeper into this question, I shall now refer to Jochanan Bloch, whose major work is a detailed and subtle book about Martin Buber’s thinking: *Die Aporie des Du*.

³⁰ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 80.

³¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 24-25.

*Probleme der Dialogik Martin Bubers*³². In a further attempt to analyse the poetico-philosophical depth of the Jewish humanist Martin Buber, Bloch wrote a conference paper about the dialogical thinking: ‘*The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking*’³³. This paper, given by Bloch at the Buber Centenary Conference which was held at Ben Gurion University of the Negev in January 1978, starts with a rather surprising statement:

“Such is the problem of dialogical thinking, that it reflects upon and discourses about a human reality about which it is essentially impossible to think or to speak.”³⁴

But, nevertheless, he then continued his attempt to outline in what kind of understanding dialogical thinking could still make sense and what its proper and new contribution to human thinking could be. Describing the genuine human situation of the *I - Thou* relation and the difficulties of speaking about it in an appropriate way, Bloch writes:

“Indeed, this true element of human existence is by its very nature concealed in a sort of secret.....Against this concealment, dialogical thinking wants to show us that reality, to bring us to it - despite and because of the fact that it is hidden. A certain 'nevertheless' accompanies all the attempts of dialogism, like a constant reservation. For even while pointing to the reality it intends, dialogism claims (and without this explicit claim the pointing could not be carried out) that that reality cannot be known as something, as a content, and thus it cannot be expressed nor spoken 'about'. Therefore dialogism knows that its thinking is an ascetic thinking, which knows that it cannot truly grasp and fix, by its concepts, that toward which they are directed. Its speaking is not informative, not a direct depiction.”³⁵

These are the difficulties Buber encountered in his writings and he chose poetic and sometimes paradoxical expressions to point towards that reality, which, by its nature as an event of life, a presence ‘between’ *I and Thou*, could not be described as an object or any other thing and therefore is not clearly identifiable in time and space. Buber

³² Jochanan Bloch, *Die Aporie des Du. Probleme der Dialogik Martin Bubers* (Heidelberg: Lambert Schneider GmbH, 1977).

³³ Jochanan Bloch, “The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking” in *Martin Buber. A Centenary Volume*, eds. Haim Gordon and Jochanan Bloch (Ben Gurion University of the Negev: Ktav Publishing House, 1984), 43-67.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

spoke in 'absolute' statements to express the transcendent and simultaneously immanent character of the dialogical event, using strong oppositions and 'black and white' expressions to point towards the 'atmosphere' and fundamental dimension of the dialogical situation. Because of this his descriptions seem to lack the 'grey shades', the gradual stages of developing relationships, the subtle details are sometimes neglected. In his 'either-or' way of opposing the '*I-Thou*' world to the '*I-It*' world he created dualisms which could lead to an over-simplified use of metaphors and therefore reduce the complexity and richness of the human situation and relationships. This was central to Franz Rosenzweig's fundamental criticism of Buber's dualistic and, in Rosenzweig's opinion, too restricted use of only two basic realities (*I-Thou* and *I-It*). Franz Rosenzweig, the well-known Jewish Philosopher and Professor at the University of Frankfurt in Germany, a close friend of Martin Buber, wrote in a letter to Buber in September 1922:

"I would like to take the bull by the horns immediately: with the I-It you give the I-Thou a cripple for an opponent. That this cripple rules the modern world, does not change the fact that it is a cripple. *This* It, you can easily dispose of. But it is the false It, the product of the great deception, which in Europe is less than 300 years old. Only along with *this* It is an I-not spoken, but thought.Of course the 'basic word I-It' cannot be spoken with the whole being."³⁶

Even if it was not at all Buber's intention to simplify reality, but rather to express in strong, poetic words a fundamental dimension of human life, there is an in-built danger of his use of a few core poetic expressions to simplify. Buber was aware of this danger, but he always refused to change or expand the dualisms he used to point towards the basic experiences in human life. One could argue that, as it was not Buber's intention to use his model of *I-Thou* and *I-It* as an exclusive philosophical model, only somebody who misunderstands Buber could accuse him of simplifying the complexity of human relationships and of human consciousness. But as Buber used poetical expressions *and* tried to combine them logically in an attempt to develop what could be called a philosophical anthropology (even if Buber was himself aware of the limits

³⁶ Franz Rosenzweig's letter to Buber as appendix to an article written by Bernhard Casper. Bernhard Casper, "Franz Rosenzweig's Criticism of Buber's I and Thou", in *Martin Buber. A Centenary Volume*, eds. Haim Gordon and Jochanan Bloch (Ben Gurion University of the Negev: Ktav Publishing House, 1984), 157.

of such an attempt³⁷), it seems to be appropriate to note that in criticising the *logic* of Buber's restrictive use of dualistic models for the interpretation of reality, the focus of this criticism is *not* the openness and transcending character of his poetical expressions. There are possibilities to expand the dualism of Buber's basic words and the *Triologue* model as outlined in this article provides an alternative model.

