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Building a peaceful society from martin Buber's perspective of I-thou/you and I-It relationship

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Abstract

The existence of broken world cannot be denied. Human beings must accept the fact that this broken world is caused by human beings themselves. The solution is going back to human beings' relationship. Since society is built upon relations, therefore human relationship must be restored to heal the broken world. The kind of human relationship that can restore unified society is subject to subject relationship, not subject to object relationship. World crisis is caused by I-It relationship in which another human being is treated as object and as a result abuse and manipulation are becoming the norms of relationship. Conflict happens because of misunderstanding and such misunderstanding is caused by not being open to one another. People do not reveal themselves to one another because of mistrust. Buber's advice is that everyone should open to one another and should be treated as equal human beings, as subjects. Therefore, honest and sincere dialogue between man and man is a prerequisite to build a dream world: unified world, not a broken one.

Keywords: Broken Society, I-You, I-It, Relationship

Introduction

It cannot be denied that relationship matters much in human society. Human society is built upon relations. There is no society and there is no community, if there is no relationship. When they meet, they relate to each other and know each other and decide to stay together. Such relationship is maintained by dialogue and therefore, the same idea goes that no dialogue, no community or no society. Dialogue is the one that strengthens the relationship because in the dialogue people get to know each other better and makes the relationship stronger.

We have been living in the society or community for a long time and we have been the eye witnesses of problems that are happening in our society, community and even in the family as the core of society. Conflicts, wars, separation or divorce are no longer extraordinary news to our ears but they are common news that we encounter every day in newspapers, TV, radio and social media. The new generations are born into this kind of society and their growth is formed by this kind of society. Their mind, their world views are affected by the society where they live. What will happen next? Most probably they will perpetuate such kind of society to the next generation, a broken society, a violent society unless there is a total cultural transformation in the way they relate and view others and the world around them.

Drawing the inspiration from the I-Thou/You and I-It relationship of Martin Buber, the writer sees the main sources of the broken world. The idea of I-Thou/You and I-It lead the researcher to the question of why we have broken society. The question will bring us back to the foundation of society which relationship is. Genuine relationship is built upon genuine dialogue. Genuine relationship and genuine dialogue are two essential factors that maintain a society, a community or even family. Dialogue bridges the gap and the distances become closer. However, the concern remains: what kind of dialogue that brings the society, community or family together. In this research article, I would like to use the philosophy of Martin Buber, an existentialist philosopher, as a lens to view how we should build a genuine relationship, genuine dialogue and a peaceful society. In the view of Martin Buber, it is possible to build a unified world and peaceful world, community or family, if human beings let go of their pride, treat one another as equal human being and be honest to one another in their dialogue.

The Existence of Broken World

It might be too idealistic if we dream for a perfect world where all people are living in harmony that is having no wars or conflicts between religions, races and countries. It is nonetheless true in the world inside the womb of our mother but when we are thrown or born into this world, we do not see a world of peace without conflicts, a person without enemy, country without enemy or religion without enemy. Though through religion, we are taught not to have enemy but in reality we have enemy. As Wayne (2015) ^[13] argued that we see all around us problems of a broken society. The broken world is a reality, it is everywhere. This broken reality marks our existence. Schopenhauer (1981) ^[12] argued that suffering and misfortune is the general rule in life and there is no exception. It is in our homes, our cities, our countries and in fact this entire world is in chaos. Animosity rules our lives for to disagree with our neighbor is just under the surface of our nature. We have been growing up in these realities and we have adjusted to them and we have accepted them as part of our lives. But the questions are: who will stand up to explain why our world is broken and what has caused it to be broken? Shouldn't we begin to realize that there is a cause or a reason for this condition? Were we born with this condition? Don't you think that if spiritual leaders tell us that we are broken then they should be able to explain why the world or society is broken?

The questions that we have raised are nothing new. It has been long time ago, Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) wondered about our life and experience and he came to a conclusion that we live in a broken world. He emphasized that the world we live in is essentially broken, fractured by events in history (Marcel, 1995) ^[11]. He was not alone in seeing such kind of world. Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) lamented that this world is irrational, in the sense that we do not understand how it operates. Many things happen not according to human calculations because it cannot be understood by reason. According to him, this world is marked by dread or anxiety, guilt, absurdity, paradox, despair, death and nothingness. Other philosopher before Kierkegaard but within the same generation, Arthur Schopenhauer also viewed the world of his time as dark world, the world that is full of sufferings. He viewed the life of individual as always a tragedy and therefore considered this world as irrational because many things happen that could not be comprehended (Copleston, 1975, 1946) ^[7].

