



## The Religion of Co-Existence Buber and Jaspers on the Mutuality of Authenticity

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**Abstract:** Noreen Khawaja's *The Religion of Existence* traces the influence of a Protestant Pietist view of personal conversion through the work of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. I critique Khawaja's study on the basis that it is limited, for she traces only one aspect of Pietism (personal conversion) through only one set of existentialists (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre). Her strong analysis of existentialism can be expanded by exploring how existentialism has also been dramatically impacted by Pietism's emphasis on bearing witness to one's conversion through a never-ending responsibility to love one's neighbor. The work of both Martin Buber and Karl Jaspers, which emphasizes the mutuality of authenticity, is particularly ripe for extending Khawaja's study in this direction.

**Keywords:** Buber, Martin; Jaspers, Karl; existentialism; Pietism; authenticity; secularism; Christianity; communication; mutuality.

In her provocative book, *The Religion of Existence*, Noreen Khawaja questions much of what we thought we knew about the place of religion in the existentialist tradition.<sup>1</sup> By tracing the influence of Protestant Pietism through Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre, she demonstrates that the distinction between Christian existentialism and atheistic existentialism is not as clear as one might think. Revealing yet another paradox emerging from a philosophical tradition that embraces paradox, Khawaja's analysis leads to the fundamental questions:

Does existentialism become a religion? Does it become Christian? Or perhaps it is the reverse? Perhaps religion itself might at last become less 'religious'? [RE 234]

<sup>1</sup> Noreen Khawaja, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016. [Henceforth cited as RE]

Khawaja utilizes a Pietist framing of personal conversion and a reworked understanding of asceticism to identify the ways that religious concepts are at work in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. As she explains, they did not avoid or debunk religious concepts in their work but rather these philosophers were "experimenting actively with this material and looking for new ways to relate to it, which operate outside the traditional purview of Christian theology" (RE 21). Khawaja recasts the core concept of authenticity through the lens of religious conversion, an infinite choosing to own myself in each moment. The Pietist view of conversion as both a decisive moment as well as an ongoing conversion to life is a kind of spiritual labor for which the authentic self is responsible. Khawaja describes this labor as a form of asceticism, not in the traditional sense of denial of the world, but rather as a never-ending work that is an end in itself, yet not

something one would designate as good. She locates this asceticism in the ongoing work of existential self-cultivation, which is, becoming more fully who one is without ever being able to achieve a definitive selfhood.

Khawaja's innovative path through Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre is well defended by textual analysis, and the theme of authenticity as spiritual labor is ripe for further philosophical exploration. Her study is limited, however, by tracing only one aspect of Pietism (personal conversion) through only one set of existentialists (Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre). Adding additional narratives to the argument could strengthen her central thesis about the complex relationship between Christianity and secularism. In this essay, I suggest that existentialism has also been dramatically impacted by Pietism's emphasis on bearing witness to one's conversion through a never-ending responsibility to love one's neighbor. The existentialist tradition has never focused solely on personal authenticity. It also contains important work on authentic being-with-others. In order to begin to give shape to this possible extension of Khawaja's project, I focus on the work of Martin Buber and Karl Jaspers, for both stress the importance of mutuality in the ongoing labor of authenticity. Rather than challenging Khawaja's depiction of existentialism, I advocate that her important insights about the ongoing conversation between religion and philosophy can be expanded and strengthened by recognizing that the theme of authentic co-existence is also woven throughout the existentialist tradition.

### Pietism: For God's Glory and Neighbor's Good

In *Pia Desideria*, Philipp Jakob Spener identifies six pious wishes aimed at a renewal of Christian life and faith. As an extension of Pietism's strong emphasis on conversion as a conscious choice and vibrant spiritual experience, Spener's pious wishes focus on Christian life and practice. He asserts,

It is by no means enough to have knowledge of the Christian faith, for Christianity consists rather of practice. If we can therefore awaken a fervent love among our Christians, first toward one another and then toward all men...and put this love into practice, practically all that we desire will be accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Philipp Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria*, transl. Theogore G. Tappert, Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press 1964, pp. 95-6. [Henceforth cited as *PD*]

Khawaja is careful to explain that the Pietist depiction of faith is an ongoing expression of one's ongoing conscious commitment to faith, a "conversion of life" (*RE* 51). She neglects to explore in full, however, the Pietist belief that outward actions were a necessary extension of inward, self-conscious conversion. Authentic conversion, in the words of the early Pietist August Hermann Francke, is never solely about individual self-identity; instead he describes true Christianity as "to the glory of God and his neighbor's good."<sup>3</sup>

The idea that authentic conversion must include an ongoing pursuit of authentic being-with-others is woven throughout Pietist writings. In his sermon on "Duty to the Poor" Francke claims, "One shows oneself as a Christian so far as one is a true person of prayer before God and practices love of neighbor" (*GG* 158). He believes this is the necessary result of authentic conversion, not merely an ethical duty in the Kantian sense. Love of neighbor is not something one does because it is the right thing to do; rather it is an outpouring of genuine conversion. As Francke maintains:

If your conversion would be a serious matter to you... God the Lord will also give you a sincere love for the poor, and...he will cause love to grow in you that you may become ever more perfect therein. [*GG* 183]

So, the never-ending choice of taking responsibility for my identity involves both a conversion of inward identity and a conversion of outward practices. Describing this model of conversion in the work of Pietist Johanna Elenora Petersen, Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom writes:

Faith, however, must be known by its fruits. Faith is not simply the input of truth and knowledge. As the Pietists proclaimed, faith acts in love. How did Petersen exemplify "faith acting in love"?...She never lived as though her faith was private.<sup>4</sup>

In the words of Spener, "Our whole Christian religion consists of the inner man or the new man, whose soul is faith and whose expressions are the fruits of life" (*PD* 96).

<sup>3</sup> Gary Sattler, *God's Glory, Neighbor's Good: A Brief Introduction to the Life and Writings of August Hermann Francke*, Chicago, IL: Covenant Press 1982, p. 253. [Henceforth cited as *GG*]

<sup>4</sup> Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom, *Angels, Worms, and Bogeys: The Christian Ethic of Pietism*, Eugene, OR: Cascade Books 2010, p. 68.

There is a danger of reading this aspect of Pietism through the lens of the ethical, placing the moral imperatives upheld by Spener, Francke, and Petersen in the same category as Judge Wilhelm's duties instead of the asceticism of the Abrahamic Knight of Faith. For Kierkegaard, the relevant difference between these two approaches is that the former is ethical by submitting himself to an ethical system while the latter transcends the ethical and, by faith alone, stands singularly before God. A careful reading of the Pietists, however, reveals that love of neighbor is a never-ending spiritual labor of re-orienting one's responsibility for oneself and for others as well. As Sattler explains in his famous biography on Francke:

Assuming that faith becomes evident in the outworkings of the indwelling Spirit and the commitment of the believer, what next? The question is asked, "What Shall I do?"...The believer is never called upon to reject the world per se, nor to escape it, but only to renounce those elements of life which are contrary to God's glory and neighbor's good. [GG 106]

There are echoes of the idea that authentic conversion confirms responsibility to both self and other in Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*. In the prayer that opens the volume, Kierkegaard, writing as himself, expresses

in heaven no work can be pleasing unless it is a work of love: sincere in self renunciation, a need in love itself, and for that very reason without any claim of meritoriousness!<sup>5</sup>

The "I shall" of love of neighbor presents an ever-present duty one is incapable of fulfilling; a duty that one simultaneously chooses and fails to uphold. This ascetic ideal in Kierkegaard, with deep roots in Pietism, would seem to me to be a fruitful extension of Khawaja's argument. Perhaps the fact that it is not part of her analysis is justified by the potential difficulty of tracing this particular ideal through Heidegger and Sartre. In the subsequent sections, however, I hope to demonstrate that the Pietist impulse of conversion as authentic being-with-others is indeed present in existentialism, when we follow a path through Buber and Jaspers.

<sup>5</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love: Some Christian Reflections in the Form of Discourses*, transl. Howard and Edna Hong, New York, NY: Harper Brothers 1962, p. 19.

## Buber: Conversion Through Mutuality

Most simplified narratives of existentialism acknowledge Buber for his fundamental contribution of the I-It/I-Thou distinction, but leave him on the margins of the tradition. Although Khawaja mentions Buber's presence in the family tree, she does not explore the ways in which the work of this Jewish philosopher may itself be contributing to existentialism's ongoing conversation with Protestant Pietism. In his early writings, Buber did attempt to distinguish the pietism of Hasidism from German Pietism on the basis that the latter emphasizes an inward emotionalism that manifests in a form of mysticism he detested. However, as Khawaja argues herself, the mystical and quietist reading of Pietism is inaccurate. In fact, Buber's philosophy may have more in common with the Pietist anthem of "God's Glory and Neighbor's Good" than Kierkegaard, Heidegger, or Sartre.

Khawaja's categories of conversion and asceticism fit well with Buber's view of authenticity. One is an authentic self when, in Buber's view, one chooses the mode of being I-Thou. By allowing oneself to be simultaneously responsible for and called into question by the other as Thou, one becomes a whole self. The I of I-Thou is not limited by the rational categories of time and space, by what can be thought, but is instead fully present. But, I-Thou is never an achievable, permanent state. As Buber describes, "the It is the eternal chrysalis, the Thou the eternal butterfly—except that situations do not always follow one another in clear succession, but often there is a happening profoundly twofold, confusedly entangled."<sup>6</sup> Khawaja's statement, "the temporal expression of sin is to lack a present tense" (*RE* 223), is mirrored in Buber's famous statement with regard to authenticity "without It man cannot live, but he who lives with It alone is not a man" (*IT* 34).

