

AFTER SELFHOOD: CONSTRUCTING THE RELIGIOUS SELF IN A POST-SELF AGE

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“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps 139:23–24).

“You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Eph 4:22–24).

“Why can’t we just get along?” Rodney King’s plaintive cry during his national agony several years ago managed to capture both the besetting problem and the pessimistic mood of our age. Oversimplified? Yes. “Just getting along” makes it sound like the divisions we face in our culture—racism, classism, sexism—could be cured if only individuals would just grow up and act like adults. Although acting like adults would be a distinct improvement on much of what we see going on around us, the problems of societal fragmentation go much deeper than that. We are divided in a way that reflects not simple immaturity but a maze of worldviews that cannot cope with the complexity of life today.

In this *mélange* of fragmentations, religious divisions are among the most pernicious. Most of the world’s peoples are not just religious. They are religious with an attitude. Convinced of the truth of their religious traditions, of their ability to satisfactorily answer life’s ultimate questions, people joyfully proclaim their good news to any and all. Even though this proclamation is most often benign—even loving—in its intent, when it gets wedded to nationalisms, tribalisms and secular ideologies of one sort or another, loving proclamation can turn to manipulative intolerance. Religious people fight, for religious, ethnic and other selfish reasons.

“Why can’t we just get along?” Why—when the most important ordering principles in our lives, our religions, teach love and fellowship and brotherhood and sisterhood—do we fight, using the very teachings designed to promote peace, to promote hatred?

Why indeed? I would like to suggest that at least part of the reason can be traced to our inadequate, almost confused views of what it means to be an individual self. One reason we fight is because the way we view personhood makes it almost inevitable that we bounce against and then quickly off

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one another like billiard balls. "Why can't we just get along?" Because we see ourselves as atomistic units propelled over the green felt of life by historical and cultural forces beyond our control, bumpered by physical, psychological, and political limitations, incapable of having any kind of relationship with other selves other than the momentary collisions of events, collisions that simply send us careening off again in different directions.

Is it possible to see our selves in different ways so that true relationships are possible? I think so. Do our religions provide us with any help to do this? I think they do. But in order to show how they do, we need first to examine the developing ways the self has been viewed historically in western culture. We will deal in particular with three elements of self: the self's relationship to transcendence, the dynamic nature of self (its journey), and the nature of individual choice.

I. THE RESPONDING SELF

The attempt to find something corresponding to our modern conception of the self in the Bible is filled with the dangers of anachronistic thinking.¹ If the modern self is atomistic, a self-contained billiard ball bouncing to and fro in the game of life, the Biblical self is only identifiable as it responds to God's or the gods' commands, entreaties and creative designs. Without the gods there is no self. God has searched us and known us in a way that defines us.² Before we speak, God knows what we are about to say. Each of us is on a journey toward God, to be sure, but this journey's timetable is set by God, not by us. God has chosen the journey through creative acts and has wonderfully and fearfully designed our bodies to transport us on this journey. His nature and being are the standard against which we measure all that we think, speak and do. God searches us, and only then do we take the divine tests of righteousness (taking a test, remember, is a responsive act) and then choose to live accordingly. This self that we find in the Bible is a self, to be sure.³ But it is a responding self. It exists only because God creates us, chooses us, guides us.

¹ Is there such an entity as the self in the OT? A place to start to examine the question is H. W. Robertson's *Corporate Personality in Ancient Israel* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964). Robertson says that the concept of corporate personality "largely removes the sharp antithesis between the collective and individualistic views of the 'I'" (p. 13). G. von Rad argues that the idea of selfhood developed within the OT prophetic corpus: In the prophets "we are shown men who have become persons because God has addressed them and they have had to make a decision in his presence" (*Old Testament Theology* [New York: Harper, 1965] 2.76).

² F. J. Geiser, "The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament," *HBT* 14 (1992) 1-29, argues that the OT self is found most convincingly in OT poetry, as this allusion to Psalm 139 suggests.

³ Anthropologists, philosophers of religion, theologians and psychologists all seem to come together in agreement that in the first millennium BC human consciousness as we know it went through a shift that more clearly identified the individual self. See L. Levy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think* (Princeton, 1985) 219-222, and his "law of participation"; K. Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (Yale, 1963) 1-21, and his "axial period"; W. Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Westminster, 1985) 168, and his "self-understanding after the exile"; J. Jaynes, *The Origin of Consciousness* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1976), and his "breakdown of the bicameral mind."

