CHAPTER SEVEN

A True and Worthy Selfhood

Identity as Salvation

Religious salvation is freedom from estrangement through a positive relation to a numinous reality. The salvation achieved by attaining some heavenly condition is the kind of religious salvation we most often think of. The salvation from aloneness that comes from belonging to a divine being or a sacred community is not quite so obvious, yet it is plain enough once it is described. The salvation that is least obviously religious is salvation from confusion about one’s own identity. The topic of identity sounds more like a matter of psychology than of religion. Yet estrangement from self is a basic problem for every human person, and there are fundamental ways that religiousness has entered into this problem as it has into others. Our identity has an intrinsically mysterious dimension to it, and so the question of who we are is one that religions address in one way or another.

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

We may have felt a need at some time to get to know ourselves as individuals better. It is common in popular psychology to speak about getting in touch with our feelings, or finding ourselves, learning who we really are. Perhaps we have had only an occasional restlessness about our inner character and feelings. Or perhaps we have stumbled upon some deeply upsetting desire, bias, or habit that sets us apart from others and makes us worry about our own normalcy, worth, or sanity. We all can experience unsettling moments about ourselves because we are born with an incomplete identity and must learn who we are to become as we grow. As we grow we change, so our identity is always changing in some way.
Born Unfinished

We are unfinished animals, said sociologist Peter Berger in his book The Sacred Canopy. He was not trying to be insulting; he was just pointing out a contrast between us and all other living beings. Every dog, kangaroo, and monkey is programmed so thoroughly by its genetic make-up that the offspring of each species does not need to be taught how to be an adult.

A puppy is born with an array of specific directions inside its cells telling it how to become a full-grown dog not only biologically but also behaviorally. A puppy raised apart from all other dogs has only a minimal need to learn at the appropriate age how to bark, how to mark off territory by urinating in the right places, how to catch food if necessary, how to recognize when it is time for mating. It will not have to be taught doggy thoughts or doggy values. The same is true, generally speaking, of all species on the planet, except for us human beings.

Human identity is a highly complex mixture of several elements. The first element is our inherited behavioral tendencies. Evolutionary psychologists, the people who claim that we are inclined by our genes to favor our kin (or actually whoever we grow up with) or to anthropomorphize inanimate objects think that there are a lot of these tendencies. Men are naturally more promiscuous than women, they say. Our tendency to overindulge in sweets and fats is inherited. So is the tendency of parents to care for their offspring even at great personal sacrifice. So is the tendency of infants to explore sounds as part of the process of learning language. There is strong evidence that we do inherit a number of behavioral, emotional, and even intellectual tendencies, though the number and strength of these tendencies are disputed.

The second element in human behavior is human flexibility. There are great differences in how societies address our common inherited tendencies. We do not all share the exact same rules on how to treat our kin. We do not share the same anthropomorphic beliefs. We must invent or discover ways of thinking and acting, in ways that go even far beyond the specific influences of our genes. Long ago the human race, or our ancestral hominids, began to shift from dependence on instincts to dependence on learning. Over many thousands of years, with some prodding from residual instinctive tendencies, the cultures of humankind built up such vast reservoirs of ideas about family life, food gathering methods, mutual defense, land use, possessions, stages of life, mysterious powers, the use of tools, making music—all the categories and structures of human life—that even an encyclopedia could barely list and describe them. Because these are invented rather than inborn, they have to be learned. We have to spend many years learning and practicing how to be a human being in accordance with the norms our society has provided for us.

Because so many of these norms are invented rather than inborn, they are also somewhat arbitrary, varying greatly from culture to culture. In many cultures nudity is so customary no one thinks to notice it. In America’s warm summers, on the other hand, few businessmen notice how strange it is to wear a suit and tie designed originally to keep people warm in England’s cool climate years before central heating was invented. Some modern military groups exclude homosexuals. Yet in the fierce military units of ancient Thbes, love among men was thought to increase the soldiers’ devotion to one another in battle. North Americans feel oddly uncomfortable talking to someone who stands too close. Latin Americans, Arabs, and others perceive North Americans to be a little cold and distant because they stand so far away when talking with them. Fat white worms that grow in rotten logs are nourishing and tasty to many people. Others enjoy the flavor of well-aged eggs but think that the rotten milk product known as cheese is disgusting. A cup of warm blood taken directly from the neck of a grazing cow is a main part of some diets.

A third element in human behavior is neither specifically inherited nor learned. It derives from the middle ground of common challenges, which arise simply because we humans are all generally intelligent, language-using, and social beings who have evolved on the same planet. We are beings who must all worry about food and water and shelter, who must all create rules for communication with different people, who must all decide how to care for the very young and the very old, who must all determine whether some people get more attention than others in community affairs, who must all respond to disease or drought, and so on endlessly. These problems do not arise from very specific genetic tendencies but from our common human situation and nature.

