THE "DEATH OF THE EGO" IN EAST-MEETS-WEST SPIRITUALITY: DIVERSE VIEWS FROM PROMINENT AUTHORS

by Jennifer Rindfleish

Abstract. Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, have traditionally held to the view that in order for an individual to fully benefit from their practice it was important to lessen or eliminate one's individual desires. Such practice was sometimes referred to as the "death of the ego" in order to emphasize its importance. However, the relatively recent popularity of East-meets-West spirituality in Western consumer cultures tends to emphasize the acceptance and transformation of one's ego rather than its death. This essay discusses sociological changes that have shaped and contributed to the popularity of East-meets-West spirituality in Western culture that in turn have brought about a modification of the principle of ego death. The views of six Western authors and practitioners of East-meets-West spirituality on the importance of the principle of ego death are compared and contrasted. Theories related to the management of self-identity in consumer society can partly explain the modification of traditional Eastern religious practices, such as ego death, in order that they become relevant and appealing to a society that increasingly reifies the concept of the self. The implication is that the excision of the concept of ego death from the practice of East-meets-West spirituality may affect its efficacy.

Keywords: consumer society; East-meets-West spirituality; ego death; self-identity

East-meets-West spirituality is a phenomenon that has developed in response to a set of social changes and challenges specific to Western consumer culture. These social changes are characterized by the increasing trend within Western consumer culture toward secularization and individuation (Woodhead and Heelas 2000).

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The reasons for the adaptation and modification of Eastern beliefs to Western consumer culture are generally threefold. First are the historical and philosophical antecedents that have shaped the social psyche of consumer cultures that make fertile ground for certain aspects of Eastern religious beliefs to flourish. Second, the rise in importance of psychology and psychoanalysis together with the adaptation of Eastern religious beliefs to Western cultures is a contributing factor to its increasing appeal. Third, the social conditions related to consumer culture make a good vehicle for hybrid religious practices that remain somewhat ephemeral.

An important aspect of traditional Eastern religions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism, is the prescription of practices designed to lessen the effects of desire and attachment to one's self, sometimes referred to as "self-cherishing" or "self-grasping" (Gyatso 1990, 432–35). Some of these practices are now well established in the Western cultural context in modified and highly differentiated forms.

The views of six authors on East-meets-West spirituality are analyzed here in order to reveal their views on the subject of the ego. The analysis explores the consensus or conflict among these authors on this subject. The purpose of the analysis is to highlight differences and similarities among the authors and discuss what those similarities and differences may mean to the followers of East-meets-West spiritualities.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Carter Phipps comments on the introduction of the term *ego* into the English language and the way in which the "death of the ego" is a central tenet in the quest for the highest spiritual goal of "enlightenment teachings":

Enlightenment equals ego death. For millennia this equation has held true. While the term "ego," meaning "I" in Latin, is obviously a relatively recent addition to the English lexicon, just about every major enlightenment teaching in the world has long held that the highest goal of spiritual and indeed human life lies in the renunciation, rejection and, ultimately, the death of the need to hold on to a separate, self-centred existence. (Phipps 2001, 38)

This quotation highlights two important aspects of the discussion relevant to this essay: that the term *ego* (and its meaning) is a relatively recent addition to the English lexicon (with Sigmund Freud's conception of the idea in the 1890s), and that the highest goal of spiritual life that has its origin in traditional Eastern religions is the rejection of a separate and self-centered existence. With these two issues in mind, the rest of this article explores the adaptation and modification of the death-of-the-ego concept in East-meets-West spirituality.