It is true that in my description of this responding, Biblical self I have used the modern language of journey and choice—accurately, I think. Throughout the Bible it is clear that we are on a journey to put off the old and put on the new.⁴ The first human beings moved and migrated in and out of the Garden of Eden, the Hebrews hungrily searched out Egypt and then the promised land, the scattered Jews became freedom-seeking Jews and Gentiles—all journeys of prime importance. But the movements of Biblical peoples were more than physical, political and psychological: They were journeys in the deepest sense from the old and unsatisfactory to the new and transformed. They were journeys that had the trappings of the material but the substance of the spiritual. Both the journeys and the journeyers were chosen by God as part of a plan. Journey and choice are crucial to the Biblical view of the self.

But I use those specific words—journey and choice—because when we talk about the self today those words are the only language you and I can understand.⁵ I have often thought that the greatest culture shock any time traveler from Biblical times to modern times would have would not be incredulity at the miracles of technology, awe in the face of our skyscrapered cities, or disbelief in the airplanes and cars that facilitate our journeys, but downright bewilderment at the extraordinary emphasis we put on individual existence, on our selves. How in the world did we move from the Biblical view of the responding, tribal, communal self—the *nepeš/psychē/anthrōpos*⁶—to the modern view of the transcending self, a self that takes journeys not because God ordains them but because we want to take them and that makes choices not out of a desire to please God who chose us but out of a desire to fulfill self?

II. THE TRANSCENDENT SELF

A Hindu creation myth from the *Rig-Veda* helps visualize how this has happened in western society. Imagine if you will a huge human body, thousands of feet tall—kind of a Jolly Green Giant. According to the *Rig-Veda* this original human (*Purusha*) represents the whole original cosmos. At creation this huge integral self became dismembered and scattered to become all the many elements of the creation: trees, grass, suns, moons, men, women, children. The various parts of the body became different kinds of human beings: “When [the gods] divided the Man, into how many parts did they disperse him? . . . His mouth became the brahmins or priests, his arms were made into the nobles, his two thighs were the populace, and from his feet the servants were born. . . . Thus they fashioned the world.”⁷

⁴ Paul’s journey language does have affinities with baby-boomer preoccupation with their personal spiritual journeys.

⁵ See P. Cushman, “Why the Self Is Empty: Toward a Historically Situated Self,” *American Psychologist* (May 1990) 599–611, for a good discussion of the modern self, especially its fluidity and dependence on its cultural context.

⁶ See D. K. Clark, “Interpreting the Biblical Words for the Self,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* (1990) 309–317, for a discussion of these Biblical terms.

⁷ *Hindu Myths* (New York: Penguin, 1975) 27–28.

In one sense the modern, western project of developing the atomized, billiard-ball view of the self followed a similar pattern. The organic interconnectedness of the indigenous Biblical worldview—the *anthrōpos* or humanity in the collective, dependent sense—was broken down into individual, independent selves. But to create the modern transcendent self an additional requirement was needed—and this is the western contribution to the Hindu myth. The miniatures created out of the Jolly Green Giant had to be fashioned themselves so that they could perform, by themselves, all the functions of the original oneness of the cosmos. True independence demands autonomy. So the little pieces of the oneness, the lilliputian selves, had to be constructed with all the tiny, computerized circuitry needed to make them capable of journeys of their own choosing, chosenness based on their self-understanding and not on divine fiat. This automation took hundreds of years, but let me try to summarize the main features of the development of these tiny portable wonders.

The first requirement was a command center, a consciousness that could provide self-awareness and direction. The man who came to be called the father of modern philosophy, René Descartes (1596–1650), was looking for a way to ground his philosophy on a certain foundation. Everything was possible to doubt, he said, except the fact that “I, who thus thought, should be something.”⁸ This principle—*cogito ergo sum* (“I think, therefore I am”) (borrowed, actually, from Augustine)—became the first principle of Descartes’s philosophy and the command center of the modern transcendent self.

The second requirement was a data-collection system that would feed information to the control center. The system was easily recognized to be the senses: We see, hear, taste, touch and smell, and the sensations provided by these organs lead to perceptions, concepts and ideas. This element was actually developed as a competitor to Descartes’s rational control center. John Locke rejected the thought that we think and therefore we are, because that implied that we are all born with a set of innate ideas. Instead, Locke argued, we are born with nothing but a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*, that only over time is etched with the empirical experiences of life provided by our senses.⁹ For professional philosophers of the day this alternative forced a choice between what came to be called Descartes’s rationalism and Locke’s empiricism. In the bigger and longer-range picture, however, it added another element to what became known as the transcendent self, a self that measured its existence against its thinking self-consciousness and trusted the particular truths generated by its thoughts based on whether they could be validated by sense perceptions.

⁸ R. Descartes, *Discourse on the Method of Rightly Conducting the Reason, and Seeking Truth in the Sciences* (Chicago: Open Court, 1927) 35. Descartes resolved “never to accept anything for true which I did not clearly know to be such” (p. 19), making him sound as remarkable as Gautama Buddha, who advised his followers to subject everything to their own investigation: “Ehi passako (come and see).” See M. D. Eckel, *To See the Buddha* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992).

