

# 1 God and the Self

The personal in man is just that in him which he does not have in common with others, but in that which is not shared with others is included the potentiality of the universal. But personality is not part of the universe, the universe is a part of personality, it is its quality. Such is the paradox of personalism.

– Nikolai Berdyaev, 1949, p. 22

In the quote above, the Russian philosopher Berdyaev hints at the “personalist” idea that the Self, while utterly unique, nonetheless contains a universal content that makes the Self an end in itself. The Self is something that cannot be regarded as a means to some end no matter how praiseworthy, but rather is an end that is irreplaceable, precious, and infinitely valuable. Its dignity lies in its rationality, its universal content, its irreplaceability – a consciousness that can deliberate rationally about moral ends and choose the good and the true.

This book will examine religion through the eyes of this Self. There are, of course, many ways to study religion, but I believe an approach to religion through the lens of the Self will prove especially fruitful because one of religion’s major self-proclaimed aims is the salvation of the individual Self. Despite the Self’s great dignity and worth, it is treated by religion as conflicted and in need of salvation. The sacred texts of both

the theistic and nontheistic forms of religion explicitly claim that they provide a “way” or set of practices that will eventuate in individual salvation. Thus, by studying religion through the eyes of the individual Self, we will be taking religion’s own claims about itself seriously.

A second reason for studying religion through the eyes of the Self is that, on the face of it, many religious forms and practices are about transformations of the Self. This focus on transformation of the Self, of course, follows logically from religion’s claim that the Self is in need of salvation. Many religious rituals, practices, texts, and institutions are very clearly oriented toward transforming the individual from one state or status into another state or status. For example, many religions in ancestral or traditional societies practiced rites of initiation that would transform an adolescent into an adult. Religions both East and West provide a multitude of individual devotional practices that allow an individual to communicate with and receive guidance from a God and that help to inspire confidence, resilience, and courage. Other ritual practices include healing an individual who has become sick, forgiving an individual who has become lost, and comforting an individual who has become bereft. Many of the prayers, rituals, devotional practices, chants, and hymns found in all the world religions are formulated in the voice of the individual “I.” Thus, our focus on the Self when studying religion has face validity. Whatever else it is, religion is very much about transforming the Self and is addressed to the needs of the Self.

A third benefit of looking at religion through the eyes of the Self is that the method will require that we give due regard to the role of the brain in the shaping of religious experiences. There is no human Self that is not embodied. Because no body can function without a brain, there is no human Self without the brain. Consequently, no account of religion’s impact on the Self will be complete without an account of how the brain helps to shape expression of both religion and the Self. Obviously, this does not mean that both the Self and religion are only products of the brain. Rather, it means that the brain matters. It counts. To fully understand religious experience, particularly at the individual level, we will need to take into account the brain regions that support religious expression. In the West, the contrary idea that matter and embodiment

do not matter was an old Gnostic idea that the Church Fathers fought against and refuted in the first centuries of the Common Era. Despite the ancient roots of the debate, there are still some authors who argue that the body and brain do not matter or at least are of no real importance relative to “things of the spirit,” like culture. A careful examination of religion’s impact on the Self will demonstrate the crucial importance of the brain in shaping religious experience and that the old Gnostic position on “matter” and embodiment is scientifically untenable.

A fourth benefit of looking at religion through the eyes of the Self is related to this idea of the importance of the brain in understanding religious experience and expression. It is obvious to anyone who has ever reflected on religion’s effects on individuals that some of those effects can be quite harmful and even dangerous. Religion produces its share of saints and sinners, as well as visionaries and fanatics. As the events of September 11, 2001, and the international response to those events clearly demonstrate, religion can effectively inspire the most heinous of crimes. Why does religion have this ability to create the most desperate fanaticism and the most sublime saintliness in individuals? I will suggest that part of the answer to that question lies in a detailed understanding of how the brain and cognitive system support the interaction of Self and religious experiences.