The questions are raised: who is to be blamed? Did God inherit the broken world? God never inherited a broken world but a perfect world, a peaceful world, a world of harmony. However, the possibility of broken world or society is imbedded in human blood. The Latin Proverb that says, "homo homini lupus" which means that a man is a wolf to another man may be true. Such proverb reminds us of social contract theory of Thomas Hobbes that prior to social contract; a man lived in the state of nature. Man's life in the state of nature was one of fear and selfishness. Man lived in chaotic condition of constant fear of another because man wanted to dominate another man. Life in the state of nature was poor, nasty, solitary, brutish and short (Elahi, n.d). Though we all are living in a civilized world under the social contract but it seems that life before the social contract, life in the state of nature is still the dominant force in human relationship. Man lives in fear of another and therefore no one opens to another. Thus, the current

state of affairs which is characterized by insincerity or hypocrisy is blamed to human beings themselves. The solution is with the human beings themselves. They should be the one to restore peace and unity among human beings by establishing genuine relationship and dialogue as proposed by Martin Buber.

Martin Buber's View on How Human Beings Should Live

Buber's (1958) in his *Ich und Du* argues that human existence may be defined by the way in which we engage in a dialogue with each other, with the world and with God. In the relation, we may adopt two kinds of attitude toward the existence: I-Thou and I-it. I-Thou/You relationship describes the relationship between subjects to subject. This relationship recognizes the uniqueness of the other and welcome the other as the other. One is not using himself/herself as a standard to measure the other but accept the other as an a unique being and respect his/her uniqueness. I-It describes the relationship between subject and object. This is the relationship that treats the other as objects. One's uniqueness is not recognized. One is accepted in if the other can fill my needs. According to Buber, human being's relationship is characterized by these two relationships. Life is encounter and, in the encounter, there is a dialogue and such dialogue are characterized either by I-Thou/You or I-It.

Buber worked upon the premise of existence as encounter (Buber, 1947, 2002). In such premise, Buber recognized that life is never lived alone but life is a society, life is a community or a family, life is with others. Every day we encounter other people and we communicate, then develop a relationship and form a society or community. Society, community or family is a result of relationship and dialogue. Thus, society is built upon relations and dialogue. There is no society, no community or family without relationship and dialogue and that is why Buber argued that if there is no dialogue among people, there is nothing human. However, the quality of relationship depends much on dialogue because in the dialogue people start revealing themselves to one another. How one reveals himself/herself to one another in dialogue and how one treats the other dialogue is important to establish a genuine relationship and a genuine community. After all, according to Buber, society or community is not a bunch of objects but a bunch of subjects or human persons and therefore one should know the proper way how to deal and relate to one another as persons with dignity.

He wrote about personal relationship between human beings and God, human beings and their world which he summarized into I-You/Thou (Ich - Du) and I-It (Ich-Es) relationship (Buber, 1958). From such pair of words, he went on to explain the genuine relationship. He used the I-Thou or Ich-Du to describe relationship between man and man and God. This is a subject to subject relationship in the sense that people enter into a relationship with the whole of their beings, as genuine persons with their own uniqueness and accept each other as he/she is. One treats the other as subject with dignity, not to be used or manipulated for one's advantage. Therefore, the specific characteristic of this relationship is reciprocity and mutuality. As a result of such relationship, both parties who enter into a relationship grow together. There is a mutual benefit that both parties received

from such relationship (Buber, 1947, 2002). One is not taking advantage of another.

According to Buber, such kind of relationship can be established if there is a genuine dialogue (Buber, 1991). Genuine dialogue is when both parties open themselves up to one another without wearing any mask. There are no secrets to be hidden but one opens herself/himself up to the other for the other to understand him/her and the other should accept the person as he/she is. It is only in the openness; one can perceive the other correctly and avoid misunderstanding. It is necessary, therefore, for the other to open himself/herself to the other and welcome the other without condition. In this dialogue, one should be silent and listening to the other and enter into his/her world and understand her/him from his/her own stories.

For Buber, genuine relationship is the foundation to build relationship with God (Kramer, & Gawlick, 2003) [9]. Buber argued that the meeting between I-Thou is not just between two people or between someone but every particular Thou is a glimpse through the eternal Thou. In other words, our genuine dialogue and relationship with the other and the world is the windows open to the eternal Thou. Every I-Thou or I-You relationship opens up a window to the ultimate Thou or God (Wood, 1969) [14]. It just means that one cannot approach God without having a good relationship with fellow human beings. One cannot be holy unless one has also good relationship with other fellow human beings and only based on such relationship one can enter into dialogue with God. Therefore, the present world which is marked by brokenness makes it hard for human beings to reach God.