⁹ “Whence (come) all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer in one word: from experience; . . . either external sensible objects or the observation employed about external sensible objects” (J. Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* [Philadelphia: Troutman and Hayes, 1953] 75).

The third requirement for the grand development of the transcendent self was a world in which this self could operate. The old cosmos, saddled with a God or gods who were both transcendent and immanent, did not give enough elbowroom for rational, empirical human selves just itching to run things. These little Svengalis needed a world that was complex enough to explain the almost infinite number of sense impressions collected daily and yet not totally under the control of a too-close God. The transcendent selves wanted a world they could run so that they could control it. Such a world was provided by the physics of Isaac Newton, a world that ran with machinelike precision.¹⁰

There were problems with this beautifully constructed self and its machinelike world. It was like a first production model off the assembly line. Some tinkering was required. It reminds one of the Mayan Indian creation story that describes the creator gods failing three times in creating human beings before finally getting it right.¹¹ The main problem with the first models of the transcendent self was finding a proper place for God and the gods. The rationalist's solution, deism, that described God as the one who made the world machine but then allows us to run it, pushed God a little too far away—not close enough to provide effective oversight in the important arenas of meaning and value.¹² On the other hand, an overemphasis on the empirical side of this self eventually led, as David Hume showed, to religious skepticism.¹³ The most important things in life, however—God included—do not register on the empirical dials of a scientific laboratory. So the final piece of the puzzle that came to be called the transcendent self was to somehow build God into the mental circuitry itself. No more of the remote control of deism, no more of the skepticism of radical empiricism. Immanuel Kant articulated a view of the human mind that allowed for the importance of both empirical science and moral philosophy. To use a modern analogy, it was Kant who finally helped us conceive of our selves as totally independent personal computers, networked by language to other personal computers, to be sure, but with self-sufficient operating systems—largely because of the way our minds were constructed.¹⁴

III. A DIGRESSION: THE ALTERNATIVE VISIONS

It must here be said that in neither the case of the responding self of Biblical times nor the transcendent self of modern times has the accepted view of self been universal or even uncomplicated. An alternative vision or

¹⁰ "God made the world and governs it invisibly" (I. Newton, "Religion: Three Paragraphs," *Theological Manuscripts* [Liverpool: Tinley, 1950] 54).

¹¹ *Popul Vuh: The Mayan Book of the Dawn of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985) 163–167.

¹² See M. Tindal, *Christianity as Old as the Creation* (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1967), for the classic statement of the deist position.

¹³ D. Hume, *Writings on Religion* (LaSalle: Open Court, 1992).

¹⁴ I. Kant, *The Fundamental Principles of the Metaphysic of Ethics* (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938).

visions in each of these eras has always been present. In some ways the alternative visions have been as important as the visions I have presented. In truth, I have presented the responding self and the transcendent self because they seem to have been the ones accepted as orthodox either by western Christianity or western culture. But the alternative visions have been important—essential, really—because they do three things: (1) They help define the orthodox vision by providing creative ideas often incorporated into that vision, (2) they stimulate the formulation of boundaries beyond which one cannot go, and (3) they are the dominant views of other groups of people.

Consider the Greek and gnostic views of the self, for example.¹⁵ These were probably the predominant competing views of the self in later Biblical times, surely held by more people than the number holding to what we have called the responding self. Many of the features of the responding self would have been common to the gnostic and Greek selves. Perhaps the most important difference, however, would have been in the way the Greeks and gnostics viewed the material world as being either a less real or evil emanation of the more real or good spiritual world. This radically affected the way people of that era viewed the journey aspect of self: The responding self emphasized the horizontal nature of journey through historical time, gradually inching heavenward, to be sure, but more interested in arriving at the *eschaton*, the end of historical time, in good shape. For gnostics the goal of the journey was to escape the material world in favor of the spiritual.

Probably the primary competing view of the transcendent self in the modern age was/is the romantic self. Whereas the transcendent self finds the truest human nature in either the rational or the empirical (or, as we have suggested, both), the romantics found the truest human nature in the emotions that then generate either thoughts or sense data. In other words, true humanity is not to be found in thinking or measuring but in feeling.

Indeed it was the romantic vision that began the long, slow process, still under way, of dismantling the transcendent self. Although the romantic label is certainly not broad enough to include under its umbrella such global thinkers as Nietzsche, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Gadamer and Wittgenstein, a good case can be made that each of these giants used heavy doses of romantic-generated philosophical insights to slowly chip away at the lofty pedestal of the transcendent self. Using the chisels of volition, piety, experience, existence, esthetics and language they have so weakened support for the modern paradigm that a new vision of the self is required.¹⁶

It is interesting to note the different roles that these alternative visions play *vis-à-vis* what come to be seen as the more orthodox visions. Sometimes they are reactions against the orthodox view. The form the romantic self took in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries probably can best be

¹⁵ See T. Torrance, "The Soul and Person in Theological Perspective," *Religion, Reason and the Self* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1989) 103–118.

