

A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF “THE SELF” IN WORLD RELIGIONS



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INTRODUCTION

Discussing the concept of self is a little bit like talking about the concept of energy. It is considered on a variety of levels yet with very different ideas concerning what it is and what makes the best self. This is certainly true across religious and worldview lines. Even within the confines of Christianity the ideas on a self concept vary a great deal but the greatest divide overall appears to be between the eastern versus western conceptions. This overview of the subject of self will be a mere perusal of this vast topic, narrowing down salient points as an introduction to the concept of an understanding of self. An outline of views from various religious beliefs will be followed by a summary and biblical assessment with regard to what is “the self” and what is the most productive posture and attitude toward the self. A view from a Christian Biblical perspective will be propounded as the best and loftiest view of the self in between those views of eastern types of non-self on one end of the spectrum and self-esteemism and self-exalting views of contemporary western thought on the other end of the spectrum.

I. Eastern Religions:

Hinduism – Purported to be the oldest of all world religions, Hinduism sees the self (atman) as part of the Self (Brahman) which are ultimately one and the same. If Brahman is compared to an infinite ocean then Atman is a wave in this infinite ocean.¹ The pantheistic notion that Brahman is present within everything in the universe including all things from people to stones reflects a less than spectacular sense of the self called mankind. The individual self is said to be an illusion since each person is only a part of

¹ *Hinduism, Many Paths to One God*, Hinduism Infocenter, [Holistic-online.com, Internet], 2006, accessed 071307, available from <http://www.1stholistic.com/prayer/Hindu/default.htm/>

the whole of reality. All existence that we (atman) perceive to be experiencing is actually maya (illusion). Everything seen, heard, touched and felt is only a dream – an illusion² and individuals are therefore deceived about what is thought of as the nature of self in any kind of distinct individual.

Buddhism – Since Buddhism actually evolved out of Hinduism there are similarities in the notion of self between the two religions. Buddhism however takes on even less definitive renderings of self that seem to elude clear definition even among various Buddhist camps of thought. The essence of self with Buddhism is what is referred to as non-self, no-self or not-self.³ Self is actually perceived in a sense of negation. The “I” is merely an appearance. The mind and apparent perceptions are false and untrustworthy (as with Hinduism) but the immediate goal for an individual is actually that of no perception of self with the ultimate goal paralleling Hindu thought. The problem with wrestling with the reality of who is asking the question when it comes to asking about “who the self is,” is typically responded with an answer designed to liberate the individual from the self. This is why the Buddha can be asked about the self and respond in two very different ways. He is said to have given a very clear answer to Moggharaja’s practical question about the self but refused to answer Vacchagotta’s metaphysical question about the self because an answer to Vacchagotta would not have aided him in his quest for liberation but Moggharaja would be assisted in a detachment from the ever changing five clinging-khandhas of self.⁴

² Lewis M. Hopfe, revised by Mark R. Woodward, *Religions of the World*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ; Pearson Prentice Hall, 2007) p. 80.

³ Hane Htut Maung, *Buddhism and the Self*, [Buddhanet’s Magazine Articles, Online], King’s College, University of Cambridge, 2007, accessed 07/13/07; available from <http://www.buddhanet.net/buddhism-self.htm>; p. 1.

⁴ Hane Htut Maung, p. 3.

In Buddhism then the questions of “who am I?” or “What is Self?” are best ignored since individuals so easily limit themselves and their release from self by trying to define themselves. This no-self belief is known as anatta doctrine. The “I” is merely appearance and its eventual disappearance into Nirvana is salvation.⁵ The goal of self for the Buddhist may best be termed “not self.”

Shinto – The eventual quasi-deification of ancestor spirits in Shintoism presents a strong hint into the godlike qualities inherent to the individual in the animistic world of Shinto belief about the self. As Muro-Kiuso said, “Think not God is something distant, but seek for him in your heart.”⁶ Self then has the potential for realizing godlikeness, most explicitly in the Shinto emperor worship as a descendent of the sun god in ancient Shinto belief but also in the kami belief. The kami are deities of heaven, much like the daemons of Greek mythology, but kami also refer to the spirit that is in human beings.⁷ The self of Shinto belief then is a self of godlikeness or god-eventualness.

