Articles

BEING RELIGIOUS: WORKING AT SELF-MAINTENANCE AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION

by Ward H. Goodenough

Abstract. We see religion in the things people treat as crucial to what they are and to what they aspire to become, things that make the biggest difference in how people feel about themselves. They may be social aspects or personal (behavioral or characterological) aspects of the self. The things people are militant about, the practices in regard to which they are most scrupulous, and the things about themselves that distress them are indicators of where their religious concerns lie, whatever the subject matter. People work to maintain themselves as they want to see themselves and as they want others to see them; they seek ways to repair damage to their selves. They seek also to transform themselves so as to escape present unhappy definitions of self and to achieve ideal states of being. What needs to be changed may be perceived as aspects of personal self, as attitudes other people have toward otherwise unchangeable aspects of self, or as the entire socio-political system in which people feel trapped. The process by which people manage successfully to transform themselves includes social cooperation, including the formation of groups to provide mutual reinforcement.

Keywords: religion; religious movements; self-maintenance; self-transformation.

By my appearing to equate being religious with working at the maintenance and transformation of the self, I know that many will feel that I am defining religion in much too broad terms.[1] One of the ways we work at such maintenance and transformation may well be through religion, but many of the ways we do this fall outside the bounds of what constitutes religion as we are accustomed to thinking about it. We whose institutional

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heritage derives from Europe and the Near East have seen religion in terms of affiliation with one or another competing versions of divinely inspired truth about the creation, the meaning of human existence, the definition of good and evil, the nature of something we call God, our obligations to that something, the possibility of life after death, and pathways to the achievement of an ideal state of being, whose achievement is embodied in our term "salvation." All of this, of course, involves answers to questions about who and what we are, where we belong in the universal scheme of things, what we should try to become, what we should be doing in order to get there, and what our resources are for doing it—all of it, that is, has to do with work relating to the self.

Religion and Being Religious

In our own cultural tradition, it is a matter of critical importance for many as to whether one is a Christian, a Jew, or a Muslim; a Shiite or a Sunni Muslim; a Hassidic, Orthodox, or Reform Jew; a Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, or Protestant Christian; and so on. These are among the most important labels by which many people define themselves to themselves and to others. It is the deeply committed identification of self with one of these that makes it our religion. If I have no great commitment to being a Christian, I can scarcely claim that Christianity is my religion. It is, evidently, the significance of one of these labels as an aspect of a person's self that makes whatever is subsumed under it something we consider to be that person's religion.

Suppose, now, that it does not matter to me, having been reared in the Episcopal Church, whether I see myself or am seen by others as a good Episcopalian Christian; and suppose that it matters enormously to me whether or not I can see myself and be seen by others as a successful businessman, whatever that label may subsume. One cannot say that I am making my religion in the Episcopal Church. You may balk at saying that I am making my religion in the arena of business; but popular recognition that that is just what is happening is evident when one hears it said that someone is "making a religion of his business." From this point of view, we see religion in those things that people treat as crucial to what they are and to what they aspire to become, the things that make the biggest difference in how they feel about themselves, especially in their sense of personal worth. It may be social aspects of the self, or personal characteristics, or some combination of both that make the big difference.

Militancy in the face of challenge about how to do things and what to believe is, of course, one of the signs that practices and beliefs serve a person in a religious way. Scrupulous, if not compulsive, observance of particular behavioral forms and unease, anxiety, or outright distress at not being able to observe them are also signs of this, as are anguish and remorse over something one has done or not done. We are not scrupulous in

observing everything we do, we do not feel anguish or remorse over all of our lapses, and certainly we are not militant about everything we accept as right and true.

When we look at the things people around us are militant about, the practices in regard to which they seem to be most scrupulous, and the things about themselves that make them unhappy or distressed, we have important indicators of where their religious concerns currently lie. They may lie in business, in politics, in morality, in keeping up with the Joneses, in the "right to life" or the "right to choice," in the virtue of free enterprise as against socialism, in the sacredness of the "American Way," or in the trinitarian as against the unitarian view of God.