¹⁶ A good summary of this process is S. Grenz, "The Prelude to Post-Modernism," *A Primer on Postmodernism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 83–121.

described as a reaction against the increasingly empirical emphases of the transcendent self. Sometimes, however, it works in reverse order. In many ways the more orthodox responding self of Biblical times grew up as a reaction to the prevailing Greek, gnostic and other indigenous views. On the current scene it seems to me that what will come to be seen as the non-orthodox view of the self has emerged prior to what will eventually emerge as the religious self, the orthodox view. So before we take a look at the religious self, we must examine the postmodern or no-self self.

IV. THE NO-SELF SELF

It should not take long to look at the postmodern self because there is not a lot you can say about nothing. This approach might best be described as the no-self view of self. It might be helpful to use an analogy from Buddhism. The Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*—*an* (not) + *atman* (self) = no-self—sees the mundane self as an illusion. To prove this, the early Buddhist philosophers dissected all the elements of individual human existence, reducing them to five main categories (*skandhas*), and then tried to show that when these five elements (body, sensations, perceptions, concepts, ideas) are eliminated there is no remainder that can be called a self. Thus the self does not really exist except as a happenstance coming together of these transitory elements.¹⁷

Postmodernists use a similar kind of analysis of the self. Using different analytical tools, such as language and historical deconstruction, they discover that after the grammatical and cultural residue are cleared away no self remains. At most one sees simple traces, evidences of selflike influences, but certainly no concrete selves (essences).¹⁸

When postmodernists look at the responding self and the transcendent self they see two sides of the same metaphysical coin. The responding self looks to God for its identity, definition and meaning, while the transcendent self at first glance appears to be radically different from that because it looks to individual human existence for the meaning of selfhood, not God. But in both instances, postmodernists say, we are operating with an illusion of concrete existence, and—although the two may look the same—real selfhood is found in neither place.¹⁹

In the postmodern paradigm none of the essentials of religious selfhood—(1) beings created in the image of God to (2) take religious journeys and (3) make meaningful choices—fare well. In the no-self systems, journey is not individual but simply represents the reconfigurations of the web of being or the evolutionary progress of some kind of universal consciousness.

¹⁷ See S. Collins, *Selfless Persons: Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1982).

¹⁸ The concept of self is obliterated by the trace, “the intimate relation of the living present with its outside, the openness upon exteriority in general, upon the sphere of what is not one’s own” (J. Derridá, quoted in M. C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1984] 138).

¹⁹ Taylor, *Erring* 19–20.

Choice is a chimera. Choice makes no sense because we cannot validate our choices by comparing them with the purposes of our chosenness, nor can we validate them by the rightness or wrongness of individual actions.

The really remarkable contribution of the postmodern (and Buddhist) no-self is that it has showed with stunning power the bankruptcy of the transcendent self. It is aptly named: deconstruction. It has dismantled piece by piece the miniature Jolly Green Giants of human creation, and then by offering no alternative self whatever—by stopping short of any prescription regarding self—it has ensured that there would not be a pendulum swing back to the Biblical, responding self.

V. THE RELIGIOUS SELF

Good. Well done, I say. If we are to answer Rodney King's question ("Why can't we all just get along?") we must get rid of the pompous, billiard-ball transcendent self. Good riddance. I agree, however, with John Milbank that we cannot just go back to the Biblical, responding self: "The capacity of nihilism [the no-self position] to deconstruct antiquity [both the responding and transcendent selves] shows there can be no going back," he says.²⁰ The transcendent self has failed because it does not allow for meaningful relationships. It created the situation that now faces us, of individuals and power groups incapable of relating in any way other than economic advantage or violent force. And, if reinstated, the responding self would fail because there is not enough humility in all the world to build even one self (let alone a whole culture) capable of humbling itself before an all-powerful, transcendent being.²¹ No, to be realistic we need a concept of the self that will do more than reconstruct old ideas that have shown themselves susceptible to the wrecking ball of deconstruction, and I would like to sketch out the three main features of this new self I call the religious self—a self that is, I think, capable of meaningful relationships. Rather than talk about this in terms of reconstruction, a term that resonates with the agenda of the transcendent self, I prefer to talk about it in terms of redirection in the way we look at selfhood.

1. *Mediating transcendence.* A fundamental requirement of the religious self is that there be a transcendent dimension of some kind. Christians call this dimension God. In order to get along in anything other than either an economic exchange model²² or a power (violence) model of society, we must

²⁰ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990) 6.