We can see how Buber's work extends Khawaja's thesis in a new direction, when we contrast Buber's emphasis on the mutuality of authenticity with the more singular focus of personal conversion in Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre. Although Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre each refer to the self in relation to others, albeit in different ways and to varying degrees, conversion is for each one of them an individualizing labor. Yet, for Buber, authenticity is only possible in the

<sup>6</sup> Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, transl. Ronald Gregor Smith, New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons 1958, pp. 17-8. [Henceforth cited as *IT*]

context of mutual relation with the other as Thou, no matter whether the other is a fellow human, part of the natural world, or the Eternal Thou. Conversion is a two-sided process involving my turning toward the other with openness to receive her as Thou, as well as the other meeting me "through grace."<sup>7</sup> As Buber explains, "the Thou meets me. But I step into direct relation with it. Hence the relation means being chosen and choosing, suffering and action in one" (*IT* 11). As a momentary meeting through which one's identity is both chosen and confirmed, although never with finality, the I-Thou encounter meets Khawaja's conditions of asceticism.

For Buber, however, the authenticity of I-Thou is never merely personal. The impact of an I-Thou encounter is that "something happens to man...man receives, and what he receives is not a 'content' but a presence, as presence as strength" (*IT* 158). The spiritual labor of authenticity does not end once I have returned back to the world of I-It. Rather, the labor of authenticity continues through living out my responsibility to "bear witness" to the possibility of I-Thou in the world. As Buber describes it: "The encounter with God does not come to man in order that he may henceforth attend to God but in order that he may prove its meaning in action in the world" (*IT* 164).

Buber's vision of what this bearing witness should look like is quite similar to the Pietist claim that personal conversion manifests as an endless responsibility for love of neighbor. According to Buber, the authentic self seeks to build an authentic community with others. Consistent with the existentialist tradition, Buber challenges us to avoid losing ourselves in inauthentic social relationships, rather to leave "the They" behind to pursue meaningful relationships in the form of "We." This community of authentic selves living authentically together happens when each individual acknowledges a genuine responsibility to respond to the other in love. Buber writes: "True community [arises] through, first, their taking their stand in mutual relation with a living Center, and, second, their being in living mutual relation with each other" (*IT* 45).

We also hear the echoes of Pietism in his statement that "Meeting with God does not come to man in order that he may concern himself with God, but in order

that he may confirm that there is meaning in the world" (*IT* 115). This idea is repeated in Buber's critique of Kierkegaard's view of the authentic relationship between the individual and God in his essay "The Question to the Single One." Buber challenges Kierkegaard's renunciation of Regina Olsen as "misunderstand[ing] God."<sup>8</sup> He goes on to explain:

Creation is not a hurdle on the road to God, it is the road itself. We are created along with one another and directed to a life with one another. Creatures are placed in my way so that I, their fellow-creature, by means of them and with them find the way to God. [*MM* 52]

Throughout Buber's work, bearing witness to I-Thou has political implications, as well as religious ones. Buber's own witness to authentic encounter manifested itself in a commitment to religious socialism, education, and countless attempts to promote peace through dialogue between opposing factions in both the Middle East and post-WWII Germany. Although Khawaja suggests the occurrence of some links between existential asceticism and the political work of both Sartre and Camus, tracing the impulse to connect inward conversion and outward responsibility through the Pietists and Buber provides additional substance for those claims.

### Jaspers: Conversion Through Loving Struggle

Khawaja accurately notes that Karl Jaspers consistently avoided identification with any particular religious tradition (*RE* 3). Following her claim that Sartre's attempt to make sharp distinctions between existentialists on the basis of religious orientation is misguided, and that ascetic ideals emerging from Pietism are part of the existentialist narrative, it seems plausible to trace these themes through Jaspers as well. I suggest that doing so will deepen my claim that existentialism not only inherits and reshapes the Pietist emphasis on conversion, but also acknowledges that conversion is essentially tied to love of neighbor.

Central to Jaspers' philosophy is the idea that the labor of authenticity is worked out through communication in the form of loving struggle—"not for power but for openness." Already it is apparent that he not only sees authenticity as taking responsibility for oneself, but also as taking responsibility for the pursuit

<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Buber remarks, "Turning is the recognition of the Center and the act of turning again to it" (*IT* 100), and "The event that from the side of the world is called turning is called from God's side redemption" (*IT* 126).

