



The Origin of the Human Self II

IN THE FIRST PART of this discussion we considered prehistory and the universe of primitive man (male and female). We saw that early man was “god-conscious” and that there was no concept of the self.¹

With a universal god-consciousness, mankind inevitably developed a sacralized or divinized universe. Today we would use such words as *animism*, *panentheism* (everything is in God; God is in everything), and *pantheism* (everything is God; God is everything) to describe this phenomenon. People worshiped a stone, the river Nile and the clouds. They worshiped the sun, moon and stars. Everything was God, and God was everything.

We now move from prehistory to the dawn of history. In the Judeo-Christian record Abraham was the first truly historical character. We know where he lived, traveled and settled. We can recover the culture and civilization that then existed.

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A “Verticalized” Universe

As the story of the Tower of Babel indicates (Genesis 11:1-9), by the time of Abraham man had begun to develop a worldview that abandoned a sacralized or divinized universe where all is God and God is all. Now mankind saw the universe as having three levels. On the top level were those who retained a god-consciousness — such as kings, priests, prophets and witch doctors. By this time both language and writing had emerged, and the people who recorded the words of those who were still god-conscious were on the second level. Down on the third level were the illiterate, faceless, selfless masses. In this

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hierarchical or verticalized universe there was domination from above and submission and dependence below. It was a very orderly system. People did what they were told. However, there was no freedom.

We have observed that, about the time of Abraham, the verticalized concept of three different kinds of people — those who were god-conscious, those who could record this consciousness, and the illiterate masses — caused mankind to develop a worldview with a three-level universe. In doing this, they simply projected a universe from their own experience. There was heaven above (the locus of the god-consciousness), there was earth beneath, and there was the netherworld (the waters under the earth). In this verticalized worldview people believed that the earth was connected to heaven by the sacred mountain. The Babylonians had a sacred mountain called the ziggurat. The Egyptians had a sacred mountain called the pyramids. The Jews had a sacred mountain called Sinai, which in the Old Testament account Moses climbed to talk to God and obtain all the rules from him.

People also believed in a connection between earth and the netherworld. The Egyptians believed that this “navel” of the world was south of Elephantine Island in the Nile River. They reached this conclusion because a diver with just one breath of air could not reach the bed of the Nile River at that point. In the Genesis story the navel of the world was in the Garden of Eden where the waters welled up and divided into four rivers — Pishon, Gihon, Hiddekel and Euphrates — flowing forth to water the earth. This writer has a friend who believes that the navel of the world is at the North Pole. “Don’t go near there,” he says; “you’ll sink into the middle of the earth, right into hell!”

With their view of a three-level universe, the Egyptians believed that the sun god Ra would mount his chariot at dawn and ride across the heavens. Then at night he would reach the earth and descend into the netherworld, where he would embark on his boat and wrestle all night with leviathan, the seven-headed serpent. Then in the morning the Egyptians would again see the sun rise, and they would cry with great passion, “Ra lives!” He had conquered the netherworld, again riding forth across the heavens in his chariot. Myths such as this reinforced the concept of a verticalized universe — including domination by those who were god-conscious and submission of those who recorded this consciousness and of the illiterate masses.

The Story of Abraham

Then God called Abraham out of Ur of the Chaldees toward a different future — human selfhood. God said, “Abraham, I’m going to show you a country that you don’t know” (see Genesis 12:1). Like the self, it was a country that Abraham could not analyze. The way there was not certain. Yet Abraham “went out, not knowing whither he went” (Hebrews 11:8, KJV). Abraham is thus called the father of the faithful (Romans 4:11-18). That is, Abraham is the father of the human self. Here we observe the prototypical or primordial self.

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With Abraham we begin to see a radical desacralization of the universe. God is not everything, and everything is not God. Furthermore, in the story of Abraham and Lot, God comes and walks with Abraham, and they talk together as coequals, as peers (Genesis 18). To briefly paraphrase the conversation, God says, “Abraham, I’ve heard of the wickedness of Sodom and Gomorrah, and I’m thinking of destroying those cities.” Abraham replies, “You can’t do that, God. I have friends there who are good people.” Then Abraham and God begin to negotiate. Here is a dialogue between God and man in a great prototypical interaction of the self. They are freely and equitably — horizontally — relational. They are negotiating covenantally, historically, decisionally. Abraham makes a decision. God makes a decision. God does not try to dominate Abraham. Abraham does not try to dominate God. They are relationally free. Here let us be clear that this historic process does not diminish God. Rather, it enhances and expands God.

Over the course of the two millennia that followed Abraham, the Hebrews came in contact with such great ancient cultures as Egypt, Babylon, Greece and Rome. The Jews went down into Egypt and partook of that culture. Then they were sent to Babylon and partook of that culture. Then they were Hellenized as they partook of Grecian culture. There thus was a move away from horizontally relational selfhood and a return to a verticalized universe. By the first century, Judaism, like the other world cultures, had a heaven above, an earth beneath, and a netherworld — hell.

False Selves

The Divinized Self. About the same time there was the emergence of Gnosticism. The term *Gnosticism* is from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning “to know.” Wanting to know the self, Gnosticism developed the mythological idea of the divinized self. That is, the self is God. You may not know it yet, but actually you are God. You simply need to become conscious of your divinity. According to Gnosticism, this is true of everyone. For example, Gnosticism says that of course Jesus was God, although he did not know it until he was baptized. The idea of the divinized self emerges under Gnosticism in Judaism and in such other cultures as Iranian, Greek and Roman.

The Demonized Self. About two centuries before this era, there was the emergence of “apocalyptic,” meaning “uncovering” or “unveiling.” Apocalyptic claimed that God had revealed the secrets of the imminent end of the world and, more recently, has been called “the mother of all Christian theology.”² Apocalyptic demonized the self. It was regarded as worthless, fallen and hopeless, destined for hell.

The Institutionalized Self. Other ideologies with false selves also emerged. For example, Rome institutionalized the self.

To summarize, by the beginning of the Christian era there was a re-entrenched verticalized worldview, with

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heaven, earth and hell rigidly defined. There was a crisis of a vertical world order in which some were divinized, some were demonized, and others were institutionalized.

Another Expectation

However, some people — shepherds, wise men, Mary, Joseph, Anna, Simeon, Elizabeth — had another expectation. Then, “when the time had fully come,” God acted (Galatians 4:4, RSV). In his incarnation as Jesus Christ, he came down to display, disclose and become a Human Self. Thus, the great historic metamorphosis continued — mankind moving toward its full humanity, and God moving toward his ultimate humanity — so that the “self” and the “other” can and will exist together for eternity.

Endnotes

1. See Julian Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1976).
2. Ernst Käsemann, quoted in D. S. Russell, *Apocalyptic: Ancient and Modern* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 23.

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