²¹ Symptomatic of this are all the current theological efforts to refashion our conceptions of God, which are in the end simply attempts to make God less transcendent and thus more acceptable to the transcendent-self mindset. Process theology, discussions of the passibility of God, are basically still following the modernist agenda. I agree with W. Pannenberg that these are wrong-headed attempts, Band-Aids to try to fix a dying paradigm when in truth a whole new paradigm is needed (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994] 2.166).

²² Economic ways of looking at things are pervasive. They extend far beyond the material exchanges of life and include the way we view interpersonal relationships and the exchange of ideas in our intellectual marketplaces (academia). They occur in almost every other aspect of public culture as well.

have a transcendent reference point, a court of final appeal that we do not control or even fully understand. We need God to tell us how to live.

Now you may think it rather strange for me to say this—a Christian historian of religion arguing for God or the transcendent dimension. I do not blame you. But it is true that we have to be reminded of this. The problem with this fundamental requirement is that we live in a culture where overly frank discussions of deity will draw very strange looks from people around you. Some examples: If you say, “The Holy Spirit spoke to me this morning,” people will roll their eyes and mentally pigeonhole you as a tongue-speaking charismatic. If you say, “I must get in touch with the transcendent power within and tap into that spiritual power,” people will undoubtedly label you a new-ager. If you say, “Our culture is going to hell in a handbasket, and we need God to restore moral order,” people will be sure you are a moralizing fundamentalist. To be sure, charismatics, new-agers and fundamentalists are all very successful subcultures. But they are not representative, no one of them nor all together, of mainstream culture. Mainstream American culture is embarrassed by too-frank discussions about God.

It does no good to lament this or try to change it. It is just the way it is. It is not a question of whether God really exists or not. It is more a matter of what people can hear. In order to have any hope of influencing culture at large (not just these subcultures) with the idea and importance of a transcendent realm—in order to redirect ourselves toward a truly religious self—you have to talk about God in a mediated way. You have to talk about God using language and thought forms people feel comfortable with.

Let me illustrate this another way. You all remember those Biblical texts where notable figures talked to God and God talked to them: “Noah, build me a boat.” “How big, Lord?” Or calls to ministry: “Jonah, get up and do my bidding.” “Do I have to, Lord?” Or military strategy: “Joshua, let’s run a flanking move on Jericho over there.” “Great idea, Lord.” Adam and Eve, Noah, Jonah, Abraham. I remember reading those statements at various times in my life and wishing that I could talk to God in such a direct, unmediated way. I never have been able to do that. The reason is not just that I am a less spiritual self than Adam and Eve and Noah and Jonah and Abraham, although that is surely true. The core reason is that my self is constructed basically out of Enlightenment stuff. I am basically a transcendent self shaped to talk about God and to understand God and to worship God, I suppose. But I am not well equipped to talk directly to God. Neither are you.

So what would it take to go beyond the transcendent self’s ability (inability?) to relate to the transcendent, recognizing that I cannot recapture the responding self’s seemingly unmediated access to God, but not going so far as to jettison the idea of the self as postmodernists have done? We must talk about transcendence in a mediated way, transcendence poured through ideas and thought forms familiar to twenty-first-century human beings. Let me suggest two forms of that mediation.

The first is mediation by complexity. The only self that has a chance of succeeding is a self that is recognized to be multidimensional in its make-up and the world’s make-up. Put out of your minds any thoughts of a simple view of self, reducible to a few key phrases. Charles Taylor will help you

quickly put aside any notions of being able to simplify.²³ We must complexify. Taylor says the modern self is made up of parts of what he calls the old theistic worldview, the rational worldview of the Enlightenment, and the esthetic worldview of the romantics. Any attempt to identify the modern self with any one of these three without considering the impact of the other two is doomed to fail, Taylor says.

Put in terms of what we have been talking about here, we must recognize that the various selves of human history—the responding self, the transcendent self, the Greek self, the gnostic self, the alternative selves, the no-self self—are none of them right or wrong in and of themselves. They are part of us because we are heirs to our western culture. Indeed today, because of the shrinking globe, we must recognize that our selves are becoming even more complex, incorporating elements of eastern cultures as well. We must recognize that God's great creation is complex and multiform. It is through the very complexity of creation and cultures that we can begin to see a transcendent unity behind it all. I am suggesting that only through complexity can moderns see unity, because it is the only way for educated westerners to understand the bewildering diversity they see around them.