This third element is a meeting place between nature (inherited tendencies) and nurture (all the many invented ideas we need to learn from our culture). How that meeting is negotiated by a culture is itself changeable. When a society reaches a certain level of affluence, for example, the problems of food and water change rather dramatically. When some diseases turn out to be readily curable through medical technology, expectations concerning health and longevity may change. In fact, the long history of cultural development from primitive to modern is evidence of an openness to change, of incompleteness in human nature.

Validity of the Social Norms

Clothing, sexual values, conversational styles, and dietary customs are only samples of the kinds of things which we humans have invented and which we pass on through generations. In becoming an individual personality with
mocked by others and rejected. The "housewife" was once praised above all other women. Now her identity is less secure because society has opened up more options for women. There are people whose sense of importance is still based on a racism that assumes them that their race is better than others. Fortunately, this norm is changing. On a more prosaic level, those who smoke cigarettes once were thought to look relaxed, or sophisticated, or tough. Now they may appear foolish and repugnant. Because social patterns are precarious, so are the identities built on these patterns.

Religion as Source and Support for Identity

In human cultures the major source of support both for the individual's sense of worthwhile identity, and for the security of the social pattern that much of that identity is based on, has been the religious traditions of the cultures. These traditions have told great stories about the origins of things, the place of humans in the world, and the goal of human life. These narratives hold up ideal humans whose lives and teachings are to be imitated and followed. A person can find a proud and significant identity by accepting a role within such a story of how things are and should be.

Both the section on the sociological function of religion in Chapter Two and the discussion in Chapter Six on the interpretation of religion and culture indicate how important religion has usually been in supporting social patterns. Every culture has inertia of its own and would tend to maintain itself for some time, presumably, even if religion were weak. At times religious groups oppose aspects of their culture and try to change it into something they can support. By and large, however, most societies have been quite confident that their ways are precisely what God, gods, or the ancestors established, or are in conformity with the numerous forces.

The belief that numerous powers support the culture works in two ways. First, it provides assurance that the customs are correct because they come not from confused human opinion but from the power or wisdom of the numerous. If anyone rebels against them, that person is simply and obviously wrong. Second, the numerous powers often can be expected to enforce their rules. In Melanesia and Polynesia, for example, if the king errs, the god may punish the whole people. In medieval Europe it was a common opinion that God would punish those who rebelled against the king. In fact, because the rebels are certainly wrong, they must be either mentally crippled to stray so far, or else maliciously evil. This justifies any actions by the rest of society to restrain or punish the rebels.

Thus the individual's identity can be made more secure by the power of religion to maintain the customs and values of the grand narrative on which the identity is based. There are numerous specific ways in which religion
supports the narratives, the social order, and individual identity. The rest of this chapter will describe a number of them.

**Worthwhile Identity and Religion**

**Special Status of a Few People**

Every culture has some people whose significance depends on their special connection with the numinous, whether official or unofficial. Each such person can feel his or her life is worthwhile, therefore, in a special way. Each is a somebody, because he or she is in touch with what is truly powerful and worthwhile.

There are many official roles. A later chapter will speak for example of those who are official religious leaders. It may include magicians and sorcerers who know how to manipulate mana-power, as well as the shaman who deals with the spirits of disease and death. The priest, official performer of ritual, has special status. So also are the official augurs and prophets of the temples.

Many people have unofficial ways of achieving worthwhileness or significance through religion. Numerous people today find themselves possessed by a divine spirit who gives them wonderful powers of healing or speaking in tongues. These Christian charismatics or Pentecostals believe they have received these powers as gifts (charisma in Greek) from the Holy Spirit, as happened to the apostles on Pentecost in Jerusalem or the Christians of Corinth a few years later.

Among religious believers with special roles or gifts there are inevitably a few who are consciously eager for high status in society or a feeling of importance. Most presumably are intent on genuinely religious devotion for its own sake. Nonetheless, whether intended or not, to achieve special religious status is also to achieve a sense of being right and being worthy. Even if no one else were to know that a person received special gifts from God or was able to deal successfully with spirits, that person would have some added sense of worth from this special relation to the numinous.

**Special Status for Everyone**

It is not only the special individuals such as priests and charismatics who get a sense of clear and worthwhile identity through relation to the numinous. In most cultures everyone receives an identity in some ways through religious beliefs or practices.

Most cultures give identity a clear form through religious rituals. This is especially true of the "rites of passage," those rituals by which a tribe, culture, or religious tradition marks off the main points of a person’s life (Chapter Ten will deal more fully with ritual). Birth rites acknowledge that a person has been born and acquired a specific identity as a member of this family, with its tradition and its gods. Baptism, for example, is a naming ceremony in which the infant is officially made a member of the religious group. The person’s identity comes from belonging to the group.

Puberty rites, when childhood is left behind, are important rites of passage in many cultures. The notion of adolescence as a period between childhood and adulthood is a recent invention. For most societies the young person who is old enough to be a parent is an adult. There is no in-between status. Puberty rites mark this very important passage into adulthood. Some Australian aborigines, for example, bury their young men in the belly of the earth mother. When they are released a few days later from their hole in the earth, they have been born again as adults. Puberty rites still exist in our society today, though we rarely think of them as such. For Jews it is the bar mitzvah ceremony. For Christians it is confirmation or adult baptism. By these rituals a person is asked to take on personal responsibility as a young adult member of the religious group.