In the adaptation of Eastern religious beliefs to the Western social context, much of the content has focused on the contemporary search for the "self." Raymond Barglow highlights the fact that a concern for self-devel-

opment in Western culture is historically nothing new (1994, 11). The Socratic maxim "Know thyself," the "care for the self" prescribed in Plato's *Alcibiades*, Augustine's intensely personal quest for salvation in *The Confessions*, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *amour de soi* are all examples. The historical antecedents of the phenomenon of East-meets-West spirituality, however, go back only to the late nineteenth century when the Theosophical Society founded by Madame Blavatsky introduced a synthesis of Hinduism, Buddhism, Neoplatonism, and Western esoteric thought into Europe. From this time onward it became possible for the educated Westerner to find out about Eastern spirituality without having to leave home (Crowley 1998, 72).

At the same time as Hindu and Buddhist texts were being translated and interpreted for the first time by Westerners, psychologists such as Freud and Karl Jung were gaining great importance in Western culture. The views held by these influential academics about Eastern religious traditions were the beginning of a philosophically critical process that sought to justify certain aspects of such traditional beliefs and reject others, a process that continues today in Western consumer culture. The coming together of a dialogue between psychology and Eastern traditional religions was most obvious during the time of the influential psychologist and Freud's contemporary Jung. Vivianne Crowley (1998, 115) suggests that Jung believed that individuals must sacrifice their ego—the false idea of what we are—in order to realize a new level of consciousness, that of self, which is who and what we truly are.

Sociologically speaking, as far back as 1909 George Simmel argued that the subjectivism of modern personal life is merely the expression of the fact that the vast, intricate, sophisticated culture of things, of institutions, of objectified ideas robs individuals of any consistent inner relationship to culture as a whole and casts them back again on their own resources ([1909] 1976, 251). Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas (2000, 134) describe this process as a failure of the mainstream institutions, including traditional religion, to provide meanings and values of existential import. As a consequence, individuals are forced to treat themselves and their own experiences as the primary source of significance.

Peter Berger, Brigitte Berger, and Hansfried Kellner (1974, 168) assert that modern identity is experienced as unstable and unreliable because the plurality of social worlds relativizes it, the institutional order loses its reality, and the subjective appears more real. As a consequence the individual's psychology takes on a more differentiated, complex, and interesting appeal attaining a high place in the cultural hierarchy of values. Individual freedom, individual autonomy, and individual rights come to be taken for granted as moral imperatives of fundamental importance. Furthermore, foremost among those individual rights is the right to plan and fashion one's life as freely as possible. Charles Taylor labels this social change "the

massive subjective turn to the self" (1991, 25), and Anthony Giddens (1991) explains that the modern consumer's social condition, characterized by pivotal feelings of uncertainty, naturally leads to an overwhelming obsession with "self-development."

Along with these sociological explanations for the rise in importance of self-development and the marked increase in psychoanalysis as a social scientific practice, parallels with the specific practices and conditions of the consumer society are also obvious. Zygmunt Bauman (1997; 1998), Michel Foucault (in Martin, Gutman, and Hutton 1988), and Jean Baudrillard (1998) discuss the specific social factors that lead to the inevitable "individuation" of society under the conditions that arise when consumption becomes the dominant form of interaction.

Bauman describes the conditions under which social actors are shaped by the practices related to consumption:

Contextualised in time, ideally nothing should be embraced by a consumer firmly, nothing should command a final commitment, no needs should be seen as fully satisfied, no desires considered ultimate. It is the volatility, the in-built temporality of all engagements, that truly counts; it counts more than the commitment itself, which is anyway not allowed to outlast the time necessary for consuming the object of desire (or, rather, the time sufficient for the desirability of that object to wane). (1998, 81)

Under such social conditions individuals are in need of constant stimulation, and their interest in new forms of self-development that have been adapted from traditional religious beliefs increases and requires continual reinterpretation (Rindfleish 2005). Bauman's interpretation of the need to continually process but not rest with solutions for life describes the way in which traditional Eastern religious belief systems have been and continue to be revised and repackaged to meet the needs of Western cultural contexts (Bauman 1998, 84–85).