There are dangers in this, of course. One danger is to attempt to totalize complexity, to make complexity itself transcendent. We must guard against this at every turn. Kenneth Burke talks about the "totalizing dynamic of all human thought." For some reason we are never content to just say it. We want to make it an absolute rule. Religion and religious language are especially susceptible to this.²⁴

A second form of mediated transcendence is mediation by Otherness. Even though it is too embarrassing for most in our culture to take God straight, we cannot, as confessional Christians, give up on the Biblical idea of God. We must get beyond the human-centeredness of the transcendent self to the more realistic view of the religious self. Many have talked about the importance of recognizing the privileged role the Other must play in modern philosophy and ethics.²⁵ One philosopher who seems to have elevated the Other to transcendent status, however, is Emmanuel Levinas.²⁶ He objected to some of the philosophical implications of the responding self—namely, the idea that we can actually identify the existence of God and the creation as an ontological reality. But he also rejected the idea that existence can be located in pure being, whether the awareness created by rational thought (Descartes), the experiences of the senses (Locke), the feelings of dependence (Schleiermacher and the romantics), or simply the existential process of individual living, the alternative proposed by his teachers Heidegger and Hus-

²³ C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1989).

²⁴ K. Burke, *The Rhetoric of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970).

²⁵ P. Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1992); H. R. Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self* (New York: Harper, 1963).

²⁶ For a good introduction to Levinas' works see *The Levinas Reader* (ed. S. Hand; Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). The most encompassing of Levinas' works is *Otherwise Than Being: Or, Beyond Essence* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 1991).

serl. The only thing that can produce an awareness of our own existence, Levinas says, is contact with the Other. It is only because I am confronted by Otherness that I can myself exist. Levinas talks not only about the other (referring to individual others) but also about the Other (others collectively or, perhaps better, Otherness). It is in this sense that his writings about the Other begin to sound like God. He never refers to the Other as God, of course.

The value of pegging our existence to the Other is that it gets us beyond the exchange theory of interpersonal relationships. Michael Purcell writes persuasively that Levinas' philosophy forces us to view other human beings—white police officers, black drug dealers, manipulative media personnel, corrupt politicians—as having a claim on us.²⁷ They cannot be avoided or dismissed because it is only through them that we exist. They have an infinite claim on us—not because we owe them anything in the economic sense but simply because they exist, and we exist through them. This view makes what we usually perceive as our most intimate relationships—with spouses, parents, children—more honest. Because they precede us—that is, they are before thought, perception, sensation—they are infinite mystery. We can never own them or exhaust them. There is always a more to them that we can only be aware of, appreciate and love.

How does this view of mediated transcendence help us with the Rodney King question? As I have suggested, it is perhaps the only way our culture can hear again the questions of God and our relationship to God. Otherwise we cannot escape the prisons of our transcendent selves. Further, it happens to be true. Almost all (some would say all) of our contacts with God are of the mediated kind. Few of us have had or will have the experience of climbing the mountain with Moses to see God face to face. Finally, and perhaps more importantly, it prevents us from totalizing either God or ourselves. Since all of our mediators are parts of changing, shifting history and culture, our understandings of God through them must always be developing, deepening. The concept of God as mediated through the Other forces us to make a place for both the Other and God in our concept of self. This is where the religious self begins.

2. *Multidirectional, never-ending journeying.* This is the dynamic element of personality. Journey easily qualifies as the meta-metaphor of our age. Not that the metaphor of journey is anything new. Physical journeys in the Bible took on enormous spiritual meanings. The Israelites were not just wandering in the desert for forty years. They were trying to find God's good favor. Medieval mystics took intense journeys in the dark recesses of their minds and souls to try to draw near to God. Pilgrims progress, according to John Bunyan, by journeying to the celestial city. Baby-boomers today have made "my spiritual journey" the be-all and end-all of Christian living: the text of religious history, the creed of religious thought, the praxis of worship

²⁷ M. Purcell, "Nec Tamen Consumebatur: Exodus 3 and the Non-Consumable Other in the Philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas," *SJT* (1995) 79–95.

and liturgy. We smile and laugh and dismiss this metaphor only at our great peril. Like it or not, it is the metaphorical key to the religious self.

Just as the necessity of talking about God in a mediated sense is not really an option but the only way postmodern people can hear about transcendence, so using journeying language is not an option. It is the only way people can hear. But it is important to emphasize that the theological journey I am discussing is an epistemological one, not an ontological one.²⁸ We are not talking about whether God exists or absolute truth exists (ontology). We are talking about human understanding of God or absolute truth (epistemology). The great contribution of the antitranscendent philosophers—Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Gadamer—is their brilliant revelation regarding the provisional, language- and culture-determined status of all human knowing. Although none in that particular group would feel comfortable Biblically proof-texting their philosophical insights, let me do it for them by saying that they would have been totally on board with the apostle Paul when he talks about the futility of human wisdom in 1 Cor 1:26. For now we can only see darkly and must satisfy ourselves with being on a journey toward seeing, a never-ending journey that may move us closer and closer to God but never get us there finally.