Puberty rites highlight the growth of identity. Every child, adolescent, or adult has a need to grow into a specific identity, to adopt specific ways of thinking and behaving, to achieve a sense of being a specific someone who fits somewhere in particular. Puberty rites tell the young person when to leave behind the child’s behavior and begin to take on an adult role. The rites can cut down on the fumbling trial and error of adolescence by assigning specific behavior patterns to anyone who has gone through the rites. The girl who played with brothers and male cousins could do so until her puberty rites. After the rites she must avoid the company of male relatives until she is married. The boy who lived at home and addressed his mother with respect becomes a man through the rites, moves into the men’s lodge, and treats his mother as someone who no longer has authority over him.

It is not only through rituals that religions establish identity; the moral code also tells a person how to behave and even how to think and feel. Those who adhere faithfully to the moral rules can feel they are good persons. A sect that tells people it is immoral to dance, drink, or play cards, may be depriving them of occasional fun, but it is providing them with a clear set of standards that define a good person. The sense of worthy selfhood achieved by obedience to the code of behavior can be more important than a game of poker or a glass of beer.

Religious beliefs generally help establish basic human identity. They can tell us we are animals, or the offspring of the ancient heroes, or the children of gods, or made in the image and likeness of God, or godlike beings in disguise, or beings who can become gods. They can tell us we are part of nature’s patterns, or belong instead to a spiritual realm, or that we do not
really exist as individuals at all. These beliefs influence how we think of ourselves and one another.

Our Secret Identity
There are a number of religious traditions that teach that we are not who we think we are. Hindu and Buddhist beliefs, for example, tell us we are not as real as we might think. Neither the body nor even the individual self is of significance; the self we believe we are is an illusion. The only thing in us that is truly real is that which is identical with the eternal and incomprehensible Atman, that which is not individual at all.

Children have fantasies of being a royal foundling, that is, a prince or princess found by the parents in a basket on the doorstep with a note: “Take care of this baby until the time comes to reveal its true identity.” The me you see, a child dreams, is not the whole me or the real me. I am like Clark Kent or Princess Diana. Under the right circumstances I will be revealed as Superman or Wonder Woman. Plato and the gnostics held that we are not as physical as we might think. We are really pure spirits merely trapped temporarily in bodily forms. The Rosicrucians promulgate the message that we have untapped mental powers within us, that we are more powerful beings than we know. New Age writers today propose that each of us may have lived many prior lives, perhaps as important individuals in history, and have a chance to be born yet again in the future, perhaps, in roles of great importance.

The system of thought known as Scientology makes even more impressive claims. According to one report, L. Ron Hubbard, founder of Scientology, declared that we are all Thetans, members of a race of superbeings who have lived for millions of years. By the power of our minds alone, we could leap small galaxies at a single bound and travel faster than a speeding photon. But it was too easy for us, Hubbard explained, so we began to set limits on our powers in order to make our existence more challenging. The greatest limitation we chose was loss of memory that we are Thetan. All the frustrating limitations we now experience in life, therefore, are self-imposed and artificial. With the proper training we can become “clear,” our memories restored and with them our superpowers.

Beliefs such as these promise many kinds of salvation. They offer power that people can use to overcome the alienating limitations of earthly physical life. Through such beliefs people can achieve a great sense of belonging. They can also provide a third form of salvation: a sense of individual worth. After all, we are truly Thetans!

Reassurance for a Threatened Identity
The importance of achieving a meaningful identity is most visible precisely where it is most difficult. Most of us grow into our identities with a vague sense that we are what people are supposed to be like, but we all have some doubts, some problems with who we are. Many people live an even more socially and psychologically marginal existence. Living on the margins of society, as it were, they may look to the numinous powers for a sense of personal significance.

A vivid instance of this is the snakehandling sects in the United States, made up mainly of people who are poor and powerless in society, who have little education, and who have the most reason to wonder about their own worth. They are Christians who have been told God loves them, but their lives mark them as outside the usual sphere of success and competence that other people experience. On certain occasions they assemble in simple churches to show concretely that they are actually people God has blessed with wondrous powers because they are strong in their faith.

After prayers and hymns and perhaps a simple sermon or testimony the leaders will open up a box of snakes, the more poisonous the better. According to the Acts of the Apostles in the Christian New Testament, the apostle Paul was bitten by a viper when he and others were temporarily stranded on Malta. The inhabitants concluded that Paul must be a murderer who was being punished for his crime in this way by a numinous power. They expected him to swell up and die, but Paul shook the snake off of his hand into the fire and remained unharmed. (The inhabitants then decided he must be a god in disguise.) Christians have taken Paul’s immunity to snake bites as a sign of his great faith and divine protection. In lines at the end of Mark’s gospel, Jesus promises that his followers can pick up serpents. So the modern Christian snakehandlers prove to themselves that they too are specially blessed and protected by God, by picking up poisonous snakes and passing them back and forth. Only rarely are they bitten. The risk is worth the rewards, apparently, of feeling that they are approved by God, regardless of how they appear in society’s eyes.