At the same time that aspects of Eastern traditional religious beliefs were being adapted for a Western cultural context, the development of psychiatry and psychology as scientific methods were gaining prominence. Methods developed to conceptualize the self and one's identity were and still are highly pervasive. David and Julia Jary define self or individual identity as "the sense of self that develops as the child differentiates from parents and family and takes a place in society" (Jary and Jary 1991, 294–95). However, the place taken by an individual's sense of self differs according to one's social context. For example, Erik Erikson (in Jary and Jary 1991, 294–95) proposes that identity forms as a result of social interaction and that problems with identity occur if, as an adolescent, an individual feels alienated from society through experiences related to aspects such as ethnic differences or unemployment. Under this theory, the effect of religion traditionally has been to assist in the identity formation of the individual. However, the increasingly dominant paradigm of secularization and inter-

est in spirituality rather than traditional religions in Western consumer cultures has decreased the effect of religion as a stabilizing influence (Craib 1998, 3–5).

Johannis (Hans) Mol describes the way in which identity and religion are related in terms he labels the "sacralization" of identity (1986, 12). According to this theory the identities of individuals are always proximate and situated in a jostling field in which they have to be capable of both cooperation and contention in order to survive. Such a dialectical characterization of the relationship between religion and identity can be observed in the ways in which Eastern religious thought, practices, and beliefs are adapted to the Western cultural context. A central feature of this adaptive process is the way in which the "death of the ego" premise, so central to the traditional goal of achieving "enlightenment" or "nirvana," has been treated in the texts written by popular authors of East-meets-West spirituality.

In this essay I explore (1) the ways in which Western authors and practitioners have adapted Eastern religious traditions into discourse and practices that are more palatable to Western consumer culture and (2) the possible contradictions and conflict that can arise from such an adaptation, particularly when one central maxim—the death of the ego—has been excised from a set of practices and beliefs that are prescribed to lead toward the stated goal of "enlightenment."

METHOD

In my exploration of the treatment of the ego as a concept in East-meets-West spirituality, my chosen method was interpretive because of the exploratory nature of the research question and the need to interpret the meaning associated with the concept of the ego among practitioners of East-meets-West spirituality. In order to analyze the meanings such practitioners associate with the ego and the self, I studied and analyzed statements made about the self and/or the ego within selected texts of the following Western practitioners of Eastern religions:

- Deepak Chopra—a Western practitioner of Hinduism (Ayurveda)
- Pema Chodron—a Western Buddhist nun
- Andrew Cohen—a Western practitioner of Eastern spirituality
- Lama Surya Das—a Western Buddhist lama
- Geshe Michael Roach—a Western Buddhist teacher
- Jack Kornfield—a Western Buddhist teacher

I chose these practitioners for their popular status and the fact that they have adapted specific Eastern religious practices and beliefs for Western readers. They also have varying views on the treatment of the concept of ego and specify their views about the inclusion or exclusion of the use of the ego in their writings.

FINDINGS

Deepak Chopra refers to the concept of getting in touch with one's "true essence" and describes this as "beyond the ego":

You must learn to get in touch with the inner-most essence of your being. This true essence is beyond the ego. It is fearless; it is free; it is immune to criticism; it does not fear any challenge. It is beneath no one, and full of magic, mystery, and enchantment. (1996, 18–19)

Chopra uses terminology that seems more suited to psychoanalysis than spirituality when he describes a process that could be likened to ego "transcendence":

In object-referral, your internal reference point is your ego. The ego, however, is not who you really are. The ego is your self-image; it is your social mask; it is the role you are playing. Your social mask thrives on approval. It wants control, and it is sustained by power, because it lives in fear. Your "true self," which is your spirit, your soul, is completely free of those things. It is immune to criticism, it is unfearful of any challenge, and it feels beneath no one. (1996, 11)

The conceptual split between the authentic or true self and the ego or lesser (small) self is common in the writing of proponents of East-meets-West spirituality. It suggests that the existence of the ego is false, and yet it is a dominant focus of psychoanalysis in Western consumer culture. Chopra never goes so far as to suggest that we kill or rid ourselves of our ego. His prescriptions for becoming our true selves are based upon the application of his seven spiritual laws of success, laws that he attributes to his own personal experience.