Confucianism and Taoism – Although these two religious systems vary greatly in their overall understanding of and approach to reality, their sense of the transforming of self which contributes to a better society in line with the Way or Tao have enough similarities to consider them collectively. The Confucian self is essentially an ethical self contributing to a well ordered society. This parallel with Greek Stoicism represents a humanistic version of self which contributes to a balance in relations with other persons in the social structure.⁸ The ultimate goal of the Taoist is similar. The person of the Tao seeks to, somewhat fatalistically, blend with the Tao (the Way) and be guided or swept

⁵ Wing-tsit Chan, *The Great Asian Religions, An Anthology* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1969) p. 90.

⁶ Hopfe and Woodward, page 197.

⁷ Ibid, p. 198.

⁸ Thomas Merton, *Mystics and Zen Masters*, (New York, A Delta Book, 1979) page 51.

along in life by it. The Taoist tends then to live a quiet and simple life avoiding personal achievement except that of seeking to understand and flow within the Tao.⁹ Both Taoism and Confucianism see education and a process of fitting into the whole of life in the same way. The concern is the betterment of the whole community. Concepts of filial piety, education of the self for the betterment of the whole and enlightenment through self-transformation sit at the center of both of these traditions.¹⁰

Eastern Amalgams all seem to take on various characteristics of a pantheistic relation to deity. From the goal of God-realization in Siddha Yoga¹¹ to the Sikh with a spark of the divine within, self is elevated to godlike status typically with the goal of absorption into the divine or All as an ultimate attainment such as with Hinduism and Buddhism. From the goal of a realized self whose own self is no more in the Singh's (perfected ones) of Sikhism¹² to the goal of full realization in an awakening of kundalini power and absolute bliss in various yoga teachings, self is often portrayed as closely and innately connected with the divine.

II. Religions of the Mideast

Islam – The self or personhood of Islam is generally consumed with the evident need for purification through the five stages of the self. Since Islamic doctrine and tradition lauds Allah as the Great One then self is seen as simply needy as a result of inherent evil. Steps of acceptability toward Allah take the self to higher and higher stages of life. The natural and first stage of self is the insinuating self which is wholly evil and

⁹ Hopfe and Woodward, p. 171.

¹⁰ Shawn Ford, *Reconciling Taoism and Confucianism*, [Article Online] (Kapiolani Community College's Journal of Asian and Pacific Writing, 1998, accessed 071307) p. 3, available from <http://www2.hawaii.edu/~sford/research/taoism/index.html/>

¹¹ Mary Pat Fisher, *Religion in the Twenty-First Century*, (Upper Saddle River, NJ; Prentice Hall, Inc., 1999), p. 89.

¹² Dr. H. S. Singha and Satwant Kaur, *Sikhism: A Complete Introduction*, [Article Online] (Helmkunt Press, Delhi, Sandeep Singh Brar, 1998, accessed 071307), available from http://www.sikhs.org/sikh_au.htm/

bent on self-gratification. Such is the raw untended self. The next stage of self is self-reproaching or self struggling with desires for good and desires for evil at war within. The inspired self is stage three where faults are perceived with the intention of correction toward the final stage of a maturing self which is the self at peace as a result of illumination reflected by actions in accord with what is good. This fourth stage of self is the liberated self.¹³

Judaism – Instead of the mere need for deliverance from evil as with Islam, the Jewish way of thought with regard to self seeks a connection between the soul (self or life) of man with God. A basic tenet of orthodox Hasidic teaching involves a process of transformation from an individual personal self to a higher self of connection with God called nefesh elohit¹⁴ Jewish tradition teaches that a person has two souls. The baser animal soul (nefesh-behamit) which is a basic life force animating the individual and a divine soul or nefesh elohit which may connect with God.¹⁵ Counterparts in Christian thought could be observed in the difference between soul and spirit in man with the soul as the animating aspect of life in this world and spirit the connecting point with God. The human heart in Judaism then is considered a battleground between these two forces, one drawing man downward and the other seeking to find connection with God. With the inevitability of sin in the battle within the individual, sacrifices are required in the Jewish system for the purpose of making repairs in the heart toward a higher self. Life is therefore seen as a place of battle from the natural self and toward the higher self in God.