Sects and cults in general have the power to transform social rejection into self-affirmation. Those on the margins of society are susceptible to the leader who comes along and tells them that their exclusion from social acceptance is a sign they are special. It is not because they are unworthy that society does not appreciate them; it is because society is ignorant, foolish, or sinful. By joining the sect or cult a person not only achieves a sense of belonging; the beliefs of the cult or sect also give the person a sense of individual significance, of worthy identity.

People can find significant selfhood through many forms of religious affiliation. In ecstatic visions, in priestly status, in rites of passage and rituals of power, in discovering their true and awesome identity—in any or all of
these, religious believers discover a way of seeing themselves as significant. The unusual cases command our attention, but it is the everyday patterns that are most important. The set of beliefs we take for granted about our human identity have the strongest effect on us precisely because we do not think to question them. Our ordinary beliefs about childhood and adulthood, male and female, what is natural and what is unnatural, are the beliefs that make us who we are. To repeat, throughout human history, religious traditions have been the repository and support of these patterns of identity. Today that may be changing, but that is a topic for the chapter on modern religion.

IDENTITY IN THE STAGES OF RELIGIOUSNESS

We live in a culture that is an accumulation of ideas from primitive, archaic, and historic times. We also have an individual accumulation of ideas collected from childhood, adolescence, and later years. Each of us individually and the society in which we live are a mixture of identity-patterns from different stages of individual and cultural development. Once more, the standard warning about neat categories: they are rough approximations, not the simple truth; there are exceptions to all of them. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to describe the various stages for the sake of any insights these descriptions can provide.

Identity in Primitive and Archaic Religions

As with the issue of our place in the universe and our sense of belonging, the issue of identity does not become a profound one until historic times, after the axial age. Primitive people are apparently the least self-conscious about who they are; they take it for granted that it is right for them to be as they are, to do as they do, to maintain their traditions. In various matters such as relations between wife and husband, parent and child, cousin and cousin, neighbor and neighbor, the primitive person is aware of a need to learn the proper roles and rules and thereby achieve what we would call the correct identity. But the primitive person does not do this in a conscious attempt to discover his or her true inner selfhood. The correct identity ideas are learned for a practical reason: correct behavior earns a person the continuing right to share in the food, the common hut, a religious dance, and so forth. Correct identity is learned simply as the external pattern of behavior suitable for a human being, as part of tribal life.

Primitive people in general do not seem to have much language to identify their inner selves. They often attribute even their own inner emotions to a particular spirit within or to a part of their bodies: "My kidneys grieve." We still do this today when we say "My heart is sad." But we are more apt to rec-ognize this explicitly as a figure of speech.

By the late archaic stage, perhaps an effect of literacy, people seem to be somewhat more conscious of the problem of identity. They can hear and even read about different lifestyles in other cities. Life is no longer just a one- possibility thing, so it is easier to wonder why this particular identity, out of many possible ones, is the one to take on as one’s own. They are better able to wonder about who they are and how they should behave, and why the group’s roles and rules should be followed.

Too much wondering about identity would cause a great deal of personal confusion and social chaos. If too many people question their roles as warrior or mother or prophet or servant, soon everyone might be doing whatever she or he feels like doing and everything would be disorderly. The religious beliefs often help to prevent such chaos. The beliefs explain that the social rules and roles, which define one’s position in the sacred hierarchy, are assigned and upheld by the gods. Other rules and roles might have been possible, the believer knows, but the gods settled the issue for the group. There is no use protesting it.

Archaic civilizations exhibit greater conscious concern about identity than do primitive people. They show this through a great concern for explicit social status, for honor and even public glory. Their sense of identity is not merely a practical matter of earning enough acceptance to maintain a full share in the city’s life, possessions, and food; it is also a matter of personal status. There is a highly developed sensitivity to insults in many archaic societies. Honor is an explicitly important standard. Heroism in battle is said to be admired even by the gods. This is largely, however, a matter of external status, not inner worth. The power, honor, and wealth a person commands is the measure of the person’s importance.

Identity in Historic Religions

Obviously every culture including our own retains the archaic tendency to value people according to their external success. But historic culture and consciousness adds additional standards of worth that are based more on the inner qualities of the person. These higher standards provide an alternative to external status as a means of establishing a worthy identity.

When the axial age gave birth to the historic forms of religion, humankind developed a new form of self-consciousness. Some individuals may have arrived at this self-consciousness hundreds or even thousands of years before the axial age, but around 600-500 BCE the new way of thinking became common enough, in poetry, drama, philosophy, and religious writings. It was the age when people learned to stand back from the world they experienced and ask ultimate questions about it. So it was also the age when
people became more skilled at standing back from themselves and asking different questions about selfhood. How can I judge myself and others by what they really are instead of by what they possess or their external successes? In fact what really is it to be a person, they asked.