Our object on this occasion, then, is to turn from thinking about religion as a body of doctrine and ritual relating to a supernatural being. Instead, we propose as an intellectual and spiritual exercise that we examine religion as something that is manifested in human behavior by virtue of the emotional investment people have in it as being crucial to their identities as persons. Indeed, instead of talking about religion with a capital R, let us think about religious behavior or, as in the title of this essay, about what is involved in "being religious." We are focusing our thinking, then, on being and becoming, on what is involved in the emergence, maintenance, repair, and transformation of human selves.

Forming and Maintaining a Self

It is now taken as given in social and psychological thinking that each of our individual selves emerges as we have sensory inputs through our physical activity and through our encounters with other entities, animate and inanimate, in our environment. Out of these sensory inputs, each of us distills our conceptions of the world in which we live and of ourselves as parts of it. Our experiences are varied, and so are the ways we come to feel ourselves as selves. A consequent problem for almost every one of us is to try to find ways of understanding our world and our place, or possibly places, in it so that we can situate ourselves in it—physically, socially, and behaviorally—in ways that allow us to feel all right about ourselves as we are or that give us hope for achieving such a feeling in the future.

The experiences from which humans largely derive their sense of self, especially in early life, are social. Thus the arenas in which we come to know ourselves as human beings are freighted with intentionality and emotion. The world we must understand and with which we must come to terms in order to feel all right about ourselves is one filled with actors, human and animal, and with forces like those we associate with sun, wind, and rain, all of which sometimes buffet us and make us unhappy and at other times delight us. There are many ways we can construe it all, but given the early social matrix of self-experience, it is almost inevitable that we shall interpret much that goes on in the world in animate terms, whether

we attribute spirit beings to things in nature or see events in nature as instruments of the intentionality and emotionality of a few gods or even of a single God.

The point here is that we have to have some conception of all of this in order to have strategies for dealing with our problems of being and becoming. What conceptions and strategies will prove helpful depends on the nature of our experience and our understanding of the world generally, a matter largely of accumulated cultural or intellectual tradition. It also depends on what our experience of self has been.

Different cultural ways of ordering social relationships give people somewhat different experiences of self. These experiences promote or reinforce particular conceptions of the way the world is structured, and they delimit the kinds of problems of being and becoming that people feel they have. What seem to be appropriate strategies for dealing with these problems follow from these conceptions and delimitations of problem. If these strategies prove helpful, the resulting positive experience provides confirmation of the rightness of the conceptions and diagnoses of problem. Their apparent truth follows from the evident effectiveness of the strategies predicated on them in regard to how people feel about themselves. As the social and material environment change and people experience themselves in new ways accordingly, old strategies may lose their effectiveness, and the understandings from which they arose may be called into question. New insights lead to the advocacy of new conceptions and new strategies, which may gain wide followings. In this way, what we think of as new religions are frequently born. To such a religion's followers, it is necessarily the "true" religion; for it can serve their needs only if they are convinced of its rightness. Faith does, indeed, make all the difference.

From this standpoint, we find ourselves having to say that religious behavior is not to be thought of as having to do with the ways people relate to God or even to their conceptions of God or other spirit beings. Rather, we find ourselves looking upon the very idea of God or gods as one of the common products of the human concern with achieving and maintaining experiences of self that are satisfying and emotionally fulfilling. How people construe their gods and whether or not gods enter into their constructions at all are to be seen as a part of how they understand their world and their place in it. The atheist has strategies for achieving and maintaining fulfilling experiences of self every bit as much as the theist or deist or animist does. Indeed there is no one whose life is without religious behavior of some kind. Thus we see conceptions of God and the divine as among a larger set of human devices for dealing with certain kinds of problems of human existence, problems that arise out of the basic structure of human existence; and we see being religious, with or without conceptions of God, as a natural feature of our humanity.

The structure of human existence is rooted in several facts. First, we

humans must be able to interact purposefully with our material and animate environment in order to survive. We are not born already knowing how to do this. That is something each of us must learn. Second, we are social animals, serving as indispensable instruments for the achievement of one another's purposes, especially those that deal with our feelings of emotional well-being. Third, we are symbol users, especially language users.