¹³ Umar Ibn al_Khattab, *The Three Dimensions of Islam*, Ihsan, [Article Online], accessed 071307, available from <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/ABewley/dimensions.html>; p. 2.

¹⁴ Arthur Shalom, *The Nazirite in us All: Ego, Anokhi Samson & Abuse*, [Article Online] (The Shalom Center, June 2006, accessed 071707) available from <http://www.shalomctr.org/comment/reply/1142/> p. 2.

¹⁵ Rabbi Noson Weisz, *Vayikra, Soul Call*, [Article Online], (Weekly Torah Portion at Aish.com, 2007, accessed 071707), available at http://www.aish.com/torahportion/mayanot/Soul_Call.asp/ p. 2.

Zoroastrianism has its own particular brand of struggle with dualistic divine forces. Forces of good struggle with forces of evil much like the yin yang of Taosim yet with a full scheme of active spirits behind the scenes. Mankind finds a part in the struggle by cooperating with either the good or evil forces in this never ending dualistic portrayal of reality. Ethical conduct is urged simply because of the determination of ultimate destiny.¹⁶ The self in Zoroastrianism is given the choice and consequence of taking either role.

III. Western Religions:

Secular Humanism – If religion is a system of belief in which people *tie themselves to reality* then secular humanism is a common and growing religion rooted in what man might achieve on his own and for his own self. In a world where twenty percent of the world's population do not identify themselves with any religion¹⁷ the resulting default belief then is of necessity the self. The naturalistic belief of Secular Humanism which eliminates all spiritual realities from practical considerations automatically sets up the self as supreme. The self then is law-maker and ruler, man is made in his own image. Humanist Manifesto II states that, “We believe in maximum individual autonomy consonant with social responsibility.”¹⁸ In secular humanism the self reigns supreme as the determiner of all reality. The living out of Secular Humanism is the practical application of the well known words of Protagoras where “man is the measure of all things.” Self then in humanism is both lord and servant where man serves himself toward his own self-made destiny in this world and this world alone.

¹⁶ Hopfe and Woodward, p. 220.

¹⁷ Fisher, p. 24.

¹⁸ *Humanist Manifesto II*, [Internet] (American Humanist Association, 1973, accessed 071907) available at <http://www.americanhumanist.org/about/manifesto2.html/> p. 1).

Postmodernism – The self in postmodernism is the resultant self of applying secular humanism across all lines of empiricism and epistemology. It is a focus on self that is “awesomely God-defying.”¹⁹ Postmodernism has much in common with secular humanism with regard to the self yet elevating self even more in determining what is right and what is wrong. The only absolute in postmodernism is that there are no absolutes. Self runs amuck in a full denial of any absolutes existing outside of each individual self. Self is so predominant in postmodern thought that even meaning has no meaning outside of one individual’s viewpoint. In an attempt to be broad-minded about life and individuality, all meaning is contingent only on the viewpoint and perception of each individual presenting then potentially six billion meanings to any one concept contingent on the view of each individual self. Self is truly god in postmodern realities. In an attempt toward tolerance for all, even meaning has no meaning. Postmodernism takes the sense of self one step further than humanism in that any collective sense of reality or truth is noticeably missing.

Christianity – In a Christian biblical viewpoint every individual on the face of the earth has the potential to become a unique self in God and in accord with an original design. Each individual has more value than many sparrows (Matt. 10:31) because each individual has the possibility of becoming a born again child of the King. People are creations rife with potential in God! The crux of the issue in a Christian perspective of self is that He (Jesus) must increase and I (individual self) must decrease in Him (Jn. 3:30).