Jochanan Bloch reflects about Buber's poeto-philosophical language by using the concept of metaphors to describe the advantages and limits of dialogism and its speaking. Bloch writes in his article about the 'speaking' of dialogism:

"Nonetheless it wants to speak and must speak: how can it depict by speaking a thing of which one cannot truly speak? It makes use of metaphors. But even metaphor is not enough for dialogism, which aspires to more than the living presence of this thing or that. It aspires to more than the Gestalt or the specific existent thing to which every metaphor is still bound, however living, however 'real' that thing may become in the language-event of metaphor. Dialogism directs itself to a reality which by its very nature cannot be in any way specific. Whatever this reality may be: metaphor itself cannot represent it, and if metaphor still wants to lead us to the fundamental event of dialogism, it has to transcend itself, that is to become a 'leap word'.³⁸ The speech of dialogism is a kind of pointing-to which does not show the indicated thing itself, but only points to its direction, in which we, as it were, leap from the pointing words to reach the presence of the reality which has no description."³⁹

Because the dialogical event, according to Buber is void of any content, not object-like, not 'something', but a presence between *I and Thou*, even metaphor cannot grasp its 'content'. This leads us directly to the question: What can be said at all about the dialogical reality? The answer, following the logic of Buber, is clear: nothing, in an objective sense. Bloch notes:

"All this has a very banal consequence, whose significance should not be downplayed, namely: we do not know exactly what Buber means when he points to reality. We all know the names of this reality: I-Thou, relationship, dialogue, the interhuman."⁴⁰

Out of our own experience we 'know' the reality, to which Buber points, but this 'knowing' is already a shadow of the genuine experience, an object of what Buber

³⁷ Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 121-126.

³⁸ Bloch, *Die Aporie des Du*, 176, 223ff, quoted in: Bloch, "The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking".

³⁹ Bloch, "The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking", 44-45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 45.

calls the It-world, conceptualised by our intellect. In his paradoxical manner of expressing this situation, Buber writes:

- “What, then, do we experience of Thou?
- Just nothing. For we do not experience it.
- What, then, do we know of Thou?
- Just everything. For we know nothing isolated about it any more.”⁴¹

In Buber’s terminology we *experience* the *It-world*, but we are *in relation* with the *Thou-world*. Therefore he can say that we do not experience it (his use of *it* to speak about *Thou* in the above citation can be seen as Buber being inconsistent in his own choice of words). His understanding of experience as I-centred conceptualisation is expressed by Buber very clearly in the following statement:

“The man who experiences has not part in the world. For it is ‘in him’ and not between him and the world that the experience arises. The world has no part in the experience. It permits itself to be experienced, but has no concern in the matter. For it does nothing to the experience, and the experience does nothing to it. As experience, the world belongs to the primary word *I-It*. The primary word *I-Thou* establishes the world of relation.”⁴²

In accordance with Bloch⁴³ I would emphasise that together with the transcendent character of the reality of the *Thou*, there is simultaneously the immanent *concreteness* of the specific person whom I meet. The presence of the *Thou* does not exclude *concreteness*, a thought, which is contradictory to some of Buber’s statements, but which he expresses in other statements.⁴⁴ Therefore it can seem at times that Buber’s thought is in itself inconsistent, if taken literally and read selectively. His radical distinction between *I-Thou* and *I-It* is itself an abstract concept, which in its abstract division does not point adequately towards the ‘togetherness’ of the transcendent *and* immanent dimension of the dialogical situation. Bloch sums up this inadequateness in Buber’s thought:

“But that is not the way it is. The reality of the Thou is after all the reality of a person whom I address. It is the reality of my addressing *you*, who as a person apprehended as

⁴¹ Buber, *I and Thou*, 24.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁴³ Bloch, *The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking*, 48-49.