The beginning of such questioning appears in the experience we have all had of an awkward or embarrassed self-consciousness over a period of time. The person who is moving toward historic consciousness can most truly feel embarrassment. It is not the embarrassment as such that is significant here; it is the ability to imagine ourselves through the eyes of others, to picture a "me" that is not the one I am inside myself, but the "me" that others see or think they see. We can wonder, "What am I really like to others? How do they really see me?"

Such self-conscious questions can lead on to the questions of historic thought. "What finally does it mean to be human; how do I live up to full human standards?" Historic thought connects these to further questions: "Where do I belong in the scheme of things, and what is my purpose?" These questions in turn contain at least implicitly the ultimate question about identity: what is the human person in the context of the whole universe? What is the purpose of any person or all people together?

These questions hold the possibility of full estrangement. Where primitive and archaic consciousness discovers individual problems and specific mysteries in life, historic consciousness discovers an awesomely large overall challenge, that we might ultimately not fit anywhere, have any ultimate purpose at all, or have any ultimately meaningful identity. Historic consciousness discovers that the mystery of human identity is potentially infinite. In order to find a secure and worthwhile identity, the historic culture has to discover ultimate answers to the problems of identity. It must find out how the human person relates to the infinite scope of reality.

Most of us do not worry about such ultimates on a daily basis. We live out a practical identity as persons who need to live, work, enjoy friends and family, and deal with our daily problems as they come. And yet we live in a culture where the ultimate mystery of life has become an explicit part of the religions, the philosophies, and the literature that tell us who we are. In response to ultimate questions historic religions offer ultimate answers about who humans are and where we fit. The Hindu says we are not who we think we are, but we are of infinite worth because the true reality within us is Atman, which is Brahman. The Taoist says we are enfolded in the eternal ways of Tao and must learn to accept our humble status in relation to the eternal. The Jew, Christian, or Muslim says we are beings in the likeness of the infinite God or destined for eternal union with God. Each of these answers connects the identity of the individual to whatever is Ultimate.

Each also says it has the universal truth about the relation of the individual to the Ultimate and how the individual should therefore live. Every individual can now judge his or her own worth by how well one lives in proper relation to the Ultimate. That individual is, at least in theory, no longer dependent on social approval to feel a sense of self-worth. This produces a certain kind of "individualism." But it is not the rather modern notion that every individual has a right to choose his or her own values and life-style. Historic thought links the individual directly to ultimate standards of selfhood to which every person ideally ought to conform. Socrates claimed to live by norms superior to those of Athenian tradition, so he placed his own values over that of his society. But he did claim he had an individual right to choose whatever he thought best for himself. He claimed that his values were the universally valid values, which everyone should recognize and accept. He condemned his own society for failing to live up to those standards.

The ideal self in historic religion may be too ideal. The religious traditions ask for sanctity or full submission to the will of God or complete detachment. Individuals may push themselves into the extreme behavior of asceticism, avoiding all earthly enjoyment, or into overly scrupulous concern to live a life of perfection. Such individuals may also try to impose their strict way of life on everyone around them. The famous Taliban of Afghanistan are not the only group in history to do this.

Yet the image of an ideal self can also lead to both humility and compassion. Historic religions usually say that everyone falls short of the ideal in some way. We could give more alms, be more sincere in our devotions, be less interested in trinkets and status, and so on. Such thoughts engender humility. Humility in turn aids in recognizing common human frailty. Each of us has blind spots, weakness, confusion. As we hope for understanding and compassion for ourselves in our own limitations, we can more readily extend it to others.

None of this is enough, though, to eliminate our human feelings of anxiety about our identities. Every person is still liable to suffer some lack of purpose, some loss of self-esteem, some self-doubt. Among the best-selling books today are those that tell us how to get ahead, make friends, get rich. Selling equally well are the books telling us how to become better persons. They tell us how to change our thinking, educate our emotions, gain self-confidence, create a new self. Many new religious movements try to offer instant salvation from insecure identity. They let us in on the truth about "the real you." They accept us lovingly into a community of people who tell us we are valuable. They perform rituals to give us special status. But life goes on. We keep thinking and dreaming and worrying. Uncertainties recur. The same weaknesses and faults remain in us; the easy answers were not
enough. Something deeper and more enduring seems to be needed. We continue to look for ways to improve not only our external social and economic status, but also our inner self. There is nothing new in that; the historic religions have been doing it since their inception.

**THE LONG PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATION**

In the course of many hundreds of years, the historic religions have developed and tested some basic means to achieve a new, lasting, and basically valid selfhood. There are many traditional religious texts giving instructions on how to transform the self. One thing the historic religions agree on is that this is not easy to do. Transformation of self is a long process.

A branch of Buddhist thought now known as Zen Buddhism is essentially a method of self-enlightenment. By meditations and instruction over the years a person comes to perceive that the structures and things of reality as we see it are all caught in self-contradiction and meaninglessness. When we truly come to perceive this, these Buddhists say, we will finally be close to release into nirvana. Similarly, the Confucian sage spends years in study and practice, imitating the wisdom of Confucius and generations of scholars until finally the sage achieves an ideal balance in life in conformity with li, right order. Likewise Muslim and Jewish mystics spend years learning to contemplate God. Jewish and Muslim scholars devote lifetimes to absorbing the sacred laws imparted by God; they hope not merely to learn the law but to become one with it in their inner beings. These are long processes of inner transformation that integrate certain values, habits, or attitudes into the person's continuing identity. To give a clearer idea of how such processes can work, here are two examples, from two greatly different, yet somehow similar, historic cultures and religious traditions: Hindu yoga and Christian mysticism.