Together with the complexity of mediated transcendence, the never-ending journey metaphor suggests two aspects of this dynamic dimension of the religious self. (1) It suggests that we must learn from many sources in mapping out our religious journeys. If all human knowledge is wise only by human standards, then no human system can be absolute. But the positive side of that statement is that many human systems—cultures, religions—will be complex mixtures of truth and error, goodness and badness. The religious self, in constructing itself, must step up to the difficult yet intoxicating challenge of separating the wheat from the chaff, using Scripture, tradition and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (2) It also suggests that we must learn in many modes. If the religious self is complex, a totality fearfully and wonderfully made by God in God's own image, then all of the faculties of that self must be used—intellect, emotions, intuition, revelation—in attempting to navigate the journey. The journey is not only never-ending but also multidirectional. We never know at any one time the terrain over which we will be traveling, and different ways of knowing, being and loving must be used to move forward or backward or upward or downward. The journey is not totally unstructured: There are boundaries, and the boundaries change as cultural conditions change. It is probably accurate to say that the current boundaries are marked out by the nihilism of the postmodern no-self, the blasphemy of the eastern all-self, and the arrogance of the western ego-self. But even the boundaries and the ways we describe them change. It is part of the journey.

²⁸ See J.-L. Marion's provocative discussion of this important distinction, which in his argument is the difference between theology that can be qualified only by faith and the faith journey on the one hand and philosophy on the other (*God Without Being* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1991] 62 ff.).

What does this multidirectional, never-ending journeying contribute to answering the Rodney King question? It reminds us that our understanding of truth (not Truth itself) is always provisional and developing. It should remind us of our finiteness in the presence of God and of the humility and openness that should engender. And yet it should also give us hope—hope that overcomes the despair that might come from not being able to know finally.

3. *Chosenness to choose.* The concept of chosenness, a great Reformed emphasis of the gospel, is under threat. In the history of the self we have sketched out, from the responding self to the transcendent self to the religious self, the concept of chosenness has undergone perhaps the most radical shifts. For the responding self of Biblical times, of course, the concept of the self being chosen is easily assimilated. If self-identity itself is based on God, then the idea of being chosen is almost axiomatic. It does not take a very nuanced reading of the Biblical text to see that God's people—first the Israelites, then the NT Church—consider themselves chosen by God to be lights to the world, cities on the hill for all to see as they imperfectly reflect God's righteousness.

But chosenness has fallen on hard times. The transcendent self directly controverted the chooser, making choice not a prerogative of God but of human beings. "God does not choose. We choose," said the enlightened thinkers. Some went so far as to say that choice is at the core of being human. Choice is being.

Such heady power did not sit well with us, of course. We are incapable of such choice. If they did anything, the anti-Enlightenment thinkers pointed out with compelling effectiveness both the dangers of locating choice in such imperfect vessels and then even going so far as to suggest that no one really chooses anyway. We are choiceless.

But choicelessness leaves religion without a home. The dilemma is this: To locate choice purely with God demands a very strong view of a transcendent, personal, sovereign God. As we have seen, such is impossible—even embarrassing—today. And on the other side of the equation, being chosen people is no less popular. The inherent arrogance of being a chosen people is as unacceptable as the authority of a choosing God.

Just one example: So often in Christian history the concept of chosenness has been closely associated with the concept of a promised land. A special people, whether Israel or the Church or the pilgrims, is given the task of possessing a land set aside for them and for their mission as a light to the rest of the world. Yet one can believe in a promised land (or a chosen people) only so long as one can literally believe in a land given by God. Biblical Christians could unhesitatingly accept this, and thus the idea of a promised land has a chance of being considered orthodox.

The modern, autonomous self, however, makes it impossible to believe in a promised land in anything other than a metaphorical sense. Lands come not by divine fiat but by exploration and warfare. The minute the acquiring of a promised land becomes a human endeavor, even if the human endeavor

is derivative or is explained through a godlike rationale, it becomes a non-Christian endeavor. Even reinterpreting the idea of a promised land as a God-directed exploration or God-ordained warfare does not make it Christian. Thus the idea of a promised land for the modern self (or the postmodern self) is problematic.

Yet we do still need to see our endeavors as God-directed or God-ordained. Without such direction we can have many kinds of selves but not a religious self as I am describing it. So how can we do it?

I am attracted to the explanations offered by Edwin Friedman. He suggests a way forward that does justice to both the need for chosenness and choice.²⁹ I chose Friedman's differentiated self rather than, say, Paul Ricoeur's "summoned self"³⁰ precisely because Friedman sees himself as a therapist rather than a philosopher, and it seems to me that a therapist has a better chance of implementing an ambiguity than does a philosopher. Friedman's position is that in order to be an authentic self a self must be willing to clearly define itself over against other selves. But each differentiated self can only be understood in the relational system in which it finds itself: one of three families. If a self does not differentiate itself, it loses much of its capacity to be an effectively functioning self and sets itself up for a pathology. On the other hand, if the dynamics of the groups that embody a differentiated self are not recognized the self cannot be properly differentiated.