⁴⁴ Buber, *I and Thou*, 20-21.

an object remain in the background of my address, and as such are bound up in the address by some connection which cannot be defined. From here it is possible to understand that Buber's own descriptions are not clear as to the aim of their meaning, but have within them a factual fluctuation which does indeed produce insecurity Furthermore: it seems to me that the reality which we attain if we follow Buber's pointing exceeds in its factual existence Buber's intentions and descriptions. This perception does not stem from the inadequacy of our understanding, but from the inadequacy of Buber's descriptions, of his ways of pointing."⁴⁵

Buber's aim in pointing simultaneously to the 'absoluteness' of the presence of the *Thou* and the concreteness of the dialogical situation could have, in my opinion, been more adequately expressed if he had used less contradicting metaphors and sharp distinctions, but more expressions and metaphors of *synthesis* in his pointing to the different poles of human life and relation.

Reinterpreting the Dialogue Model of Martin Buber in an Interreligious Context

The concepts and insights of Buber concerning the nature of dialogue and the human person raise additional questions in interreligious contexts: how can the concepts and the framework of an '*I and Thou* meeting' be envisioned in the context of interreligious understanding, taking into account, amongst many other issues, the wide variety of religious, spiritual and philosophical views on the nature of the 'Self' in the world's religious traditions and belief systems? A scholarly response to such questions would necessitate, just to give some selected examples, a careful reflection on the concepts of the 'Soul in Christianity' and the 'Atman in Vedanta', or the 'Christ Consciousness' in Christianity and the 'Purusha' in Vedanta, thereby highlighting the complexity of any attempt to compare notions of 'Self' and '*Ultimate Self*' across traditions. It would go far beyond the central theme of 'dialogue' here in this article to endeavour a scholarly comparison of the central concepts of 'Self' and '*Ultimate Self*' in the major world religions (Hinduism, Jainism, Confucianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, amongst others). All that is attempted here is *to propose a model of 'Triologue': to begin a conversation* on the nature of 'dialogue', including a

⁴⁵ Bloch, *The Justification and the Futility of Dialogical Thinking*, 48-49.

conception of ‘Self’ and ‘*Ultimate Self*’ that goes far beyond a narrow Cartesian, materialistic and western Enlightenment understanding of the ‘I’, acknowledging that the transcendent dimension of ‘Self’, exemplified here in this article through a very brief mentioning of experiences and concepts in Vedic and mystic traditions, opens new and deeper possibilities for understanding the nature of dialogue and being a person. A major difference to Buber in my *Triialogue* model is that, in his understanding, the “I” is only existent as *I-It* or *I-Thou*, not in itself, whereas the *Ultimate Self* in my model of *Triialogue* is Self-existent and at the same time interrelated with everything, not by mental but by spiritual unity, transcending the dualisms of mental concepts of the Self. The *Ultimate Self* is present in the *I-It* and in the *I-Thou*, *It-experiences* and *Thou-encounters* which are depending on the attitude of the human mind.

Shah Reza Kazemi, in his pioneering book *‘Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart (Spiritual Masters East and West)’*⁴⁶, reflected on the peak ‘experience’ of transcendence, when explaining the Sanskrit term of ‘*anubhava*’:

This “immediate experience”— *anubhava*— in terms of which the transcendent Absolute is “known” to be one’s own true Self, constitutes the veritable summit of spiritual experience, an experience that is not “of” the Self, but, as seen in the last quotation, it is the Self; this means that there is no question of a subject, an object, and an experience linking the one to the other; the word “experience” is thus employed elliptically, the intention being to underline the disjuncture between a mere mental, and thus outward, knowledge of the reality of the Self, on the one hand, and the plenary realization of infinite Selfhood, on the other. In this “experience,” further aspects of which will be treated below, there can be no dichotomy between knowledge and being; rather, a complete identification between the two is realized, so that each is absolutely the other; it is only within the matrix of the ego that the two elements can subsist as distinct poles.”

The question what remains of the Self or how the Self is transformed, when the ‘*Ultimate Reality*’ and ‘infinite Selfhood’ is experienced, has been contemplated and reflected upon for thousands of years in the dharmic traditions of India. Especially

⁴⁶ Shah Reza Kazemi, *Paths to Transcendence: According to Shankara, Ibn Arabi and Meister Eckhart (Spiritual Masters East and West)* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc., 2006), 28.

Buddhism, Jainism and Vedanta have this reflection, contemplation and exploration at the core of their tradition.