I-Thou relationship is not just a relationship between man and man, man and God but it also includes the relationship between man and environment. Environment has to be approached through I-Thou relationship or subject to subject relationship. Such idea reminds us that environment is not to be treated as object to be manipulated but to be treated as equal with human beings, as subject. It implies that we cannot also establish good relationship with the eternal Thou unless we have good relationship with the environment because every particular Thou or You is a glimpse through the eternal Thou. Destroying others and destroying the environment is destroying our relationship with God and the disappearance of God into human relations.

Buber recognized that achieving genuine human relationship may become difficult when people fall into I-it relationship. I-It relationship is a relationship between subject and object. It is a relation of person to thing, of subject to object, involving some form of utilization, domination or control. This is not equal relationship because the other is treated as object to be manipulated. One is subject, while the other is object. This kind of relationship is not founded on mutual trust but suspicions or mistrust (Buber, 1952) [5]. Within such kind of relationship, the differences are accentuated and the uniqueness of "I" is emphasized. Man enters into relation not with the wholeness of his being, but part of it. Each is still wearing mask, does not open themselves up to each other. Consequently one cannot open fully himself/herself to the other because of mistrust and prejudices. Within the I-It or subject to object relationship, there is no dialogue but only monologue. People pretend to be in dialogical relationship but in reality there is no real dialogue because one is only emphasizing his/her points and no listening.

Within this seeming relationship, one cannot fully understand the other because their perception toward each other is limited and such situation always causes misunderstanding. The invasion of seeming and the inadequacy of perception can lead to conflict. They pretend to be in dialogue but the dialogue is full of personal interest, not common interest. They enter into dialogue with the self-interest agenda in which one enter into dialogue because one wants to get something out of such relationship. According to Buber, there is a movement from relation to separation, a growing crisis of human existence in modern society. He believed that the relationship between individual and their selves, between people, and people and creation was increasingly that of I-It. As a result, it is becoming more and more difficult to encounter God (Wood, 1969) [14].

Building a Peaceful Society Based on Buber's Idea

Based on Buber's idea of the encounter, relationship and dialogue, we cannot deny the fact that building a peaceful society is depending on what kind of relationship and dialogue is present among human beings. Buber admitted that there is a growing crisis in human society and the reason of such crisis is human relationship. Human relationship is no longer between I-Thou or subject to subject but more on I-It relationship or subject to object relationship. The nature of such kind of relationship is no longer based on mutual trust but suspicions. Each one is suspicious toward the other and one does not trust the other one and therefore create a distance. There is no more room for genuine dialogue and there is no possibility of openness. The more people are distancing from each other, the more they are suspicious.

Buber (2002) [6] frankly pointed out that we are entering into crisis because the relationship between man/woman and himself/herself, between man/woman and the environment are no longer I-Thou but more of I-It. In this kind of relationship, one does not meet the other as subject or as person with dignity but as object to be used for one's advantage. A Person enters into a relationship with the other because of certain personal interest, there is something to be gained from such relationship. It is the same true with other kind of relationship. One country enters into relationship with the other country because it wants to gain something from such relationship. Business enters into a relationship with other business because of something to be gained. A man enters into a relationship with a woman because he knows that something can be gained from the woman. These agendas are not revealed, but hidden within the person and the other does not have the capability to detect the real agenda of the person why he/she enters into the relationship. Buber lamented that the growth of the individual persons are impeded because of the invasion of seeming and the inadequacy of perception. Why? Within this kind of relationship, people can no longer communicate themselves to one another as what they are and so they cannot really know and understand each other. They are stranger to each other and therefore, they are no longer true to each other because their inner self is not revealed. They are wearing mask all the time, there is no authenticity.

Building a peaceful and harmonious society should be based on genuine relationship or I-Thou relationship. Each one should be treated as subjects, no matter who they are. One needs to accept one another as they are, not based certain condition. Buber advised that in order to create peaceful

Society, man has to unfold because man does not exist in isolation but in the completeness of relation. The completeness of relation can be achieved through opening up of oneself to the other, no pretention, no seeming and ready to welcome the other as they are.

Conclusion

Following the basic concept of Buber about the encounter, we have simple conclusion that broken world is caused by dishonest relationship, unauthentic relationship. Each one is taking advantage of one another. One is using another as object of manipulation. Such relationship can cause conflict because of conflicting interest. Buber recommends that relationship must be a subject to subject, not subject and object. In this relationship, it is not only that one will gain from such relationship but both sides. It is a reciprocal relationship. Within such kind of relationship, everyone is treated as equal individual human beings; no one is lower than the other. From such relationship, an honest and sincere dialogue can be established and in consequence, it can build or heal the broken relationship, the broken world. Beyond that, through genuine dialogue a person, a community can build relationship with God. Foundation of building good relationship with God is genuine human relationship and the environment.

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