



The Parousia¹ and Destiny of the Human Self II

IN THE FIRST PART of this discussion we noted that, because of Calvary and the resurrection, we now have in Jesus one universal human Self, one universal human “Other.”² From that day forward there has been human progress as the

impact of history has increased. For example, Augustine (354-430), one of the early church fathers, penned the first autobiography ever written. Augustine was self-conscious. He was an “I.” A perceptive scholar has observed that self-consciousness as we know it first appeared in the time of Jesus, at the time of the incarnation. This human self-consciousness did not actually or fully exist until that first century.³

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Another example of the progress of human consciousness is the humanization of the arts. It was not until the 16th century that artists were able to portray mankind humanly — with bones, muscles and sinews. The German painter Albrecht Durer (1471-1528) portrayed the Christ as a full human being. It was in the 14th century that Francesco Petrarca (1304-1374) left his valley home in northern Italy and climbed a mountain just for the joy of it — to see the sights, to look at the horizon, to watch the sun rise and set.

Historical Retrogression

Meanwhile, there also was historical retrogression:

1. There was a revival of a three-level universe. Interestingly, fundamentalism reverts to this ancient world view, with heaven above, earth beneath, and the netherworld — hell. Of course, in fundamentalism, with its *demonic* self, virtually everyone is going to hell.

2. There was Gnosticism in the early centuries, which *divinized* the self. In Gnostic thought people are unconsciously God and merely need to become conscious of who they already are.

3. There was the *institutionalized* self, in Rome, bowing to Caesar.

4. Then, in the early 17th century, René Descartes began to develop the idea of the *autonomous* self: “I think; therefore I am.” That developed into the Age of Enlightenment, the Age of Reason, and into the American Revolution and the French Revolution.

5. Although the so-called Age of Enlightenment with its autonomous self was eventually abandoned, other thinkers continued the exploration by proposing alternative definitions that *animalized* the self. Sigmund Freud said that it is the libido. B. F. Skinner said that it is the conditioned reflex. Such ideas attempted to understand the self through reductionism.

6. More recently, there has been an outbreak of the New Age Movement — a blend of Eastern and Western spirituality. We find this in the charismatic movement. We find it in the World Council of Churches. We find it in postmodernism, articulated in such books as *The Reenchantment of Science*,⁴ where there is a return to ancient Gnosticism. Here all is God, and God is all. You are God. You simply need to become conscious of it. This is an attempt to democratize God — that is, everyone becomes his or her own God.

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Collapse and Fragmentation

Throughout the world we are now witnessing the collapse of the various world orders because of a collapse of the old worldviews with their deceptive ideas of the self. What is happening in the Middle East? What is happening in the former Soviet Union? What is happening in Africa? What is happening in Asia? Is there a coming together in community, or is there a fragmentation — a tribalism — being manifested? Clearly, humanity is searching for some common denominator, some common perceptual standard, something that will unite us as human. Everything that we have tried for the last three and a half or four millennia is dead. It cannot be revived.

When we go to the Gospels to examine the life of Jesus, we encounter a phenomenon that runs counter to the fragmentation of our age. Jesus made no distinction by race, color, religion, class or gender. His life was revolutionary. He stood alone at the well and talked with the

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woman of Samaria, who had a questionable history, while his disciples went downtown to shop. Surely, to be proper, he could at least have asked two or three disciples to stay with him! But Jesus defied all such customs, forms and mores. Did he have to go into the Temple with a whip and cleanse it that way? Could he not have negotiated some settlement? Why did he have to go to Bethany and stay in the home of a former

prostitute? This just does not look good! But Jesus defied the old conventions in the interest of becoming that fully, universal, eternal human Self — that perceptual human Standard. He did away with all the artificial political, social and economic distinctions.

A Historic Crisis

Today there is a sense of historic crisis. For example, the AIDS epidemic has threatened mass genocide similar to the Black Death of the 12th and 13th centuries in Europe. Besides this, there is the implosion of problems caused by the fragmentation of tribalism. It is evident that self-deceptive selves — those selves that we have sought in order to insulate us from the unknowable, from the uncertain, from freedom and decision — are dead. Moreover, they are faithless, hopeless, loveless and valueless. They have no future, no history. These self-deceptive selves have no relational reality. They are not creative. They are not transcendent. They do not have life. They do not have wholeness. They cannot decide. Thus, all attempts to create such selves have collapsed. The deceptive self may appear knowable and certain, but it is doomed to die. The autonomous self may sound attractive, but it means death and the end of history.

As we witness the collapse of world orders with their old worldviews and their false ideas of the self, there not only is a sense of historic crisis. There also is a sense of optimism. For now humanity can confront the unknowable, unanalyzable, unreflectable, irreducible true self. That self is life. It is history. It is the future. It is relational. It is decisional. It is free. It is a self that is disclosed in the Jesus Christ of history.

At this time of crisis, all can decide between deceptive selves and the true selfhood of faith, hope and self-giving love. For the enabling Spirit of the truly human Self is present with all humanity in the unseen Presence of the Risen Jesus (Mathew 28:20). All — without distinction of race, religion, color, class or culture — can respond to that revelatory Presence by exercising decisional freedom to be truly human. And all can be assured that Christ, as a relational human self, will indeed “come again, and receive [humanity] unto [himself]” as promised (John 14:1-3).

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An Imminent Parousia⁵

We therefore anticipate an imminent Parousia — the imminent appearing of the Lord Jesus Christ as that incomparable, universal human Self. He alone can unite all humanity in one community with individuality. He alone can fully create, liberate and transform the self so that we can live with him as our “Other” and he can live with us as his “other” for all eternity.

The time has come for humanity to decide to be free, to be human, to respond to the unseen Presence in faith, hope and self-giving love.

Today we face an imminent axial point in history. We face a crisis of opportunity. We face the imminent appearing of the ultimate, quintessential human Self disclosed in Jesus Christ. If this be true, will it not challenge the prevailing world order, the prevailing worldviews, the prevailing deceptive selves? Will it not threaten the institutions that rest upon that foundation? Thus, the time has come for humanity to decide to be free, to be human, to respond to the unseen Presence in faith, hope and self-giving love, and thus to manifest the spirit of “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20, RSV).

Endnotes

1. The Greek word *parousia*, translated, means both “presence” and “coming.” See *Wikipedia — The Free Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Parousia,” at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parousia: “Parousia . . . is an ancient Greek word meaning presence, arrival, or official visit.”
2. See “The Parousia and Destiny of the Human Self I,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1992.4); cf. “The Nature of the Human Self,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1991.5); “The Origin of the Human Self II,” *Outlook* (Prequel 1992.3).
3. See T. J. J. Altizer, “Replies: The Self-Realization of Death,” chap. 6 in R. P. Scharlemann, ed., *Theology at the End of the Century* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1990), p. 131: “Now nothing is more important in that history than the historical advent of self-consciousness, a self-consciousness that apparently did not actually or fully exist until the advent of Christianity.”
4. See David Ray Griffin, ed., *The Reenchantment of Science: Postmodern Proposals* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988).
5. See note 1.

This article was originally published December 1992 under the Quest imprint.

Last Revised September 2011

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