A fifth benefit of looking at religion through the eyes of the Self is that we will be obliged to study a whole range of disorders involving changes in religious expression that afflict real people. If we can extend knowledge in this area, it may actually help people with these disorders. We will see in the chapters that follow that there are several disorders of the mind/brain that centrally involve religion in one way or another. Take, for example, schizophrenia with religious delusions. These unfortunate people can experience the most horrific auditory “command” hallucinations involving voices of supernatural agents who demand that the patient harm him- or herself or others. Or take the case of temporal lobe epilepsy (TLE). There have now been dozens of studies that convincingly demonstrate a link between some forms of TLE and heightened religiosity in some TLE patients. During preictal and ictal states, when seizure activity is building up or commences, the religious symptomology may

escalate into delusional states during which the patient claims that he or she is God or has seen God face to face. These beliefs may prompt the patient to engage in dangerous or reckless behaviors. Or take a subclass of patients with obsessive-compulsive disorder – namely, the subclass of patients with scrupulosity. These patients may be riddled with anxiety and may spend hundreds of hours each week attempting to say a single prayer “correctly.” Or take the case of so-called “demonic possession” states. These patients may become utterly convinced that they are controlled by an evil and alien agent that means them harm. Some patients may be so tortured by the possession experience that the state can be life threatening. Whatever the multifarious causes of these various psychiatric and brain disorders, the patients’ religious beliefs are absolutely central to the phenomenology and clinical outcomes of the disorders. Thus, we will need to bring in an understanding of how religion works at the level of the mind/brain to understand and help someone with these sorts of disorders. To the extent that our study of religion’s effects on individuals reveals clinical mechanisms of these religion-related disorders, our work may actually benefit some persons with these disorders.

A sixth benefit of looking at religion through the eyes of the Self is that you can test various theories of religion by careful examination of the predictions of those theories for the life of the individual Self. For example, suppose you theorize, as did Durkheim (1954) and many others after him, that religion functions to create within-group cooperation and solidarity. If true, the solidarity theory would predict that religious individuals would develop signaling strategies to identify and cooperate with in-group members. In other words, the solidarity theory predicts specific individual-level effects that can be tested by looking at individual behaviors. Signaling behaviors in particular must rely on the brain to be expressed, so once again, study of the Self’s brain can illuminate theoretical constructs in the science of religion, in this case signaling theory. Another way to look at this benefit is to consider this fact: If you think religion promotes within-group cooperation, you can certainly test the theory by comparing religious groups to nonreligious groups on some measure of within-group cooperation. If you found that the religious group evidenced greater within-group cooperation than the nonreligious

group, you would certainly have evidence that religion does indeed promote cooperation. What you would not have is an explanation as to how, at the individual level, religion promotes within-group cooperation. To obtain that sort of evidence, you would do well to look at the individual.

For all of these reasons, we will use the Self to probe potential core properties and functions of religion. Conversely, we will also examine the ways in which religion helps to produce and shape the Self. In the process, we will cover a fair amount of ground on both the properties of the Self and of religion. In doing so, we will end up with the materials that will motivate a new theory of both the relation of the Self to religion and the functions of both the Self and religion.

To forecast the main contours of the new theory of religion's effects on the individual, I will propose the following in this book: Insofar as religion is concerned with the Self, it functions to provide a range of techniques that have the effect of transiently "decentering" the agentive or executive Self. Decentering will be explained more fully in Chapter 3. Suffice it to say here that decentering involves a temporary decoupling of the Self from its control over executive cognitive functions and a search for some more effective controlling agency over cognitive resources and mechanisms. The idea is that religious practices create a decentering effect that transiently relaxes central control but that leads ultimately to greater self-control. Depending on the intensity of the decentering mechanism effected by a particular religious practice, operations and consciousness of the central executive Self are transiently suspended, and thus the individual enters a liminal state. That liminal state is filled with potentially positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, decentering puts the individual into a receptive and integrative mode, allowing the individual to perform a lot of off-line maintenance and integrative information-processing tasks. Religious practices and rituals provide the protective cognitive scaffolding to promote integration of all kinds of cognitive and emotional content in such a way as to put that content into the service again of the executive or agentive Self. This Self is enriched, transformed, and transfigured by religious beliefs and practices – depending on the intensity of those beliefs and practices. Another positive benefit of the decentering process is that the individual enters

a kind of transient, trance-like state that promotes healing capacities of the organism. On the negative side of the ledger, the decentering process can, depending on context, lead to dangerous, disintegrative psychic states including fanaticism and psychotic and delusional states.