This latter fact makes for a vast proliferation of purposes and wants and allows for the content of social interaction and its symbolic import to be enormously complicated. We experience ourselves socially not just from the things others do to, with, and for us but from the things they say to and about us and the manner in which they say them. Language enables us to present ourselves in various guises, and it enables others to define ourselves to ourselves in all kinds of ways. Parents are constantly defining their children and their behavior to them. They work to influence how their children will feel about themselves as persons, sometimes constructively and sometimes not. Schools, boot camps, fraternity initiations, novitiates, and apprenticeships are also among the situations or occasions in which others define or redefine individuals to themselves.

In the complexities of social living, people experience themselves in different ways in the company of different people and from the same people on different occasions. Experiences of self are not uniform. Some of these experiences we wish to cultivate, and others we wish to avoid. People work at their social relations, insofar as they can, to optimize their experiences of self, some more subtly than others. The person who is forever seeking attention exemplifies an unsubtle and largely counterproductive effort of this kind.

As attention seekers remind us, in one way or another we all have problems about how we experience ourselves. We all find ourselves suffering humiliations on occasion, being rejected by those whose acceptance we crave, being found wanting in things others expect of us and we expect of ourselves. Furthermore, it is built into human existence that we must through the course of our lives work at transforming ourselves, endeavor to become different kinds of persons from what we were. We cannot forever play the role of cute child or of bright young comer. We must develop new skills, assume new responsibilities, constantly work at meeting new standards of conducting ourselves in order to enjoy the respect and approval of others. Maintenance of self, repair of damaged self, and transformation of self are all crucial to human contentment and happiness. They are matters with which we humans are much preoccupied, and pathways to their accomplishment are what the messages of hope offered by prophets and institutionalized religions are very largely about. By scrupulously observing the Law, a Jew can maintain a feeling of righteousness; through confession and absolution, a Roman Catholic can repair the damages to self from sin; and through participation in ritual, a person may achieve an

experience of self that fundamentally transforms his or her being.

But people maintain a sense of safety from possible calamity not simply by scrupulously following the strictures of organized religions; they do so by carrying rabbits' feet or worry beads, by crossing themselves, by touching wood, by avoiding stepping on cracks in the sidewalk, and by all the other compulsions that fill our lives. Some are purely private, some are widely practiced, some have public approval and some do not, and some are officially approved by organized religion. To condemn some as crackpot or as benighted superstitions, while approving others as truly religious, is to make judgments reflecting personal or institutionalized preferences and values, much as we make judgments about different styles of art or music. The point remains that they all do self-maintenance work for the people engaging in them. The loss of a rabbit's foot or a security blanket can be every bit as distressing as the loss of a crucifix or the destruction of a shrine, and for emotionally similar reasons.

Transformation of Self

So far, I have been speaking largely of the maintenance of self and the cultivation of one's social identity that enhances one's sense of worth. Transformation of the self can be significantly associated with the latter activity; but the more profound experiences of self-transformation are often associated with efforts to escape from things about the self with which we are distressed or that we find intolerable. The feelings of anger that accompany diminutions of self by others and the feelings of shame and guilt that accompany diminutions of self by our own actions, if unrelieved, can lead to clinical depression or other behavioral indications of emotional stress.

In the face of such distress, there are several ways people can enhance their sense of worth. The first is by working at being a better exemplar of what one already is. The others, which concern us next, involve changing things about our social or behavioral selves.

First, we can try to escape from the particular identity in our overall social persona (bundle of identities) that carries heavy liabilities and seek to acquire another that brings more rewarding feedback from others or from our own appraisal of self. Dale Carnegie provided a bible for a lot of people with such concerns.

Another way to enhance one's sense of worth is to try to get others to change the way they view one's identity so as to give it more esteem, freedom, or privilege than it had before. This is the only recourse for people whose identities are regarded as unchangeable, such as those having to do with gender, ethnic group membership, or race in U.S. society, or with such things as caste, clan, or occupation in some other societies. Because this latter approach involves bringing about a change in social expectations, it requires a new social consensus regarding the cultural rules and public expectations and behavior governing the way social relations are

conducted. It requires restructuring the allocation of rights, privileges, and powers in identity relationships—something that can be accomplished only by large-scale mobilization of effort, considerable social conflict, campaigns for public education, and some degree of coercion, for this restructuring inevitably puts the identity in question in competition with other social identities. The equal rights and women's liberation movements are examples in U.S. society. The conflicts between Jews and Palestinians in Israel and between Catholics and Protestants in Ulster are other examples. This method of enhancement, by its very requirements, leads to competition for power to control how social relations are to be ordered. At best such competition is handled peacefully in the arena of political process; but more often it leads to covert or open warfare. This approach to identity change is what social revolution, in one way or another, is all about, for people see the only avenue to successful transformation of their individual selves as being through a transformation of the social system in which they operate.

