

A community of relationships or a Kingdom of Religion?



Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Hitchhiking across Europe after graduation from college, I carried a backpack that, among other things, was stuffed with a few books A Bible of course (after all, I was a Religion and Philosophy major), a copy of Dostoyevsky's novel "The Idiot," and my dog-eared copy of "I and Thou," by the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber (seems I wasn't much into light reading). Though still in the process of emerging from a seriously narrow version of Christian faith, I was fascinated by religious thought from any source. Like the borders I was crossing in Europe, I was learning to appreciate crossing borders of belief, through a kind of hitchhiking curiosity.

In a recent biography of Martin Buber, Paul Mendez-Flohr writes of Buber's sense that "only when religion strives to overcome itself," without advocating the "kingdom of religion," will religion in general and Judaism in particular, find "spiritual renewal" ("Martin Buber: A Life of Faith and Dissent"). I think this deserves deeper thought.

As I understand it (and I'm not sure anyone actually does understand it), when Jesus spoke of "the kingdom of heaven" or "the kingdom of God" it refers to a realm where a higher authority rules. This gets more complicated when we read Jesus' words: "the kingdom of God is within." This suggests the reign of heaven/God is not an outward societal kind of thing but an inner, personal experience. Though some believe Jesus will one day set up his kingdom on earth, many more believe his kingdom is in heaven. Whichever way people interpret these things, I think Buber's concern is important to consider.

With so many believers claiming to know what the "divine kingdom" truly is and what it should look like, even staking out a piece of earth to call it holy ground, we have to wonder 'who actually rules the kingdom?' It seems there are those who assume they will be God's princely administrators since they will reign with him as righteous royalty. This is more than concerning, especially if these folks are working hard to transform communities or countries into kingdoms dominated by their religious beliefs. We might also ask whether Jesus truly envisioned world domination, and if so, was it about power or love?

What does a "kingdom of religion" look like in reality? An authoritarian government run by those who believe

they are specially chosen by God? A state that looks a lot like a church (synagogue, mosque or temple)? As the biographer presents Buber's view, those who claim their "revealed truth" is exclusive from other belief systems, miss an important opportunity to dialogue and create a sense of community. "What is needed, Buber argued... is a totally new approach to interfaith encounter, [which respects] the integrity and authenticity of the respective faith experiences of revealed truth." For Buber, this takes "theological humility." Buber says "we are not capable of 'judging' the meaning of another person's faith experience

Those of us in the secular community, who don't recognize any form of "revealed truth," may have to wait to see evidence of respect and humility between faiths before we can potentially find ways to participate. If religion, or any specific faith tradition, is assumed to dictate the structure of a dominant "kingdom," nonbelievers will be relegated to noncitizens — the kingdom isn't for us, because it is not within us. Strict believers might simply say "foreigners" without faith will burn in hell. Less hardened believers might allow secular members of the human community to sit back and observe how the kingdom operates in practice. All of this would be the opposite of Buber's vision, and perhaps the vision of Jesus as well.

In the Gospels we hear the wandering Teacher claim his kingdom is "not of this world." Maybe he recognized that the practical yet challenging life lessons he was passing on to his followers wouldn't fit well in Roman society, or perhaps any societal system. A culture based on the teachings of love, compassion, justice and inclusion might not be much of a "kingdom" after all.

Martin Buber was one of those critical bridge-builders for me as I emerged from a "kingdom mentality," a mindset of having a mind set on ruling over others rather than serving others. Instead of believing I was chosen and called to build a Kingdom of (Chris') Christianity in the world, faithful voices like Buber's assisted my growth to a more "theological humility," and finally to a basic humble humanity beyond kings, queens or any illusion of royalty. Reading my backpack copy of "I and Thou," in a hostel or under a bridge in a far away land, I reflected on the need for a world community built on relationships rather than kingdoms of religion.

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