I will show that one can observe the mechanics of the decentering process by examining disorders that include a change in religious expression as part of the clinical picture. One can even see decentering at work in brain-damaged patients who spontaneously express changes in their religious interests. Studies of these same patients, along with studies of healthy research participants, are yielding a picture of the ways in which the brain shapes and mediates both normal and extreme religious experiences. These neuropsychological data also demonstrate considerable overlap between brain regions implicated in the Self-construct with regions implicated in religious experiences.

I claimed earlier in this chapter that the examination of religion from the point of view of the Self would also yield a new theoretical perspective on the nature and functions of the Self. This is what I mean: When we look at how the decentering process works and what its functional effects are, it soon becomes clear that the central executive Self functions to unify a range of capacities possessed by the individual so that the individual can more effectively pursue goals and desires. The Self is a tool that is specialized for accessing and orchestrating skills and processing resources and knowledge domains in service to the individual. Selves can access, create, orchestrate, and realize new human capacities and powers. They should be seen, in part, as tools or perceptual devices created by cultural beliefs and practices and put in service to an individual such that that individual can vastly increase his fitness by enhancing his cognitive and behavioral capacities. Insofar as religion is about individuals, it can be seen as an exquisitely attuned set of cultural practices that assists Selves in the process of creating new human cognitive powers and capacities. I will support all of these claims in the course of this book.

First I will begin by laying out a general picture of the relationship between religion and the individual, between religion and reason. Recall that the individual, the Self, is defined by its universal content – its ability to reason, to act as a rational agent. Thus, the relationship between

religion and the Self will be defined by the relationship between religion and reason.

*Fides et ratio.* Reason and religion have more often been seen as enemies than as friends ever since the emergence of philosophy among the peoples of the ancient world. As the religions of the “Book” (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) emerged and came into interaction with the philosophers of Greece in the West and India in the East, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim theologians attempted to find ways to reconcile reason with the revealed truths of their respective traditions. These efforts climaxed in the twelfth century of the Common Era in the universities of Paris and in the land of Al-Andalus when Andalusia was still ruled by the Muslim Almoravids. An accommodation between reason and religion was reached during this era such that religious truths were seen as consistent with reason. When inconsistencies were noted, it was assumed that more work needed to be done so that the inconsistencies could be overcome. It was assumed that inconsistencies were due to our own ignorance rather than to any supposed inherent flaws in either reason or religion.

In the West, the inconsistencies between reason and religion became more pressing and sharp with the rise and spectacular successes of science and technology beginning in the sixteenth century.

During the Age of Enlightenment in Europe, it became fashionable to excoriate religion as an absurdity and an infamy. The scientist, in turn, was cast as a kind of lone hero, working courageously against the ignorance, stupidity, and willful superstitions of the communities around him . . . and, despite almost overwhelming odds and great self-sacrifice, the courageous scientist was able to achieve intellectual breakthroughs of the first magnitude that benefited the very people opposed to his scientific research.

The irony of such myth-laden accounts of the “struggles between reason and religion” is that most of the early scientists were profoundly religious men. Whatever the truth and merits of this standard myth regarding the role of the scientist in society, it has certainly helped to recruit armies of young men who want to be seen as heroes fighting in the noble cause of “the battle against religion, superstition, and ignorance.” These young “heroes,” despite their self-infatuation, have certainly made enormous contributions to knowledge and indeed to all of humanity. These

contributions, however, have to be attributed, at least in part, to the greatness of the scientific method rather than to any particular heroic efforts of the scientists themselves. Despite big egos, petty political agendas, and huge economic influences, reason and fact tend to win out in science. Again, this is due to the greatness of the scientific method. This is not to neglect the ways in which scientific and technical advances can be put in service to some pretty destructive political purposes. Science produces both technical marvels and a monstrous technics (such as nuclear and chemical weaponry) as well. As Lewis Mumford (1966) pointed out, unless humanity controls its machines, the machines will control humanity. It may be that only religion can control the machine.

If the three great monotheistic religions arrived at a consensus understanding of the relationship between reason and faith during the Middle Ages, that consensus did not survive the period of the Renaissance. What happened to that consensus? How did religion get painted as antisience and irrational? How did religion get branded as irrational?

As just mentioned, the standard answer to that question has been that religion repeatedly opposed scientific advances and thus was seen as a retrogressive and fundamentally irrational force. Again, that explanation cannot be correct given the fact that many scientists were religious men and many churches and religious groups supported the advancement of science in myriad ways from the founding of universities to funding huge scientific research projects. So then, how did religion get branded as irrational?