**Hindu Yoga**

The word “yoke,” the collar joining two oxen or horses, comes from the same ancient word as yoga. A yoga is a way to achieve union with the supreme reality. (Often the word “manga,” meaning “way” is used instead of yoga.) A simple classification divides yoga into three types. Bhakti yoga is union through devotion, through special worship of a god or goddess who will help a person achieve union with Brahman. Karma yoga is the path of morally good action in conformity with the cosmic law of justice. By good behavior a person earns rebirth into a higher life, one close to attaining union with Brahman. The third type of yoga is jnana yoga, the way of contemplation.

The most widely esteemed method of jnana yoga is one developed in the second century BCE by the Indian holy man Patanjali. His method is sometimes called “raja” or “royal” yoga because it is thought to be a noble way to achieve enlightenment and release into moksha, eternal salvation. The goal is to meditate on reality, self, and eternity until one truly recognizes that the real self is Atman-Brahman, that there is no individual self. Anyone who achieves this recognition has already achieved union with Brahman-Atman, a unity that will become complete when the person dies. Through discovery of true Self, therefore, a person achieves eternal release from the self.

Patanjali’s way is arduous and complex. It begins with learning moral goodness. As we put aside all anger and jealousy and greed, we must also release ourselves from various attachments, all the little pleasures and irritations in life. This begins with a conscious asceticism, a deliberate denying to self of any particular pleasures or comforts. After some years of practicing moral virtues and asceticism, a person will begin to lose all attachment to needs. The yogi, the one following the path of yoga, will become utterly indifferent to all pleasure and pain, all comfort and discomfort.

Meanwhile, as the yogi learns detachment, he or she also begins the practice of meditation. Detachment from pleasure and pain makes it possible to give oneself over to meditation more fully, but there are still other obstacles. A person’s body can be a major source of distraction. Bodily cramps, a lack of oxygen, gas in the bowels, can all interfere with the yogi’s concentration. A person must learn techniques of posture and breathing and bodily control that will eliminate internal distractions. The senses also must not be distracting. With training the yogi will learn how to allow ears and skin to still function, perceiving sounds and pressures and heat, but in a way that does not distract the person. The yogi remains aware of the outside world, but his or her mind no longer pays any attention to it. The techniques of physical self-mastery are called hatha yoga. (This is the form of yoga that most Westerners think of when they use the word.)

There are yogic or soteric who have apparently mastered many of the techniques of controlling the body or ignoring pain, and who demonstrate their skills for the sake of attention or money. This is entirely contrary to Patanjali’s advice. Anyone who still needs to receive attention; praise, or physical rewards is still obviously attached to this worldly maya that keeps us from our true eternal identity. The serious yogi will not be seen in the streets lying on a bed of sharp nails or walking on hot coals; the yogi who does such things has not yet begun to understand what true self and reality are.

The serious yogi will have learned moral goodness, detachment, and bodily control. Years of meditation will reveal the limits of self and the world. The meditation thereby leads eventually to insight, a clear recognition of the truth that the self and the world are maya. In time the insight will produce an inner experience of self as not-self but Self (Atman). The experience of Self
is a moment of union with the infinite Atman, which is Brahman. This moment of union with the infinite will completely consume all the tiniest webs of desire, attachment, or illusion that might remain floating in far corners of the yogi’s consciousness. When the yogi opens his eyes again when the moment of union has passed, he or she will still live on until natural death but will have no attachment of any kind. Family, home, personal name will not exist for the yogi. When death comes, the inner emptiness of the yogi and the total lack of attachment assures that he or she will merge completely into Brahman’s undifferentiated oneness, never to be born again. This is moksha, salvation.

Christian Monastic Mysticism

The previous chapter presented a brief description of the mystic who achieves a sense of belonging to God through union with God. To achieve this union with what is eternal, the Christian mystic must endure a training process and an inner transformation just as the Hindu yogi does in seeking a union with the eternal Brahman.

Near the beginning of the Christian era, some people decided that in order to be a perfect Christian and achieve salvation in this wicked and useless world only a thorough asceticism would be sufficient. In the deserts of Egypt there grew up small colonies of solitary ascetics. In Greek they were called monachoi, loners. From this word “monks” evolved. Influenced perhaps by gnostic dislike of the material world (see Chapter Five), the desert loners decided they must give up all physical pleasures. They ate and drank and slept very little, through hot days and cold nights with little protection against the climate. Through trial and error over generations certain practical rules developed and were handed down on how to regulate one’s own life in order to be morally good, undistracted by earthly concerns, and attached only to God. Eventually many of these rules were incorporated into organized bodies of regulations followed by whole communities of people. Individual people became members of such communities and the solitary ones of the desert became less solitary, as they banded together into homes for monachot, known now in English as monasteries. From very early time women sought their own form of monastic life.