<sup>8</sup> Martin Buber, *Between Man and Man*, transl. Ronald Gregor Smith, Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1961, p. 52. [Henceforth cited as *MM*]

of authentic being-with-others. Jaspers maintains,

I achieve [the authenticity of Being] in the order of a world of men in which even those who cannot understand each other yet respect each other. In this world the task remains: to come closer and closer to each other in an ever-widening perimeter of communication.<sup>9</sup>

The paradox of Jaspers' core belief in the perennial nature of truth and a never-ending commitment to the never fully attainable goal of human unity is consistent with an ascetic view of authenticity. Recognizing that the pursuit of authenticity necessarily takes the form of a continual loving struggle allows us to trace the religious in his philosophy.

For Jaspers, one becomes authentically oneself through participation in the process of existential communication. As Jaspers explains:

I cannot be myself unless the other wants to be himself; I cannot be free unless he is free; I cannot be sure of myself unless I am sure of him. In communication I feel responsible not only for myself but for the other, as if he were I and I were he; I do not feel it set in until he meets me half-way. For I do not reach the point of communication by my own action alone. [P2 52-3]

So, the truth of my self-being is revealed in the ongoing process of myself and the other responsibly calling each other into question.

Existential communication leads to authenticity, because it heightens self-awareness. When one risks revealing herself as distinct from one other, she takes ownership of who she is both to herself and to the other. She cannot allow the other to serve as a substitute for her, because open communication involves each individual's "fight for Existenz, both for his own and for the others" (P2 60). The individuals engaged in existential communication must mutually recognize and respect each other, involving each other in an open-ended pursuit for and creation of truth. As historic individuals, they bring particular traditions and beliefs to the conversation and use these to challenge each other. Although each one believes in the truth of one's own tradition, both must reject any claim to an exclusive possession of the truth. By openly engaging the other's truth alongside one's own, one is able to authentically reach beyond objective truth to

the truth of one's own being. In the context of Jaspers' philosophy, the conversion of self-choice described by Khawaja, takes place in authentic relationship with another person.

Existential communication is described by Jaspers as "loving struggle." As a boundary situation, struggle makes me aware of the limits of my own beliefs as well as of the limits of objectivity itself. Struggle also propels me beyond these limits to the source of my freedom. In Jaspers' words "The struggle is necessary because even where I seem to be myself I am not truly, really present, unless I am doubted" (P2 212). In other words, I need the other to call me into question, so that I do not become reified in my existence. This conversion to authenticity becomes mutual as I too call the other into question, so that also she does not become reified in her existence, or in my perception of her existence.

Loving struggle is an ascetic labor on grounds of Jaspers' insistence that it remain open-ended. In love, both partners must reject any imposition of final truth upon the other. And, in their struggle for truth, both partners must resist the temptation to cease communicating. Authentic community as loving struggle is, therefore, a perennial task of approaching the other with openness, but also of remaining authentically rooted in one's self-being.

Similar to Buber, Jaspers also extends the path to authentic being-with-others beyond two individuals to social and political. Jaspers' promotes a world community "in which even those who cannot understand each other yet respect each other" (P2 58). A homogenous community, where everyone agrees upon the same fundamental truth, would not be authentic, the self would be lost. As Jaspers explains, "Either I keep risking loneliness over and over, to win my self-being in communication, or I have definitely voided my own self in another being" (P2 58). So, what Jaspers envisions and solicits is a community where everyone agrees to actively participate in the perennial loving struggle of challenging and respecting diverse truths.

Although Jaspers avoids embracing any particular instantiation of religion, we can still read his work as being in constant conversation with the religious landscape of twentieth century Western Europe. In particular we see a strong commitment to the dual emphasis on personal conversion through a continual pursuit of the truth of my own being, and a commitment to the idea that I am only fully pursuing that truth when I take responsibility for others.

<sup>9</sup> Karl Jaspers, *Philosophy*, Vol. 2, transl. E. B. Ashton, Chicago, IL: Henry Regnery Company 1963, p. 58. [Henceforth cited as P2]

### Conclusion

Khawaja rightly acknowledges that while the specific characteristics of existentialism vary by individual thinker, the tradition emerges as an ongoing conversation with a shared landscape of Enlightenment philosophy, as a continued struggle for the essence of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy, and as social and political revolt. Her exploration of the ways in which even atheistic existentialism is influenced by, and continues to influence, religious themes raises crucial questions about how the relationship between religion and philosophy can be viewed, and how one can understand the secular. Since existentialism is not itself a single story, it seems reasonable to suggest that

adding more voices to the conversation would benefit the pursuit of answers to her fundamental questions. I have sketched the beginning of a new path for inquiring into the religion of existence that not only sees authenticity as a core commitment, but also asserts that authenticity is manifest in relationship with others. By exploring the religious impulse in authentic being-with-others, perhaps we can begin to modify and extend Khawaja's final questions as to whether existentialism demands a religious responsibility to and for others, or if the reverse position of making neighborly love less religious is preferable. Following in path of Buber and Jaspers, I believe these questions ought to be explored with others in genuine dialogue.