There are very likely many factors that fueled the reason–religion divorce in the West that began at the time of the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. During the Reformation, for example, some religious people began to call themselves irrational. The principle of “sola scriptura,” or the use of scripture alone rather than tradition and reason to guide behavior, could be seen by some as an antirational trend in religion. The overemphasis on personal faith as the primary route to salvation had the side effect of valuing a stance (trust, faith) over rational deliberation about moral choices and so forth. The sola scriptura doctrine shifted the accent away from rational interpretative traditions and argument onto the individual with his idiosyncratic interpretative tendencies and his haunted, lonely conscience. That move alone would



not have been fatal to the reason–religion relationship had it not been for the second idea – that faith alone saves. If faith was all that really counted, then you did not need established and rationally justified doctrines, traditions, priests, rituals, or institutions. Indeed, these things were even considered harmful. Faith was explicitly analyzed by some religious thinkers (e.g., Calvin; Kierkegaard) as fundamentally an irrational process, but religion need not be fundamentally irrational or antiscience. Scientific and technical innovation can proceed quite nicely without claiming that religion is irrational. Indeed, science has developed in all cultures on the planet regardless of their position on the reason–religion relationship.

As seen from the point of view of the Self or the individual, reason and religion cannot be opposed. Scientific work on the anthropology, psychology, and biology of religiousness has shown that religiousness is deeply embedded in the human psyche. Religiousness appears to be a human cultural universal and may even turn out to be a trait that is strongly influenced by standard, nonmysterious, evolutionary forces like any other biologic trait. Like that other quintessentially human skill, language, religiousness displays many of the telltale signs of a classic, evolutionarily shaped adaptation or suite of adaptations. Belief in supernatural agents, for example, appears to be acquired relatively effortlessly by children. Children do not need to be force-fed religion; they naturally develop religion’s basic component processes. Religiousness, furthermore, varies continuously, as does any other personality trait. Some families and persons are “better” at religiousness than others. Religiousness is heritable. When one twin is religious, the other will likely be religious as well. There are genes that are consistently associated with high scores on religiousness scales. Religiousness, finally, has a definite biology: Some drugs enhance religiousness whereas others diminish it; some brain regions are more consistently associated with religiousness than are others, and so on. We will review all of this evidence in the pages to come.

If we assume, as I think we should, that all of this psychobiological evidence suggests that religion has some sort of functional benefit for individuals, then it follows that whatever else religion is, it is NOT merely irrational or a delusion, unless of course delusions are functional. Although there may be some delusions (e.g., positive illusions about the Self)

that might be functional and therefore positive for the individual, these do not rise to the level of organization characteristic of religious ideas. My illusions about my wonderful abilities and character are not always shared by those people who interact with me on a daily basis. My religious beliefs, however, often are shared. They are more elaborate, more developed, and more demanding than are my personal illusions. My personal illusions accommodate my self-conceit, whereas my religious beliefs demand a better me. Religion therefore cannot be considered a personal illusion – even a positive one.

Instead, religion appears to serve some functional purpose for the individual. How do we identify that purpose? One way to identify potential functional benefits of religion for the individual is to investigate its mechanisms or how religious experiences are mediated by the brain and the cognitive system. By observing how something works, we can sometimes make reasonable inferences as to its function. Although it is clear that we can often better understand the mechanism of a thing by first understanding its function, in many instances we do not know the function of the thing. All we have before us is the thing itself or some basic knowledge about its workings or mechanisms. We can sometimes observe the workings of a thing to get clues about its functions. In these cases we can “reverse engineer” a mechanism to discover clues as to its function. This situation is the one we are in with respect to religion. By observing which brain regions are engaged during religious experiences or behaviors, we can get some clue as to what types of information are being processed and what types of information are not being processed during the experience. Attention to brain mechanisms of religious experiences and behaviors can therefore yield critical clues as to potential functions of religion.

There are problems, however, with basing a scientific enquiry on the reverse-engineering strategy when subjective experiences of a person or persons are involved. First, we can't see subjective experiences, and thus it is a bit harder (although not impossible) to measure them. We are one step removed from the object of study because we have to measure reports about experience instead of experience itself. Here is where the focus on the brain really helps. With modern neuroimaging technology,