Like the yogi, the monk is supposed to practice morally correct behavior. The monk is to strive to avoid all sins. He is to practice kindness toward all the people he meets, but he is also to avoid too much contact with people. The main goal is holiness through an attachment only to God. The monk learns to avoid excessive food, drink, sleep, conversation; he learns to fill every idle moment with prayer rather than trifling conversation; he learns to see every event and person and thing as a form of the presence of God. Even as he learns to do all these things, the tradition warns, he will be tempted to become proud of his accomplishments, to be smug about how holy he is becoming. Such temptations are a sign that the person has only begun the long process of achieving holiness and has a long way to go.

A major goal that more and more monks, as well as their feminine counterparts, the nuns, came to cherish was mystical union with God in prayer. They practiced what is usually called a life of prayer; but it is not a prayer that asks something from God; it is not even a conversation with God. While it is traditionally called prayer, it is more accurate to think of it as meditation. In monastic circles it came to be called “contemplation.” It requires years of training before a person can achieve mystical union in this way.

In one classic formulation a person must first go through purification or purgation, a process of detachment from pride and self-love, from one’s own desires, perhaps even from pleasure. Then a person has begun to enter the second stage, that of illumination. In this the potential mystic begins to discover that the God whom the monk or nun seeks in meditation is awesome—great, the infinite and eternal One. This involves realizing ever more clearly that God is not imaginable, not even conceptualizable. Illumination thereby turns out to be, in one famous metaphor, darkness. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Spanish mystic, proclaimed that a person reaches God only through a dark night of the soul. In this a person knows that even the powers of the human spirit are too limited to grasp God. This mystical proclamation God’s brightness to be so great as to utterly blind a person’s mind. Those who say they can conceive God in their minds are therefore deceived. By this time the potential mystic may be entering into the third stage, the stage of unity, in which all desires and selfishness are left behind and the soul is so filled with the Infinite God that the person is as nothing. For a moment the person has become united with God, transformed and overwhelmed.

In the mysticism of the West, unlike that of India, the individual self retains his or her own identity. Jewish and Islamic mystics share this notion with Christianity, although all three sometimes speak as though the individual is completely dissolved in God. In the West, unlike in Hindu thought, a person does not have to become a mystic in order to achieve final salvation. Paradise or heaven or the kingdom of God are open to all morally good believers. Moral goodness alone, however, is difficult. Monasticism, even for those who are not mystics, is a way of life involving self-transformation through a long developmental process of moral growth, asceticism, and meditation.

For the Christian monk and Hindu yogi the ultimate goal is to unite oneself with the infinite. In this union all forms of estrangement are eliminated because now the person is perfectly at home, united to the eternal truth, fulfilling the ultimate purpose of every person, achieving the fullness of what a
human person can aspire to. But even as they work toward this ultimate goal, they are already achieving a sense of salvation. By dedicating themselves to the process of transformation, they already can feel they are giving their selfhood over to what alone is truly worth belonging to.

The Continuing Need for Long Effort
The previous two examples of asceticism in historic religions both center on a concern to achieve inner union with the Absolute. In general, any and all attempts to establish inner transformation of one's selfhood involve long processes.

In primitive and archaic societies only external behavior patterns require long conscious effort. Inner identity is taken for granted. Thus, the primitive hunter knows that only long practice with a spear creates real skill, but having an identity as a tribesperson is automatic. An artisan of an archaic culture knows it requires years of training to become an expert silversmith, but worthwhile identity is just a matter of being loyal to one's family and society.

When primitive consciousness appears, there is also a greater inner self-consciousness and with it comes the notion of perfect selfhood, an ideal self without any failings or unworthiness, a happy self without any fears and frustrations. Even if a person recognizes that no one can be truly perfect, the image of perfection nonetheless remains present in the culture. All this constrains to make a person restless to develop a better selfhood. Then that experience begins to teach a person that such development requires years of effort.

This has remained true in modern times also, as we will be seeing. Modern thought is more this-worldly and does not seek mystical union with an other-worldly absolute. In the quest for ideal selfhood, however, modern thought still recognizes the need for a long process of personal development, accomplished through hard effort, through an asceticism that includes a willingness to face years of reflection and experience.

The modern person, like people in all types of cultures, will still look for the quick fix. The primitive and the childlike in us will expect that reading one or two insightful books, or finding the perfect philosophy, or engaging in a series of seminars by psychology experts, or joining the new cult with the answers to everything, will finally make us all right. Then it turns out that even the leaders of the cult or the new psychological advisors expect that only years of disciplined community life or years of seminars, analyses, and training will lead us to the sense of worth and belonging we seek. It is not easy to achieve the salvation that is the sense of ideal selfhood. (In modern thought, in fact, a different idea will appear: that a person can be at peace even with one's imperfect self.)