One example of a contemplation of transcendent, ultimate reality is the *Gayatri Mantra* in the Rig Veda (Mandala 3.62.10), one of the most revered and widespread mantras in Hinduism, which makes the invocation of such experiences a part of the daily life of practitioners:

ॐ भूः भुवः स्वः ।
तत्सवितुर्वरेण्यं
भर्गो देवस्य धीमहि ।
धियो यो नः प्रचोदयात् ॥ 47

In the translation by Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902):

“We meditate on the glory of that Being who has produced this universe; may He enlighten our minds.”⁴⁸

It seems more than overdue to explore the question how the transcendent dimension of reality *and* of our Self can be understood and envisioned when reflecting on the nature of dialogue and inter-personal encounter in today’s interreligious contexts. Stanley J. Samartha, the first Director of the Dialogue Program of the World Council of Churches, emphasised the role of ‘mystery’ and transcendence in these comparative reflections:

"Mystery provides the ontological basis for tolerance, which would otherwise run the risk of becoming uncritical friendliness. This Mystery, the Truth of the Truth (Satyasya Satyam), is the transcendent Center that remains always beyond and greater than apprehensions of it or even the sum total of those apprehensions. It is beyond cognitive knowledge (tarka) but it is open to vision (dristi) and intuition (anubhava)."⁴⁹

Buber too spoke about a third presence in the dialogical situation in the sphere of ‘between’, the presence of the *eternal Thou*⁵⁰ (his metaphor for God). But he always

⁴⁷ ‘Gayatri Mantra’ in: David Bailey Carpenter and Ian Whicher, eds., *Yoga: the Indian Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2003), 31.

⁴⁸ Swami Vivekananda, *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (Almora: Advaita Ashram, 1915), 211.

⁴⁹ Stanley J. Samartha, “The Cross and the Rainbow” in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988), p. 75.

⁵⁰ Buber, *I and Thou*, 99.

refrained from making the eternal Thou a third primary word in dialogue, he did not want to speak about the *eternal Thou* as being included in the world or in any set of concepts (this is understandable given Buber's Jewish background), he wanted to insist that the *eternal Thou* is absolutely different, it is the absolute Person⁵¹, the complete 'Other', a *mysterium* always transcending human understanding, which can be addressed only in silence. This attitude of Buber let him point to the dialogical situation in dualistic models, even so a third 'hidden' presence was fundamental for him. The thinking of Buber is therefore an explicit dialogical thinking, but it could as well be described as an intrinsically *trialogical* thinking, if seen through the lenses of my model of *Trialogue*.

For Buber, the sphere of 'between', is the sphere where *I and Thou* and the *eternal Thou* are present, where genuine dialogue and relations take place and where genuine community has its foundation. Buber pointed out these relations, describing the sphere of 'between':

"This reality, whose disclosure has begun in our time, shows the way, leading beyond individualism and collectivism, for the life decision of future generations. Here the genuine third alternative is indicated, the knowledge of which will help to bring about the genuine person again and to establish genuine community."⁵²

The sphere of 'between', existing in the togetherness of the dialogue partners and *Ultimate Reality* is central for what I proposed to name *Trialogue*. In my model of *Trialogue* the unifying and connecting effects of the presence of *Ultimate Reality* ('Ultimate Reality' is 'pointed to' in the *eternal Thou* in Buber's thought, with a 'personal' dimension) and the presence of the *Ultimate Self* of each dialogue partner are highlighted.

Michael Theunissen, who was Professor of Philosophy in Berlin, has written in his Habilitation about *Der Andere*⁵³ (*The Other*) in an extensive analysis of Buber's thought:

⁵¹ Ibid., Postscript written by Buber in Jerusalem in 1957, 168-170.

⁵² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 204-205.

⁵³ Michael Theunissen, *Der Andere: Studien zur Sozialontologie der Gegenwart* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965).

