

Jews, Christians recall scholar who emphasized human relations

By SYLVIA HART
Press Register Reporter

The concept of "I and Thou" has become a common expression in the United States and many other countries of the world, according to Dr. Robert L. Perkins of Mobile.

PERKINS, professor of philosophy at the University of South Alabama, spoke to participants in the Mobile Area Jewish-Christian Dialogue during a meeting at First Baptist Church of Mobile.

Perkins, who has been on the faculty of the University of South Alabama since 1966, has resigned to become dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Stetson University in Deland, Fla.

THE PROFESSOR talked to his local audience about Martin Buber, a Jewish philosopher who was born in Vienna, Austria, in 1878 and died in 1965.

Buber lived and taught in Germany, and in 1938 he moved to Palestine, which now is Israel. He taught at Hebrew University in Israel.

Buber used the words "I and thou" and "I and it," and because the concepts have become so common, they "probably have become abused as so many important concepts have. As they become common, they become weakened," according to Perkins.

IN EXPLAINING briefly the concepts, Perkins said, "In a period of great depersonalization in the 20th century, Buber spoke of the vitality of the person, the vitality of personal relations."

According to Perkins, Buber advocated a life of dialogue in which persons relate to each other as "I and thou" rather than "I and it." The individual who views another person as an "it" views him as an object to be manipulated.

Perkins said, "The difference between the 'thou' and the 'it' is that the 'it' is watched, and the 'thou' is spoken to."

PERKINS SAID, "In this crowded day of objectivity when people try to be 'objective,' Buber comes along and says, 'It's all right to be subjective. Relate to persons as persons and

recognize the limits of objectivity.'

"As we think about persons as 'its,' we think of them as parts — as TV repairmen, surgeons. We do not think of them as persons. The 'I-thou' in dialogue considers the whole man."

Perkins said a remarkable point about Buber was that when he lived in Germany, "he appeared as a Jew, and he made Germany receive him as a Jew" during a time of assimilation, or an emphasis on "the universal man."

Said Perkins, "In terms of human relations, universal man just isn't worth very much to you because you never do meet him coming down the street. You see people coming down the street who are sweaty, all kinds of things." The emphasis on the universal man is "a loss of what makes the individual."

FROM 1924 to 1933, Perkins said, Buber taught at the University of Frankfurt in Germany. He was "a real live professor of Jewish philosophy and Jewish ethics — the only time that chair had been designated and appointed and recognized in the history of German universities."

Talking about Buber after he moved to Israel, Perkins said the Jewish philosopher "attempted to get the Zionist leaders in Israel to see the Arabs with their own national aspirations, and in this Buber failed."

Perkins said that "many people apparently thought ... the Arabs' nationalism could be bought off with economic prosperity," but that approach failed.

THE MOBILIAN presented the view that Buber would be further saddened today if he were alive because of news reports "about the emergence of Jewish terrorism on the West Bank" of the Jordan River, an area occupied by Israel.

That terrorism "is to repudiate Buber," said Perkins. "It's to repudiate the inner meaning of European Zionism as its founders argued and presented it. It's also to repudiate the Jewish encounter with God. It's sad."



Press Register photos by Victor Calhoun

Dr. Robert L. Perkins