¹⁹ D.A. Carson, *The Gagging of God, Christianity Confronts Pluralism*, (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), p. 133.

Hebrews 5:4 presents an expression of biblical common sense with regard to self stating that "no man takes honor to himself." If an individual focus turns inward then scripture references that as a posture in the wrong direction (Psalm 36:2). A healthy starting point for self is never to be merely beginning with the self but God first and God always. Biblical concepts emphasize this repeatedly. **Love is** outward-looking because true love is selfless. **Faith is** outward-looking toward the object of faith. Introspection of the self is profitable for confession of sin but introspection for personal esteem or negation of self appear to be at the wrong ends of the spectrum for realizing God's life in a believer. The scriptures say, "but we all, with open face *beholding* as in a glass *the glory of the Lord*, are changed into the same image from glory to glory." This beholding is the foundational focus of a healthy self concept in a Christian perspective.

Jesus said in Mark 8:34 that "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me." This is not a side issue or a one time event. It is a style of living focused on God alone and is part of the fullness of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

The key for a healthy self is to set the sights in life according to God's identification of the individual in Him. The trigger that accomplishes the release of power in a fulfilled self is to constantly give thanks to God for what He has and is accomplishing in the believer. God sees His Son Jesus at the heart of the believer and in Jesus the believer is: God's child (Jn. 1:12; Eph. 1:5), justified from sin (Ro. 5:1), united with the Lord (I Cor. 6:17), complete in Christ (Col. 2:10), free from condemnation (Ro. 8:1,2), assured that all things in your life work for good according to God's overriding plan (Ro. 8:28), hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:3), in the process of God perfecting His work (Phil. 1:6), able

to find grace and mercy in time of need (Heb. 4:16), a branch of the one true vine (Jn. 15:1,5), appointed by God the Father to bear good fruit in life (Jn. 15:16), God's temple (I Cor. 3:16), God's coworker (II Cor. 6:1), God's workmanship which also means His poem that He is in the process of writing (Eph. 2:10), and also someone who can do all things through Jesus Christ who strengthens (Phil. 4:13). These kinds of things represent the true self in a biblical Christian perspective.

IV. Superiority of a Biblical View

There is a commonality within the framework of various religious views of self that have some connection with a biblical text. Islam, Judaism and Christianity all see man in need before a Creator God and put forth potential paths toward rectifying that need. Eastern views however tend to set the issue of need aside in the presuppositional framework of a pantheistic worldview where the self is merely one point on an infinite plane. From Hinduism and Buddhism to Taoism and Confucianism man is seen to varying degrees as merely a wave in the ocean of All. Self is the subject and there is no object. Man is soul and personhood is thereby lost. This insignificance of man then leads to deductions of insignificance on many levels from self eventually becoming spirits to be revered and feared such as with Shintoism to mere cogs toward a better society or better flow of Tao such as with Confucianism and Taosim. Such immaterial views have little to commend a view of self that gives any promise of future hope. There is no becoming of the self in any true elevated sense with eastern views. Absorption into the great all in eventual nirvana is questionable as a lofty view of man.

On the other hand many western proponents of secular humanism and postmodernism exalt the individual self to godlike status in the here and now in ways that

are self serving and one dimensional in outlook. Self is the subject and self is the object. When observing the consideration of self in the Bible a warning stands out where in the last days "men will be lovers of their own selves" (II Tim. 3:2). This is not stated as a good thing and the infiltration of this self-esteemism from humanism into Christianity is less than laudable.

