

Gabriel Marcel's Concept of I-Thou Relationship: A Model for Peace and Harmony in Nigeria

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Abstract: *This work explores Gabriel Marcel's concept of I-Thou relationship and its potential application as a model for promoting peace and harmony in Nigeria. Marcel's Philosophy of existence is focused on commitment to the development of the individual concrete existence. He also focused on the restoration of mutual respect and trust in human relationships. In the Nigerian society today, there is high-rate of individualism in our political, economic, and socio-religious life. The feeling tends to breed the idea that one can live and survive without the others. The negative implication of these is that, it erodes peace and harmony in our society. These is judging from the rise of violence, killings, ritualism, kidnapping, banditry, suicide, segregation etc. going on in almost every part of the world and Nigeria in particular. Marcel's philosophy emphasizes the importance of authentic relationships, mutual respect, and deep connection with others. By adopting this approach, individuals and communities in Nigeria can foster a sense of unity, understanding, and cooperation, ultimately contributing to a more peaceful and harmonious society.*

Keyword: *Gabriel Marcel, I-Thou Relationship, Inter subjectivity, Peace, Harmony, Nigeria.*

Introduction

The Nigerian socio-political landscape is one marked by diversity and division, where ethnic tension, religious conflict, political rivalry, and economic inequality threaten the nation's unity and peaceful coexistence. In such a volatile environment, there is a growing need for a moral and philosophical reorientation that emphasizes authentic relationships and communal solidarity. Gabriel Marcel's I-Thou relationship, rooted in existential and personalist philosophy, offers a valuable lens through which the problem of peace and harmony in Nigeria can be re-evaluated and addressed.

Marcel distinguishes between two fundamental modes of being: being and having. In a society driven by "having," individuals view others as objects, resources, or threats. In contrast, the "being" mode, particularly in the I-Thou relationship, calls for openness to the other as a subject—capable of dialogue, understanding, and transcendence. The work argues that embracing this model can re-humanize the fractured interpersonal and communal relationships in Nigeria and establish a more just and peaceful society.

Emphasising the importance of human relation, Martin Buber proposes that a respectful reciprocity be shared, because when this is lacking and the other is manipulated, then that 'other' is said to be objectified. On the other hand, where the otherness of the other is affirmed, authentic relationship crystallizes. Plato's response to a similar situation in his *Psychology* shows it is a long-lasting

issue. While Plato proffers justice as his means of realizing harmony, Aristotle emphasizes the centrality of the society or polis

He sees the human being as a political animal that loses his essence if he ventures out of the polis. Aquinas reaffirms Aristotle's statement that the good of community is more "godlike" or "divine" than the good of an individual human being. This is in line with Jean-Paul Sartre's claim that "I need the Other in order to fully understand the structure of my own being.

All these above prove to be very precursory to the development of Gabriel Marcel's intersubjectivity. In the same vein, Gabriel Marcel is unbending in his believe that man needs the other as a subject for his authentic existence and fulfilment. He thinks that man in isolation would hardly actualize his potentials without others. Marcel observes that the rise of anti-community culture poses threat to human interpersonal relations, the world, existence and even morality. Such state of affairs constitutes sometimes what is referred to as postmodern condition characterized by a sense of uncertainty, nihilism or meaninglessness, doubt in traditional values and also a certain feeling of malaise, carrying on its wings the culture of moral and political relativism calls for a serious philosophical concern.

Proffering solution, Gabriel Marcel stresses that only the philosophy of intersubjectivity can rescue us from either the impasse of an individualism which considers man solely in reference to himself or the other impasse of a collectivism which has eyes only for society. Marcel agrees that, it is only when the individual recognizes the other in his very otherness, as a human being other than himself, and when on this basis he effects a penetration to the other, that he can break the circle.