Chopra has been criticized for an oversimplistic mix of materialism and spirituality. According to Susan Bridle, he relies on religious scriptures from the Hindu Vedas that he interprets and presents within his own revisionist framework and at the same time dismisses traditional teachings when they do not support his personal view: "I seek in the spiritual literature that which is consistent with my own experience. If something is other than my experience, then I ignore it" (Chopra, quoted in Bridle 1997, 71). Rather than recognizing spiritual transformation as an ultimately demanding endeavor, as taught by the greatest sages, I agree with Bridle who believes that Chopra popularizes the notion of an easy, feel-good spirituality, with no mention of the perennial spiritual imperatives of renunciation and one-pointed dedication. Rather than emphasizing that true spiritual life is and has always been about the death of the ego, Chopra teaches us to bend the power of the infinite to our own will.

Western Buddhist nun Pema Chodron describes how, in her view, instead of getting rid of one's ego it should be "investigated" and made an object of interest:

Sometimes among Buddhists the word *ego* is used in a derogatory sense, with a different connotation than the Freudian term. As Buddhists, we might say, "My

ego causes me so many problems." Then we might think, "Well, then, we're supposed to get rid of it, right? Then there'd be no problem." On the contrary, the idea isn't to get rid of ego but actually to begin to take an interest in ourselves, to investigate and be inquisitive about ourselves. (Chodron 1991, 4)

Similarly, when describing the interaction between psychoanalysis and Buddhist practice the Western Buddhist Lama Surya Das blames "some inadequately informed spiritual teachers" for misunderstanding the important role psychology and psychoanalysis play in reaching a deeper understanding of ourselves:

Much of the perceived conflict between spirituality and therapy revolves around a misunderstanding of the role of the ego in our lives. It has erroneously been believed by Westerners new to Buddhist thought that the purpose of Dharma practice is the annihilation of ego or sense of self. The oft-stated goal of therapy, on the other hand, is to strengthen self-esteem and heal the ego. In fact, one needs a healthy sense of self in order to progress in spiritual practice. (Das 1999, 226–27)

Das uses the concept of authenticity in his writing and appeals to readers to "develop an authentic presence":

As we go through life, many of us get so caught up with the roles we play that we lose sight of our sense of connection with our own authentic nature. We forget who we are. We become who we ain't. In short, the stories we make up about ourselves and others separate us from the truth of who we are; the roles we play create barriers that keep us from genuine spiritual connectedness—either with ourselves or with others. (Das 2000, 62)

Das offers the "promise" of an authentic self, a type of self that is always in a state of "becoming" real. Such a concept is a process and a promise of something at a future time and as such is perfectly suited to the always changing and evolving needs and practices of the individuated self in consumer society.

Like Chopra, Chodron, and Das, Western Buddhist Jack Kornfield takes an inclusive and conciliatory approach to the Western concept of ego.

To try to get rid of the self, to purify, root out, or transcend all desire, anger, and centeredness, to vanquish a self that is "bad," is an old religious idea. This notion underlies the ascetic practices, such as wearing hair shirts, extreme fasting, and self-mortification, that are found in many traditions. Sometimes such practices are used skilfully, to induce altered states, but more often they only reinforce aversion. Worse, what comes with them is the notion that our body, our mind, our "ego" is somehow sinful and dirty and deluded. "I (the good part of me) must use these techniques to get rid of the self (the lower, bad part of me)." But this can never work. It can never work because there is no self to get rid of! We are a changing process, not a fixed being. There was never a self—only our identification makes us think so. (Kornfield 1994, 203)