It has been the historical biblical position of God's people through the centuries that mankind is corrupt, maladjusted and in desperate need of "dying to self" in order to truly live in Christ. It has been said on the other hand that Jesus told people to love themselves when He said, "love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:36-40). It seems more likely in this statement that Christ assumes (or knows; cf. Jn. 2:24) that we *already* love self. Love of self is stated as an apparent fact of humanity and it is not a command in the text. It is a "given" that all people already love themselves. Jesus could not have given the golden rule (Lk. 6:31) without complete confidence that every human already loves himself. Paul says the same thing in Ephesians 5:29, that this is a universal and absolute truth, "no one ever hated his own flesh...." John Stott has remarked lucidly that the very idea that we might be told by Christ here in Matthew 22 to love ourselves is ridiculous historically, definitively and biblically.²⁰ It is **ridiculous historically** because self-love has always been recognized as a reality of human life. It is **ridiculous definitively** because agape love always entails sacrifice and service and it makes no sense whatsoever to speak of sacrificing ourselves to ourselves. It is also **ridiculous biblically** because self-love is synonymous with pride and therefore soundly condemned from the standpoint of truth (e.g. 2 Timothy 3:2,4). The warning seems to be to refrain from allowing self be subject and also become the object of life.

²⁰ John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (Downers Grove, IL; Intervarsity Press, 1986) p. 35

Galatians 5:24 presents a priority of a biblical self-life. Its passions and lusts are crucified in Christ. Those passions include the passion (natural tendency) for exalting and overtly loving self. Christ's example in Phil. 2:5-8 presents the ultimate pattern of how to regard the self. He "made Himself nothing" and "put no confidence in the flesh." It is never said that Christ had a so called "high self-esteem" or that He ever thought highly of himself. It is stated that He, the LORD of glory, humbled Himself. He thought modestly of himself and did not esteem himself! He said specifically, "I can of my own self do nothing." (Jn. 5:30) Since the deeds of individuals represent a significant aspect of being, and Christ's deeds apart from the Father would amount to nothing then it may easily be concluded that there is unequivocally no worth *apart from God*. Matthew 16:24-27 says that if man attempts to "save" (preserve) life then that life will be lost, but if life is lost in Him then life will be preserved. Verse 24 declares the basic principle (deny yourself) and verses 25-27 show the following consequences for not doing so (great loss). Humanistic and Postmodern self-esteem puts too much undue value on self and consequently leads ultimately to great loss in life.

Romans 12:1-3 lays a foundation for a Biblical self-concept. We are "*not to think of self more highly than we ought, but to think soberly...*" The premise of this statement is that man already naturally thinks too highly of self. This "sober thinking" or "sound judgment," can only be found in one place – the directives of the Creator. He has made each one unique! To "*think more highly*" means simply to think too much of self. Self-Esteem teaching in western thought promotes exactly that, thinking of self too much. This concept in Romans 12 is preceded with the admonition not to be conformed to this world which would include the current philosophies of "selfisms" promoted today. Self is

the subject here and God is the object. In God through Jesus Christ personhood is thereby fully attained.

CONCLUSION

Ideas on the self are wide and varied along various belief paths. In Scripture there is no individual who can be pointed to as an example of a person who sought to maintain a positive self-image or high self-esteem or who suffered from the lack of any of today's popular selfisms. Neither is there a concept of ultimate absorption in God at the end. Believers are told to *esteem others* as better than self (Phil 2:3). This focus of esteeming others and seeing self as God's *poema* (Ephesians 2:10) is a crucial aspect of a healthy self-concept. It elevates man in the eyes of God as created for more than an eastern absorption into an eventual Nirvana and it draws man out of a Middle Eastern mindset of working toward acceptability with God through better choices. It also at the other end of the spectrum frees man from the gravitational pull of postmodern and secular humanist self-aggrandizement. It is also important to underscore that the alternative to self-esteem is not self-denigration but an understanding of the greatness of God dwelling in a weak vessel of flesh. A.W. Tozer expressed this when he said:

"The victorious Christian neither exalts nor downgrades himself. His interests have shifted from self to Christ. What he is or not no longer concerns him. He believes that he has been crucified with Christ and he is not willing either to praise or deprecate such a man."²¹

In other words, pure faith is not conscious of its own existence, it is occupied with the Object upon which it rests and pays no attention to self at all. That is a Biblical

²¹ A.W. Tozer, *Man: The Dwelling Place of God*. (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, Inc., 1976), p. 72

concept of self, looking outward instead of inward. That is the way of victory with regard to who we are in Him. That is Christ-Esteem!

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