Summary
This chapter has surveyed some aspects of identity and religion. Identity is a problem because we are born without one. The question of identity was not explicitly asked in primitive cultures. Archaic cultures defined it in terms of loyalty to the local gods and nations. Finally, historic cultures asked who we are ultimately in relation to the universal power or order behind all else, and even came to provide programs of growth towards our ultimate fulfillment.

END OF PART II
There are patterns running through the quest to achieve salvation through the numinous. One pattern is the set of observable stages of development from primitive to archaic, historic, and eventually, perhaps, the modern. This is a progress of awareness from local to universal, from home-ground awareness to a cosmic consciousness.

This is also a progression toward more and more self-awareness. The primitive sees little of his or her interior self, attributing even unwanted emotions to spirits acting on a person. By historic times humans learned how to mentally stand outside of self in order to look back at self as an individual with certain needs, hopes, and fears. Consequently, the progression from primitive to historic times has also been a movement toward an ever deeper questioning of self. Where the primitive person need only look around to find the one natural (local) way to live, the historic person must connect in one universal and coherent picture all the ways of life with ultimate justifications of all.

All this means that the kind of salvation offered by religion, at each stage of religious and cultural development, must be adequate to the scope of awareness of people. A primitive person who is told that salvation consists of achieving nirvana or the beatific vision may worry whether there will be plenty of pigs and chickens there. A historic person who is assured that after death there is a pleasant valley for spirits to live in may want to ask whether there is any ultimate purpose to that.

Another pattern is the ongoing threefold dimension to the mystery we humans all face. The mystery can be delineated by three questions: 1) who are we? 2) where and how do we belong? and 3) how can the world in which we live be made right? Problems of selfhood, relation to others (and the universe), and the conditions of our universe have constantly challenged people and made them wonder whether it makes sense (is intelligible) and has a purpose (is worthwhile). A consistent part of this pattern of human behavior has been the faith that, in spite of the mysteriousness, in spite also of confusion and evil, our existence is indeed ultimately intelligible and worthwhile. This is religious faith in its most general form.
Primitive, archaic, and historic stages of culture have all included a firm religiousness, assured that the mystery is the realm of a numinous reality that provides a good world (here or to come), a proper and worthwhile place to belong, and a secure and worthy identity. Modern culture, as we will see, appears at times as though it is the first culture to lack this assurance. We live in days when it is possible to doubt the existence of not only the spirits and gods but even God or any other such Ultimate. It is as though the modern age of humankind is going to see whether it can face the mystery without religion.

Something like this has happened before, however. One of the charges on which Socrates was tried and condemned in Athens in 399 BCE was the charge of atheism. His universalizing way of thought seemed to call into question belief in the gods. Jews and Christians were sometimes called atheists by the authorities of ancient Rome, because they refused to worship the gods. The axial age had introduced the idea of a God in the West as far back as the sixth century BCE. But it took many centuries before historic religiousness became so strong that it dominated politically. It then turned out that atheism, in the sense of disbelief in the gods, was actually a step to a new form of religious belief.

The modern way of thinking may well be as Bellah describes it, not irreligious but a new stage of religiousness. Even in these somewhat skeptical times there is still endless mystery, there is still the need to discover who we are, where we belong, and how life can be made whole; and there still seems to be the underlying faith that even in the presence of mystery, somehow life does have meaning. Even the modern era, as we will see, still has some lingering inclination to treat the infinite mystery as numinous and not as emptiness.

The most obvious kinds of salvation are concrete and limited—having a helpful God, for example, who can also provide life after death. Equally obvious are the human needs for various kinds of salvations, needs that arise out of our experiences of helplessness before death and life’s unfairness, of feeling lost and alone and worthless. Less obvious is the infinite depth of these needs. The mystery of where we are, how we fit in, what our purpose is, and where our happiness lies is an endless mystery. If none of the answers of historic religion is fully satisfying or fully convincing to some people in these modern times, they may nonetheless find that only a modern form of religiousness, not unreligiousness, is what they seek.

All these ideas, however, have to wait upon later chapters for a fuller and clearer explanation concerning modern religiousness. Before that, there are other aspects of the religions of humankind that have to be surveyed to provide a better description of the ways we humans live our lives in the presence of mystery.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

1. Can you identify any particular patterns of human behavior that are clearly natural (inborn or conformed to nature) and not just invented? What are they?
2. Do you see it as good and valuable that people can establish a sense of worthy identity through their religion? Why? Why not?
3. What are the main social forces or groups or individuals that tell you who you are? Which of them are religious, if any?
4. Is there an ideal self you can imagine you might become through long effort? Is religion relevant to this? Explain.
5. What are your plans to develop your own selfhood in the years to come? If this strikes you as an odd question, explain why.

SUGGESTED READINGS


Peter Berger, The Sacred Canopy, 1969. This book is difficult to read, but the first chapter contains the major ideas of the book.

Denise L. and John T. Carmody, Ways to the Center, 1981. See the sections of each chapter in Parts II and III entitled "Structural Analysis...self."

Victor Frankl, Man’s Search for Meaning, 1967. Written by a survivor of a concentration camp.