Gabriel Marcel: Overview of His Philosophy

Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973) was a Christian existentialist who emphasized human subjectivity, freedom, and communion. Unlike the atheistic existentialists such as Sartre or Camus, Marcel believed in transcendence and hope, insisting that true being is found in communion with others and ultimately with God. In works such as *Being and Having* (1935) and *The Mystery of Being* (1950), Marcel distinguished between

treating others as objects (I-It) and engaging with them as persons (I-Thou).

He writes,

"To love a being is to say, 'Thou, shalt not die.'"

Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*

This affirmation of the other's inviolable worth lies at the heart of Marcel's ethical vision.

I-Thou vs. I-It Relationship: Conceptual Framework

I-Thou encounter involves total self-commitment to a cause and people; it is expressed with the whole being. This type of relationship is predominantly innate to man rather than theoretical.

Gabriel Marcel's notion of authentic existence is tied to the use of the 'I-It' and 'I-Thou' terminology, the expression of which determines one's respect or disrespect for the other. He explicates this when he said:

If in fact, I treat the Thou as a he, I reduce the Other to being only nature; in some ways and not in others. If I treat another person as a "Thou", I treat him and apprehend him qua freedom and not only nature. I help him to be free. I collaborate with his freedom." One of Marcel's most significant contributions is his distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships, a concept that illustrates how people interact with the world and one another. In an "I-It" relationship, individuals are viewed as objects to be used or manipulated. According to Marcel, this depersonalized interaction results in alienation, dehumanization, and a sense of spiritual emptiness.

Marcel also argued that technological progress and materialism often lead individuals toward objectification, undermining communal ties and authentic interpersonal connections. He advocated for a revival of reflective thinking and spiritual awareness, which can promote reconciliation, dialogue, and peace. Formula sometimes sounds paradoxical and contradictory but love is always proving it true.

His whole emphasis is on the superiority of the 'I-Thou' mode of relation over the I-It which does not make for mutual understanding and respect. In his I and Thou, Martin Buber points out that, it is within the context of I-Thou a being is encountered in its entirety and seen as an unreserved relational being. He claims that I-You relation is not restricted to relations between human beings. In speaking the word, I-Thou, the person discovers others, the uniqueness and concrete reality of others. Kepnes observes "that since the word I-Thou has a dialogical quality, the 'I' is not lost in the 'Other' but is affirmed through it."

The I-Thou relationship entails a genuine presence and participation with another person. It is dialogical, relational, and non-objectifying. Marcel adopts and deepens Martin Buber's notion by adding a metaphysical and spiritual dimension. For Marcel, the I-Thou bond fosters a mystery of presence, wherein the other is not simply known, but encountered.

I-It Relationship: The idea of I-It on the other hand, refers to those interactions where we treat the other individual as a functionary. It does not allow for full personal involvement, intimacy and sense of oneness between the I and the other because the other is distant from the I as an 'It.' In the I-It relations, there are no real interpersonal values and tacit assumptions that the other 'there' exists. This makes life meaningless; no sense of love; no security, no comfort. The difference in people's opinions leads to disagreements and divisions which will definitely end with none of the two parties agreeing with the other. It is such an ugly scenario which as Buber observed is seriously gaining ground in contemporary societies.

By contrast, the I-It relationship is utilitarian. The other is treated as a means to an end, leading to alienation, conflict, and depersonalization. Marcel warns that modern society's obsession with technology, efficiency, and possession fosters the I-It attitude, eroding the moral and spiritual fabric of human community.

Nigerian Context: A Crisis of Objectification and Division

Nigeria's history since independence has been marred by tribalism, religious intolerance, and political corruption. Ethnic and regional identity often supersede national identity. Groups see each other with suspicion, and violence frequently erupts over land, politics, and belief.

The I-It dynamic is evident in how politicians instrumentalize ethnic and religious identities, in how militants dehumanize their victims, and in how communities isolate themselves in fear and prejudice. The "other" becomes an object—an "it"—to be fought, excluded, or exploited.

As Chinua Achebe noted,

“The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership.”

The Trouble with Nigeria, 1983, This failure is not only political but deeply ethical—rooted in how Nigerians view and treat one another."

