



## **I and Thou: Martin Buber’s Philosophy of Dialogue | Discussion Curriculum**

### **Audience and Format**

This video is appropriate for use in the following learning situations:

- High School Social Studies or Humanities classrooms
- College, University or Seminary classrooms
- Congregational adult or high school education programs
- Adult learning groups (e.g., senior centers)

Plan for a 30 to 60 minute class period or session. The video is 11.5 minutes long; you can adjust the conversation and activities to fit your time frame and audience.

### **Learning Goals**

- Understand the dynamics of I–It and I–Thou encounters.
- Consider how this corresponds to your life experience.
- Be inspired to seek I–Thou encounters.

### **Suggested Program**

#### **WARM UP ACTIVITY (5 TO 10 MINUTES)**

With your full group or in pairs, ask your group to consider either of the following questions:

- Think of the social media accounts you use regularly: Facebook, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc. How many “friends” or contacts do you have on each?
- Of those contacts, how many are just acquaintances. How many would you say are friends? How many would you consider to be close friends?
- When was the last time you had a deep, intimate conversation with someone?

#### **INTRODUCE VIDEO (2 MINUTES)**

Share with your audience the following information:

This video was produced by ICJS, the Institute for Islamic, Christian and Jewish Studies, which has a mission to advance interreligious dialogue and understanding in order to build bridges between people and communities. The video introduces the ideas of Martin Buber (1878–1965) and his philosophy of dialogue as he explains it in his most famous work, *I and Thou*.

Following the video, we’ll discuss what we heard.

#### **VIEW VIDEO (11.5 MINUTES)**

Available on the [ICJS web site](#)



**DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (15 to 20 minutes):**

1. "I–It describes a relationship between the I—you as a subject, an interesting person—interpreting the world [the It]. And you interpret the world through your five senses. But you understand that it's not you, that it's separated from you."

What is an I–It encounter? What is an example?

2. "You can't live in a world without I–It. There are certain relationships that require you to be an 'I' and the other end to be an 'It.'"

Why are I–It encounters essential to daily life?

3. "In the I–it world, you run into the danger of racism, patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, religious bigotry. Because once you have the ability to objectify a human being, it allows you to understand it in a way that gives you some sense of power, some control, and some understanding."

What are the risks or pitfalls of I–It encounters? Why does this happen?

4. "For Buber, if that cashier and I exchanged a moment, we could have an I–Thou relationship in which all of those I–It relationships that make up the empirical world, that make up reality, will disappear. We're no longer the people we were in that moment, we're something different. And both of us recognize that. That's called genuine mutuality, in which we recognize each other in our absolute subjectivity, in that you are a unique person at this moment in time, as am I, and we're sharing something."

What is an I–Thou encounter? What is an example?

5. "For some people, it's transcendent. For some people, it's simply time stopping. And for Buber, that disrupts the I–It world because it reminds us that no matter how well we know the world, there's something missing. There's something lost. And that something missing is where Buber would like to build community. For Buber, he would call that some sort of 'eternal now,' an engagement with God or whatever other word you want to attach to the beyond."

For Buber, how can an I–Thou encounter be an experience of God or a Higher Power?

6. "In our contemporary situation where people are trying to find meaning in a variety of places, [Buber] offers an opportunity for us to experience transcendence without the borders of religion."

How can atheists and agnostics be closer to God, as Buber argues in *I and Thou*, than practicing religionists?

7. "So drawing from the Talmud, the Jewish tradition's interpretation of the Hebrew Bible, but also of oral laws, is his concept of *machloket*, which is commonly translated as argument or



disagreement. I'm more comfortable translating it as a form of sacred arguing in which you can debate with your interlocutor about a whole set of issues, whether it's theological, political, cultural, whose sports team is better. So at the end of that debate, I should be able to articulate back to you what your intentions were, what the ideas were, to give it the most charitable meaning imaginable, so that when you hear it coming from me, you say, 'yes, that's what I was saying.' Then I can engage it. Then I can debate with it."

What is sacred arguing? How do we engage in it?

8. "Once you have that moment with the other, with someone different from yourself, it is transformational in such a way that you relate to every other person with the same potential for that kind of experience. And when you do that, it's a lot harder to categorize or objectify that person because they no longer are who they say they are, or who you think they are. You can engage them in certain ways that allow for I–Thou encounters. When you build community in that way, how we discuss politics, how we discuss religious difference, will take on a different urgency."

How do I–Thou encounters transform us and enable us to engage in dialogue and build community?

#### **CLOSING ACTIVITY (5 minutes):**

- ❖ Think about your own life. What steps could you take to facilitate more I–Thou encounters in the future?
- ❖ Choose one of these possible actions and discuss how you could use it in your own life or community:
  - Buber describes instances where there was the potential for an I–Thou encounter that, for whatever reason didn't happen, as "mismetings." Think of a recent missed meeting in your life. Make it a point to reach out to that person.
  - Participate in interreligious, interfaith, or multiracial/multiethnic conversations or advocacy groups, which foster dialogue and build community. Consider how/if your community could start (or join) such a group.
  - The next time you are in a contentious conversation with somebody, see if you can repeat their argument back to them in a way that they would view as accurate. Observe how that transforms your conversation.
  - Take time to meditate on how you have encountered God in your life, or have had a transcendent experience, through your relationship with another person.

### **Extend the Conversation**

View the 6-part ICJS Course: [Martin Buber and the Life of Dialogue](#)