“Buber’s ‘theology’ of the between does seem to possess a certain truth content. Its philosophical validity is to be limited, however, from two sides. In the first place, it is to be restricted in just the way that, in the present investigation, the title of the final chapter does it, in that it characterizes the ‘theology’ of the between as the goal of dialogic, one that transcends philosophy. But over and beyond that, one must, in my opinion, also undertake a reduction of the content of Buber’s ‘theology’ of the between. According to our interpretation, Buber grasps God as the existent reality of the between, as that in which the very being that, from the standpoint of worldly beings, is deemed to be ‘nothing’ itself exists. It would be philosophically as well as theologically less problematic if one were to address this reality -the “medium” that links all relations with one another - as the ‘domain of God’. That expression of Jesus handed down by Luke (17:21).....reads in another, and today almost universally recognised, translation, ‘The kingdom of God is *in the midst of you*’.”⁵⁴

The clarification which Theunissen proposes might solve philosophically some of the ‘*aporia*’ (insoluble contradictions or paradoxes) in which Buber gets when he points with his poetic expressions towards the presence of the *eternal Thou* in the relation of *I and Thou*, in the midst of the ‘between’.

But Theunissen's clarification can take the focus away from the absolute centre of Buber’s thought, which is precisely not just ‘the kingdom of God’, but the ‘presence of God’. Buber himself wrote about ‘theophany’, distinguishing it from the ‘Kingdom that is hidden’:

“But this course is not circular. It is the way. In each new æon fate becomes more oppressive, turning more shattering. And the theophany becomes ever nearer, increasingly near to the sphere that lies between beings, to the Kingdom that is hidden in our midst, there between us. History is a mysterious approach. Every spiral of its way leads us both into profounder perversion and more fundamental turning. But the event that from the side of the world is called turning is called from God’s side redemption.”⁵⁵

Therefore this ‘easy’ philosophical solution to the ‘*aporia*’ of Buber’s thinking has to be rejected and the challenging task to formulate a thesis, contemplating the reality of the ‘between’ and expressing the togetherness of *I and Thou* and the *eternal Thou*, still waits to be answered. My interreligious model of *Trialogue* focuses precisely on *this*

⁵⁴ Michael Theunissen, *The Other. Studies in the Social Ontology of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Buber*, translated by Christopher Macann (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press, 1984), Postscript, 382-383.

⁵⁵ Buber, *I and Thou*, 152.

togetherness and the fundamental relations and ontological structures of persons in dialogue in the presence of *Ultimate Reality*.

The Relevance of Dialogical/Trialogical Thinking for Contemporary Interreligious Issues

The religious situation of humanity, as well as the dialogical situation between persons, is always in danger of becoming dominated by concepts of the *It-world*. In their wish for security people hold on firmly to the written words and systems of their religious traditions, to their 'Weltanschauung' or to their cultural systems, ready to defend them even in barbaric wars against the stranger, instead of meeting the *Other* in openness.

Human beings all too often prefer to attach themselves to the security of dogmas in an excluding and defensive way, rather than to meet the presence of the living God, who calls the person into the openness of the dialogical situation. Buber, in his work *Dialogue*⁵⁶, expresses his understanding of genuine dialogue and points to the above mentioned danger of becoming dominated by concepts of the *It-world*. He notes:

"Religion at risk, which is ready to give itself up, is the nourishing stream of the arteries; as system, possessing, assured and assuring, religion which believes in religion is the veins' blood, which ceases to circulate. And if there is nothing that can so hide the face of our fellow-man as morality can, religion can hide from us as nothing else can the face of God."⁵⁷

For Buber the concepts of the *It-world* belong to the past; real life cannot be found in them. Religion, only understood as a set of concepts, therefore hides the 'face of God', hides the unfathomable presence of the *eternal Thou*. On morality and religion Buber writes:

"Principle there, dogma here, I appreciate the 'objective' compactness of dogma, but behind both there lies in wait the - profane or holy - war against the situation's power

⁵⁶ Buber, "*Dialogue*", published in: *Between Man and Man*, 1-39.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

of dialogue, there lies in wait the 'once-for –all' which resists the unforeseeable moment."⁵⁸

If human beings are imprisoned by exclusive systems of the past, they lack the decisive basic attitude, which is the *condition for genuine dialogue: openness*, which can be filled by the presence of the dialogical situation. Openness as basic attitude is fundamental for genuine interreligious dialogue and for *Triologue* to take place.