A final approach is to withdraw from participation in the social system. If there is no perceived opportunity to improve one's situation in one's own society, one may seek to join another through emigration or through a change in group affiliation, just as historically many Irish sought to do by turning Protestant, at least publicly, in order to escape the severe social and political discrimination against Catholics. Where immigration or change of allegiance is either impossible or unattractive, withdrawal may take the form of becoming a social eccentric or a hermit, thereby declaring oneself out of the social identity game altogether. Or one may discover a new reality that puts everything into a different perspective, whose implementation in our society leads to one's being labeled a paranoid schizophrenic, if it is rejected by others, or to one's being labeled a prophet by those who find it answering to their own concerns.

Prophets may, of course, be the mobilizers of militant social reform, but they may also be the occasion for withdrawal from the larger society by a group of followers into a separate community of their own, in which they devise social rules aimed at providing both leaders and followers with the kinds of experiences of self that they felt they could not achieve otherwise. The Jonestown movement was an unsuccessful attempt to do just that. The Mormon movement was a successful one. The Jehovah's Witnesses and Black Muslims appear to me to represent movements of this kind as well. So, of course, on a different scale, did the Hippie communities.

The Process of Transformation

Mention of prophets brings us to consider the process by which the transformation of self takes place, whether it is done privately or in the context of a social movement, and whether it involves working at changing one's own behavior or changing the behavior of others through social reform.

For a successful transformation of self to occur, it is first of all necessary to desire to change. To try to give up smoking because one feels that one ought to will not work. One has to *want* to give it up; one has to be fed up with oneself as a smoker. The motive power of desire is the first requisite. But what triggers such desire? It is a new view of self and world—both go together—that makes what was acceptable about oneself no longer acceptable. To discover that others whose views I respect are distressed by my behavior may trigger a new view. To find myself in entirely new circumstances may set in motion the development of new criteria of self-appraisal. The fieldwork experience of anthropologists often has such an effect. Having to learn to get around in a different language and in a different cultural system of social expectations and relations inevitably raises to consciousness much about self and world that we have taken for granted before. We come to see our fellow Americans, and ourselves as Americans, in a different and not always flattering light.

The process of identifying with others and then looking at ourselves from their perspective is perhaps the most significant way in which we acquire new views of self, views that can provide the necessary motivation for change. These new views bring into focus what it is about ourselves that needs to be changed in order for us to feel good about ourselves. If we are unhappy with ourselves but don't know what it is that needs to be changed, we have no leverage on our problem. This is where psychotherapists, counselors, brainwashers, prophets, evangelists, and other kinds of diagnosticians have a role to play. They define for us or help us define for ourselves what our problem is and what we can do about it in terms that are sufficiently illuminating to transform our understanding and help us feel liberated to do something that will make a difference.

Such feeling is antecedent to the next requisite for a successful transformation of self: the commitment or dedication to making a change. Change is not easy. There is much to learn. New ways of doing things have to be rehearsed and mastered. Daily routines have to be restructured. We may suffer doubts about our ability to bring it off, and, above all, we are reluctant to give up the self-maintenance techniques we have relied on heavily in the past from which we have now to wean ourselves. Even when we want to change and feel we know what needs to be changed, we can be terribly ambivalent about actually taking the necessary steps to make the change. Some act of commitment is usually required, an act that puts us in a situation where we can only go forward. We have to cross our Rubicons and burn the bridges behind us. Where relapse is easy, we have to put ourselves in situations that protect us from it—such as joining drug treatment programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, Weight Watchers, or a church. Such organizations all develop rituals that reinforce the new definitions of self to be achieved or maintained and the definitions of world from which the definitions of self derive.

Social reinforcement is usually absolutely essential to cultivating and later maintaining a transformation of self. To this end, converts to the teachings of a prophet regularly form communities or congregations in which they help maintain in one another their common commitment to the self-transformation on which they have launched themselves. In just the same way, of course, people who are working hard to maintain established selves with which they are content join together to reinforce one another in that maintenance work. Country clubs and other kinds of social clubs are examples of this.