This seems to me to be a good example of combining the need to be chosen, in this case the mediation of the family system, with the need to choose, in this case the differentiated self. The responding self of Biblical times (a self completely chosen) cannot be duplicated today because we need our transcendence mediated through more mundane systems. The transcendent self cannot ultimately admit of any chosenness because to do so limits the autonomy of the essential self. Being chosen to choose—that is, recognizing that my self can only function in a context over which I have little control, but that what control I have consists in choosing to define myself in that context—seems the only way we have to satisfy the requirements of the religious self.

An example: A recent issue of the *Utne Reader* has an article on jazz music, including an interview with Wynton Marsalis, the virtuoso trumpet-playing jazzman.³¹ "Playing jazz means learning to respect individuality," Marsalis said. "It teaches you how to have a dialogue, with integrity." Jazz music respects the context of its music, the melody (in my example, the chosenness), but also allows each musician a chance to express individuality within the boundaries of the context (in my example, choice). It seems to me that the religious self must embody both.

How does this feature help us with the Rodney King question: "Why can't we just get along?" Because this one, even more than the first feature—

²⁹ E. Friedman, *Generation to Generation* (New York: Guilford, 1985).

³⁰ P. Ricoeur, "The Summoned Subject in the School of the Narratives of the Prophetic Vocation," *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) 262–275.

³¹ T. Scherman, "The Music of Democracy," *Utne Reader* (March-April 1996) 29–36.

mediating transcendence—gets us back to the essential Christian question of recognizing that selfhood, in the end, is not something we produce or manufacture but something that comes as a result of God's grace. Chosen to choose. Chosen by whom? God's grace. To choose what? God's grace. Toward what end? God's grace—that is, spreading the message of God's grace to any and all, and hearing God's grace in every human voice, every bird's song, every thunder's roll.

VI. CONCLUSION: SOME PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

We find ourselves, it seems to me, at the cusp of a change in our view of the self, a change from an increasingly discredited modern, transcendental self to who knows what. The transcendental self foundered on its inability to find a proper place—ironically, given its name—for transcendence. We have attempted to find a place for transcendence in ourselves and failed. We have attempted to locate it solely in agnostic mystery and so far failed. I suppose a case can be made that the historical jury is still out on both of those experiments. But I for one am ready to pronounce the first as leading only to insanity and the other to nihilism. I may be wrong, of course. But in case I am not, what is our alternative? I think it is the religious self, a self that relates to transcendence as mediated through a variety of mundane structures that reveal that transcendence, a revelation that produces a journey toward understanding, an understanding that allows for both individual personhood and a thorough dependence on context and community.

In case that is close to being right, what are the more practical hurdles before the religious self becomes a cultural reality? I suggest two.

1. *Religion is currently seen as part of a problem to solve, not part of the solution.* Let me be more specific: Christianity is currently seen by both culture and most Christian theologians as part of the problem, not part of the solution. That perception must change. Both Christianity and the world's religions represent an enormous storehouse of wisdom that must be poured into the forms of modern culture. Current wisdom is to relegate religion to the margins of society and the internal workings of the individual psyche. My contention is that that is precisely why religion is such a problem rather than playing its true role as harbinger, guide, evaluative standard, and cheerleader toward the solution.

2. *Overcoming the transcendental self even as we are still appealing to the transcendental self.* The Church finds itself in a double bind: We are both critic and caretaker of the transcendental self.

We are critics because no single group of people sees the intractable problems of the transcendent self in a more immediate way than pastoral practitioners. Church leaders, better than any other group of people (save perhaps the medical profession), are the ones who see the creeping insanity of modern living, the desolation, isolation, melancholia, and depression that

like a rising tide of blackness threatens to encompass us all. One must be blind not to see that something is desperately wrong. Ask Rodney King.

But we are also caretakers of the transcendent self. We heal in whatever way we can even if it means bandaging up wounds the best we can without changing the essential structures that inflicted them. But even worse, we are also put in the uncomfortable position of having to appeal to a marketing-oriented culture constructed to take advantage of a culture full of transcendent selves. To make ourselves, our churches, our religion appealing we must cast it in ways that perpetuate rather than criticize the individualism, egoism, and unhealthy independence of transcendental selves. To not do a certain amount of this risks losing even the small voice we have now.

Yet we must move forward. We must create change, even if the change comes slowly. We pray for God's wisdom as we attempt to make our world a better reflection of God's great intention for us.