Genuine dialogue can only happen if there is *openness for the presence of the Other*. Openness is not without intention: the intention is to be in relation with the *Other*, to encounter the presence of the *Thou*, to let happen the event of dialogue. Genuine dialogue is described by Buber as follows:

"There is genuine dialogue - no matter whether spoken or silent - where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them."⁵⁹

A congenial description of a genuine dialogical situation is given by Carl R. Rogers, the well-known psychotherapist, when he describes an insight of his experience as a therapist:

"When there is this complete unity, singleness, fullness of experiencing in the relationship, then it acquires the 'out-of-this-world' quality which many therapists have remarked upon..... In these moments there is, to borrow Buber's phrase, a real 'I-Thou' relationship, a timeless living in the experience which is between the client and me. It is at the opposite pole from seeing the client, or myself, as an object. It is the height of personal subjectivity."⁶⁰

Buber's general description of genuine dialogue can be applied in the field of interreligious dialogue. In the field of interreligious dialogue we encounter specific problems: when it comes to questions of faith human beings feel themselves under the demand of divine authority or the will of God, often mediated through holy texts, religious tradition or religious institutions. Only when the non-exclusive character of religious traditions is understood, will the participants of interreligious dialogue be

⁵⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19.

⁶⁰ Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person* (London: Constable&Company, 1967), 202.

able to accept the other as equal. John Hick describes the coming-into-existence of religious traditions:

“Each major tradition, built around its own distinctive way of thinking-and-experiencing the Real, has developed its answers to the perennial questions of our origin and destiny, constituting more or less comprehensive and coherent cosmologies and eschatologies. These are human creations which, by their association with living streams of religious experience, have become invested with a sacred authority. However, they cannot all be wholly true; probably none is wholly true; perhaps all are partly true.”⁶¹

Whilst John Hick’s interpretation of religious traditions as in part human creations remains controversial for more conservative believers, it is nevertheless self-evident that a *non-exclusive understanding of religious traditions* can lead towards genuine dialogue, if the intention of all participants in dialogue is to meet and to accept the ‘Other’ and their basic attitude is openness. This does not mean that someone has to give up his/her own religious traditions or the ‘Other’ is expected to give up his/her religious traditions, as the acceptance of the ‘Other as Other’ includes the respect for his religious convictions. Such an attitude of openness and acceptance can lead to genuine religious conversations. Buber expressed this dialogical situation in his following statement:

“A time of genuine religious conversations is beginning - not those so-called but fictitious conversations where none regarded and addressed his partner in reality, but genuine dialogues, speech from certainty to certainty, but also from one open-hearted person to another open-hearted person. Only then will genuine common life appear, not that of an identical content of faith which is alleged to be found in all religions, but that of the situation, of anguish and of expectation.”⁶²

Such insights, based on our shared human situation, are important for a reflection on the basic attitudes needed in interreligious dialogue. They also provide a good educational basis for the increasingly widespread, contemporary situation where interreligious dialogue and encounter leads to interreligious co-operation, working together across traditions when responding to humanitarian crisis and human needs.

⁶¹ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 146.

⁶² Buber, *Between Man and Man*, 7-8.

Another challenge to genuine interreligious dialogue has, at the same time, strengthened a reaction towards greater openness amongst religions: it is the great increase in *It-models* because of the humanistic and scientific-technical revolution over the last 700 years. Robert Wood in his paper on *Oriental Themes in Buber's Work* describes this phenomenon as follows:

“In the East and in the West today, religious and philosophical traditions seem to be in a rapid state of decay brought about by the geometrical increase in the *It-world* of scientific and technical mastery that emerged out of the West since the time of the Renaissance. The ecumenical movement within the West and the developing dialogue between world religions today have infrastructural roots in this situation of scientific-technical development. Traditions which for centuries and even millenia viewed each other with attitudes ranging from lofty indifference through suspicion to outright hostility are now more inclined to accord to each other the respect and even reverence which their own traditions have taught, for they all have their backs to the wall before a common threat of their growing irrelevance.”⁶³

On the other hand, the paradigms of secular, materialistic science and the rigid models of the '*It-world*' have been questioned increasingly in the second half of the 20th century, as quantum physics, quantum mechanics and quantum theory have opened new possibilities for an open discourse across science and diverse world views. Some scholars came to the conclusion that the strict boundaries between the material and spiritual world can be overcome in a new, holistic world view, which seeks to integrate the new insights from quantum physics. Max Planck, one of the fathers of quantum physics, stated in 1944 in Florence in a lecture on 'Das Wesen der Materie' ('The Nature of Matter'):

“And so I say after my investigation of the Atom this: there is no matter in itself. All matter originates and exists only through one power, which brings the atom particles in vibration and holds them together as the tiniest solar system of the universe. As in the whole universe there exists neither an intelligent power nor an eternal power – humanity has not succeeded in inventing the hotly desired Perpetuum mobile – so we have to assume that behind this power there lies a conscious and intelligent spirit.

