

Book Review

Madhuri Santanam Sondhi, *Intercivilizational Dialogue on Peace: Martin Buber and Basanta Kumar Malik*

Reviewed by Maurice S. Friedman

Madhuri Santanam Sondhi, *Intercivilizational Dialogue on Peace: Martin Buber and Basanta Kumar Malik* (New Delhi: Indian Council of Philosophical Research, 2008), xi + 421 pages

This book is exactly what its title suggests, and it accomplishes its ambitious project amazingly well. Indeed, in the course of reviewing a great many books during the past six decades, I have never come across one like this! The author and the publisher might lead us to expect the book to err on the side of Indian civilization. But it is not so. If anything, it is the other way around. As the author of *Martin Buber's Life and Work*, the three-volume biography that the judges of the National Jewish Book Award found "definitive" when they gave it the award for Biography in 1985, and of *Encounter on the Narrow Ridge: A Life of Martin Buber*, I may be permitted to express my enthusiasm not only for Sondhi's understanding of Martin Buber from within but also of her raising questions that go beyond what I myself have done!

Although I was brought to India to lecture in 1981 and again in 1991 and a book of the lectures that I gave on this second trip was published in India in 1994, I can claim no such expertise on Malik. So far as I can tell, however, Sondhi has done equal justice to the thought of Basanta Kumar Malik and to the dialogue that she has constructed between Buber and Malik.

Sondhi begins with an overview of the two biographies and the two civilizations. In Buber's case there is actually a double civilization since until he was sixty he lived in a European and Germanic culture and for the last almost thirty years of his life in Palestine and, after 1948, Israel. Malik lived in both India and England. I suspect, however, that Sondhi means by "intercivilizational" Jewish and Indian.

In her concluding chapter Sondhi brings Buber and Malik into dialogue about "relationsism," which they both share, Malik metaphysically and Buber in terms of the interpersonal, which includes both the I-Thou and the I-It, and the "interhuman," which is I-Thou alone, "opposition and cognition," on which again they are surprisingly close, "mysticism, theism, and absolutes," in which case Buber emerges from mysticism into dialogue yet keeps a trace of mystical immediacy in the "between," whereas Malik has only a small trace of the mystical line his final, poetic book *The Towering Wave*, Buber does not keep to a personal God as much as Sondhi thinks. She does not at all explore what Buber means by the "absolute person." Most important is the fact that both men agree in the rejection of absolutes in favor of relation without either of them falling into relativism. To that extent we can accept Sondhi's conclusion that together Buber and Malik "might provide useful perspectives for dealing with personal, societal and international relationships and for transforming a merely interconnected world into one that is truly interrelated."

Strange as it may seem I highly recommend this book to anyone who is interested in Buber's thought even apart from the dialogue with Malik. I offer here a couple of samples:

"Something very akin to mysticism haunted his [Buber's] dialogic formulae till the end, especially his descriptions of the Between...

"... He renounced the mystical attitude, in so far as he had accepted it, of denying all reality to the world of normal experience. But the Between exemplifies very intensely the polarity of unity and duality or unity and plurality...

"Though anti-metaphysical [Buber's philosophy] is nevertheless a coherent system of interrelated parts." (pp. 76 ff.)

"What could never leave him was the experience of immediacy which did not diminish the reality of the I-Thou...an enduring mysticality now arising in the space between self and other instead of in pure self-direction." (pp. 119 ff.)

"Not only is the independence and uniqueness of an individual center not diminished by its capacity to enter into relationship, an individual cannot be defined without it." (p. 122).