Applying the I-Thou Model in Nigeria

To achieve peace and harmony, Nigeria must reconstruct its moral landscape by embracing the I-Thou relationship across four domains:

Nigerians must see each other not as competitors or threats but as co-travelers in the journey of nation-building. This demands empathy, openness, and forgiveness.

Marcel warns against reducing others to roles or categories. In Nigeria, ethnic and religious identities often overshadow personhood. Adopting the I-Thou stance requires seeing the other not as “an object” or “as that man or woman” but as a person, with hopes, fears, and dignity.

Sincere dialogue between groups requires mutual respect and the suspension of prejudice. The I-Thou model invites stakeholders to listen and respond to each other in the spirit of fraternity, not rivalry.

Marcel writes, “To love a being is to say, 'Thou shalt not die.'” (Marcel, *Homo Viator*, 1962). This statement captures the depth of his existential commitment to the other. It suggests a fidelity that transcends self-interest, a willingness to stand in solidarity even in suffering."

Again, Marcel's concept of availability involves being present to the needs of others. In Nigerian communities, fostering empathy across religious and ethnic divides could encourage social solidarity. This means engaging neighbors, listening actively, and promoting interfaith and intercultural dialogue.

Marcel believes true relationships point beyond the self toward transcendence. Nigerian society, plagued by despair and cynicism, needs a revival of hope. Leaders, especially, must inspire hope through integrity and service, moving beyond political expediency.

Political leaders must reject the objectification of citizens and embrace servant leadership. The state must treat every citizen as a "thou," not as a voter, statistic, or expendable resource.

Marcel underscores the formative role of culture and education in shaping persons. Nigerian education must promote values of dialogue, respect, and human dignity—not just technical knowledge. Literature, history, and philosophy should reinforce the sacredness of human life.

Curricula and cultural narratives should teach communal values, dignity of the person, and solidarity, reflecting Marcel's insistence on transcendence and mutual presence.

While Marcel's philosophy offers an ideal moral vision, its implementation is not automatic. Nigeria's political and economic structures often reward the I-It mentality. Changing this would require: Religious institutions modeling authentic relationships. Civil society actively promoting empathy and human dignity

Moreover, critics may argue that Marcel's thought is too spiritual or abstract for practical politics. However, as John Mbiti observed, "Africans are notoriously religious," making a spiritual-philosophical model like Marcel's particularly resonant in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Gabriel Marcel's I-Thou relationship provides more than a philosophical abstraction. It offers a moral blueprint for human coexistence. In a country like Nigeria, where social fragmentation and mistrust are endemic, Marcel's thought urges a return to authentic human presence: where the other is encountered as "Thou"—a being worthy of respect, dialogue, and love, providing a powerful tool for building stronger, more meaningful relationships and promoting a culture of peace and understanding among Nigerians.

If peace and harmony are to be achieved in Nigeria, they must be rooted not only in political agreements or economic reforms but in a renewed vision of personhood—one that sees the other as a Thou, not an It.

Again, Gabriel Marcel's concept of the I-Thou relationship provides a transformative framework for promoting peace and harmony in Nigeria, a nation frequently plagued by ethnic divisions, political turmoil, religious conflict, and social alienation. Marcel's call to see others as "Thou" instead of "It" addresses these very issues. It urges individuals and communities in Nigeria to move beyond mere tolerance to engage authentically with empathy and mutual respect.

Implementing Marcel's insights involves rehumanizing relationships across all levels—political, ethnic, religious, and communal. It encourages dialogue over violence, presence over suspicion, and solidarity over segregation. In a diverse society like Nigeria, where historical grievances often impede unity, the I-Thou relationship can act as both a philosophical and moral guide toward creating a just and peaceful society.

Ultimately, Marcel's existential humanism—grounded in love, hope, and community—offers not only a critique of the societal challenges Nigeria faces but also a practical blueprint for reconciliation, nation-building, and enduring harmony.

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