This spirit is the prime cause of all matter. Not the visible, but transitory matter is the Real, the True, the Reality – because matter would not exist at all without the spirit – rather the unseen, immortal spirit is the truth! Since spirit can also not exist in itself but each spirit has to belong to an entity, we are forced to suppose that there are

⁶³ Robert Wood, “*Oriental Themes in Buber's Work*”, in: Haim Gordon and Jochanan Bloch, eds., *Martin Buber. A Centenary Volume*, 325.

spiritual beings. Given that spiritual beings also cannot exist out of themselves, but have to be created, so I do not hesitate to name this mysterious creator like all civilised people on earth of past millennia have named him: God!”⁶⁴

Not only the perceived threat of the scientific-technical developments of the last 700 years has influenced the world of religions, but also the ever increasing amount of more objective and detailed information about ‘the other’ religions, as well as the more pluralistic societies, especially in the West, in which we live today. A question in this context, that calls for further research and empirical data, is, how these scientific-technical developments have had such varying impacts in different parts of the world, as these impacts were shaped in different locations by diverse cultures, political realities, diverse religions and worldviews, different levels of modernisation, etc.

Martin Buber himself was born into such an encounter of worldviews:

“Buber entered into dialogue with the East very early in his career and maintained contact with it to the end of his life, guided by his conception of the community of his birth. Buber was a Westerner, but he was a Jewish Westerner; and that meant for him one who stands at a peculiar confluence of Western and Eastern sources, for he saw Judaism as essentially Oriental and as the religion which brought the spirit of the Orient to the West.”⁶⁵

The being ‘in between’ cultures and religions certainly has shaped Buber’s thinking and has allowed him to become one of the influential ‘bridge builders’ between cultures, religions and civilisations, providing an important legacy for today’s ‘Dialogue of Civilisations’ and interreligious dialogue.

Conclusion

The preceding discussion has given Buber’s major aims: to support the awareness of the genuine dialogical situation, the relation between *I and Thou* in the reality of the ‘*between*’ and in the presence of the ‘*eternal Thou*’; to overcome narrow, abstract and especially I-centred concepts if they pretend to be all-inclusive (no matter if they are of

⁶⁴ Translated by the author. Original Source:

Max Planck, *Das Wesen der Materie* (German), Speech in Florence, Italy, 1944, recorded in: Archiv zur Geschichte der Max-Planck-Gesellschaft, Abt. Va, Rep. 11 Planck, Nr. 1797.

⁶⁵ Wood, “*Oriental Themes in Buber’s Work*”, 325.

philosophical, theological, psychological, sociological, scientific, political, or any other origin) as they lead away from the fullness of the experience of human life and the divine mystery; to show that we can find the truth of life and the presence of God in the reality of this world and in human relations; and, sometimes in a paradoxical way, to point towards the unfathomable presence which gives our life meaning and fulfilment, the *eternal Thou*.

The consideration of the terminology and concepts of Buber's thought in this article provided a philosophical-poetical introduction to the question of the nature and structure of all dialogue, and at the same time to the specific theme of interreligious dialogue and understanding, across the diverse paradigms and concepts of diverse religious traditions in a fast globalising world. Buber was a highly influential pioneer seeking dialogue and understanding between different cultures and religions in the early twentieth century.

In reinterpreting Buber's dialogical thinking this article proposed to go beyond analysing dialogue *mainly* in dualisms, based on inter-human experience ('*I-It*' and '*I and Thou*'; distance and relation). It proposed to see the dialogical encounter between persons as a *Triologue*: a dialogue and relation between concrete persons – in the presence of *Ultimate Reality* and the *Ultimate Self* of each dialogue partner, and to focus on the immanent and transcendent interconnectedness of the different aspects of reality. A major difference to Buber in my *Triologue* model is that, in his understanding, the "I" is only existent as *I-It* or *I-Thou*, not in itself, whereas the *Ultimate Self* in my model of *Triologue* is Self-existent and at the same time interrelated with everything, not by mental but by spiritual unity, transcending the dualisms of mental concepts of the Self.

The *Triologue* model proposed here is an attempt to put into a conceptual framework the logical consequences of taking seriously the presence of *Ultimate Reality* and the *Ultimate Self* of each concrete person, ultimate realities which are frequently referred to in many religious traditions, but rarely applied to the dialogue encounter between persons.