Bridge-burning acts may be voluntary, but they may also be involuntary, as in the initiation rites of adolescent boys and girls in many parts of the world involving various forms of bodily mutilation, such as circumcision and scarification, or the experience of other painful ordeals. Mutilations cannot be undone; once the ordeal has been survived, one can never feel the same about oneself again. Such experiences, so widely incorporated into rituals of change or rites of passage, help to accomplish commitment to working at achieving and consolidating a new self or, at least, acceptance of the need to do so.

Mutilations also proclaim to others that a change in identity has occurred, inviting them to treat the changed individual accordingly. Marked changes in behavior or dress also do this. It is no accident that new religious movements invariably enjoin their followers to adopt distinctive marks of their identity as such, whether in dress, hair style, mode of speaking, or public observances, such as food taboos. Every time people thus publicly present themselves in their identity, they reassert their commitment.

Finally, it does no good to have committed oneself to change, to have worked hard to master the new roles and new understandings, if there is no social feedback in recognition that a change has taken place. The prophet who has had a vision of how to save the world needs followers in order to sustain the vision. People who have managed to give up drugs need experiences of self that confirm that they are now different and that make the difference rewarding. It is devastating to present oneself as a new person with a transformed identity only to have those with whom one lives and works refuse to recognize the change. The black African who succeeded in graduating from Oxford and in making himself competent in the language and customs of Britain's professional class was understandably infuriated when, on returning to colonial Nigeria, he was not recognized as a social equal by resident British colonials. Women in U.S. society today encounter the same thing when, having obtained the necessary credentials for employment in corporate America, they find themselves getting less pay than men for the same work and being overlooked for promotions for which they are clearly well qualified. And for all the changes achieved by black Americans in recent years, recognition of these changes by white Americans in work and social relations generally still remains gallingly

elusive. Recognition by psychotherapists of the need for others to adjust their behavior in recognition that a change has taken place has led to what is called "family therapy," where a person's most immediately significant others are brought into the change process.

Things of the Spirit

All that I have been reviewing is familiar to you as part of the stuff of religious behavior. You may say, however, that I have dealt with it in social psychological terms but not in truly spiritual ones; that what characterizes "real" religion is its concern with the spirit. But here, again, we are confronting matters relating to the self in its connectedness with others.

When we experience the love of spouse and children, we find ourselves spiritually filled. We can think of it as being filled with spirit coming into us or as being filled with something coming into our spirit; the experience is the same in either case. Without our own commitment of self as spouse and parents to them, we would not have their love. Commitment of self to any social identity, whether it be parent, friend, teacher, business executive, or officer of the law, is a commitment to relating to others in particular ways and of being related to back by them accordingly. If our commitment is to cultivating an identity that allows us to exercise power over others, or to one that calls for being protective of others, or that requires humble reverence of certain significant others, or that calls for us to love and respect others as equals, in each case we have our spiritual rewards. The rewards are very different, but it is our spirit, our very being, that harvests them.

And so we are back to all those things involved in becoming human selves. It may not be apparent on first consideration, but things of the spirit are indeed what self-maintenance and self-transformation are all about.

Note

[1] This paper was presented in substantially its present form at the summer conference of the Institute on Religion in an Age of Science on Star Island, Portsmouth, New Hampshire, on 30 July 1989. The title of the conference theme has been taken as the title for the paper, which was written to serve as an introduction to the conference. I am grateful to Karl Peters both for reading the paper on my behalf at the conference and for helpful editorial suggestions. In this paper I seek to pull together ideas relating to the nature of religious behavior that I have explored from time to time on different occasions in the past, especially in *Cooperation in Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1963), 146–251, 286–321; "Human Purpose in Life," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 1 (September 1966): 217–29; "Toward an Anthropologically Useful Definition of Religion," *Changing Perspectives in the Scientific Study of Religion*, ed. Alan W. Eister (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1974), 165–84; "On Describing Religion in Truk," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 125 (1981): 411–15; and "Self-Maintenance as a Religious Concern," *Zygon* 23 (June 1988):117–28. I have also drawn on the work of Anthony F. C. Wallace, especially his "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58 (1956): 264–81.