The inherent difficulty of understanding or realizing the "no self," as described here by Kornfield, however, requires that the self-identity (ego) of an individual take part in the process. James D. Hunter expresses the dilemma that arises with such a process:

At a purely practical level, how is self-denial or self-mastery for the purpose of developing moral character possible when that which is to be denied or mastered is under almost constant examination? How is the renunciation of the self possible if it is being "improved," or is being developed to its "full potential," or is needing stimulation by "new experiences"? (1987, 73)

Another aspect related to the adaptation of Eastern religious beliefs into the Western cultural context is the deliberate shedding of the traditional dress and cultural symbols related to the Eastern religious traditions being adapted by these writers. Das explains why he decided to forgo the traditional dress of Eastern religion within the Western cultural context:

As a Westerner and a Tibetan lama, I find that people are often confused, and sometimes even disappointed, that I am not wearing maroon and gold robes or talking and behaving in ways that they expect—whatever those might be. For years, I was a monk who wore saffron robes and had a shaved head. When I left the monastery, it was my Tibetan teachers in fact who encouraged me to be more authentic to my background in terms of dress. "If you're teaching in America," they said, "teach like you're an American." That advice was first given to me in France by an incarnate lama who said, "Surya, you could afford to be more authentic." I think we could all take a page from that lesson book. It took me a while to realise that the authenticity and essence of the Buddha's teachings had nothing to do with traditional Asian dress. I am grateful to my friend the lama who said that to me. (Das 2000, 66–67)

The issue of one's self-identity is intricately associated with the wearing of traditional robes and the practice of traditional ritual, whether or not the essence of Buddhism is expressed in them. The invisibility of the practices of Eastern religious beliefs such as meditation is, I believe, an important aspect of their appeal to individuals in a Western social context. The wearing of robes and practicing of complex rituals, which are central to the tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, are practices related to visible forms of commitment to a religious belief system. The fact that these Western Buddhists purposefully tried not to make their commitment visible sets an example that allows Western practitioners the personal freedom to either choose commitment or remain uncommitted. The "part-time invisible" quality of their practice allows aspects of the belief system into their lifestyles without challenging their Westernized ego identity.

Conversely in other teachings offered by Western Buddhists there is an emphasis on the need to challenge and rid oneself of the trappings of the ego. Western Buddhist Geshe Michael Roach outlines the ultimate goal of practicing Buddhism during his "silent retreat" teachings. Interestingly, he frequently draws upon quotes from Jesus in his elaborations.

Jesus was sitting with some of his disciples, and he turned to them and said: "Verily I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste of death before they see the Kingdom." It means you will pass into the kingdom of heaven before you die. The Hindus call it "*jivan mukti.*" The Tibetans call it "*lu ma pongpar dakpa kacho du drowa.*" That's what we are doing, we are trying to reach this place. (Roach 2000, 9)

After describing the purpose of the silent retreat practice Roach goes on to describe the practices required to enable the aspirant to reach this "death-less" destination. Apart from the regular practice of meditation, the most important of these practices is to rid one's self of material possessions.

We started to talk about ways to find "samadhi," and the first one is to fight the war against things, the things in your life that draw your mind in so many different directions that you can't reach samadhi at the core. Things are a tremendous drain on your spiritual energy. You have to try to be very aggressive in removing them from your world, from your house, so you can concentrate on deeper things. Be aggressive don't wait. Be radical in the war against them. Thrust them out of your house. Make a big pile for the garbage truck. (2000, 31)

Andrew Cohen, a Western teacher of Eastern spiritual beliefs, demonizes a particular aspect of the Western concept of ego. He describes ego as having two possible definitions. One is benign in terms of its being a self-organizing principle with a mechanistic function that is neither positive nor negative and having no "self" nature; the other is that of having a "self" nature based on pride, arrogance, narcissism, and the need to see oneself as being separate from others at all times. Cohen describes the "unmasked face" of this type of ego as demonic:

When *this* ego is unmasked, seen directly for what it is, finally unobscured by the other expressions of the personality, one finds oneself literally face-to-face with a demon—a demon that thrives on power, domination, control and separation, that cares only about itself and is willing to destroy anything and everything that is good and true in order to survive intact and always in control. This demon lacks any capacity for empathy, compassion, generosity or love; delights in its perfect invulnerability; and, worst of all, will *never* ever acknowledge that which is sacred. (Cohen, 2001, 1)

Cohen goes on to say that the demonic side of one's ego is not obvious, sometimes even to individuals themselves, unless it has been "tested." Like Roach, Cohen describes this test of the ego as the ability to give up our attachment to everything.

To walk the spiritual path in earnest is to find out what we're made of and how much we are truly willing to give up in order to come to the end of division within ourselves. The price for that kind of profound and deeply liberating simplicity is too high for most, because the price is ego death. What does that mean? That means endeavouring with all our being to purify ourselves from any and every attachment, gross and subtle, to the narcissistic ego, that demon of false individuality that masquerades as our own self and whose task it is to keep us, at all costs, separate from our own heart. (2001, 2)

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The authors hold diverse views on how practitioners should treat their ego. The conciliatory approach proposed by Chopra, Chodron, Das, and Kornfield is a position that parallels a rise in importance of the practices

surrounding psychoanalysis in Western culture. Practices and beliefs surrounding psychoanalysis have been appropriated into an industry of self-development or self-help and have become highly acceptable and common practices in post-traditional consumer society. The parallel between the adaptation of Eastern religious beliefs for a Western cultural context and the increasing importance of psychoanalytical theory supporting the concept of individuation and self-actualization over the last hundred years cannot be underestimated in explaining such an attitude toward the ego. Michael Rose highlights the parallels between the increasing affluence of consumer culture and the application of Abraham Maslow's needs hierarchy, which is a foundational concept in psychological theory:

Forty years ago Abraham Maslow put forward a doctrine of universal human needs. Maslow pictured these needs as arranged in a hierarchy, commencing with hunger, in such a way that once a "lower" need has been satiated the next highest automatically governs behaviour. Self-actualisation becomes a pressing need only once all "inferior" biological and social requirements have been met. Yet, once they have been, "hunger" for self-actualisation may become as imperious as hunger for food. (Rose 1985, 54)

Unlike Das, Chopra, Chodron, and Kornfield, Cohen and Roach tend to take a harsher view of incorporating the concept of ego on any level. The treatment of and attitude toward the concept of the ego differ markedly in the authors discussed here and are at times contradictory. The authors all use a variety of concepts—the "true self," "inner self," or "authentic self"—as states of being preferable to the "ego self." However, the distinction between these preferred selves and the ego is not clear, and the reference to and treatment of the "ego self" varies between authors.

The reference to a preferred or authentic self is a popular way in which the concepts of self-identity and ego are brought together in the writings of East-meets-West spirituality. In discussing the many and varied ways in which identities are conceived of in Western culture, Judith Howard (2000) cites Rebecca J. Erickson's (1995) argument that authenticity has captured both cultural and sociological imaginations, partly through the power of images and mass media. Maintaining that postmodernism does not do away with selves and identities but rather directs attention to how they are constructed, Erickson stresses the meanings that individuals associate with themselves as the crucial issue underlying identity. For example, Erickson asks what it means to be white, female, or gay and challenges the use of a single reducible quantity of authenticity and meaning when most human actors experience a multiplicity of relationships and identities simultaneously. Erickson argues for a conception of the self that is both multidimensional and unified, both emotional and cognitive, both individual and social—a notion that is congruent with traditional conceptions of identity. The postmodern element is that authenticity is no longer a question of being true to one's self for all time but rather of being true to one's self in context or in relationship (Howard 2000, 20).

The findings show that when the specific statements of the authors discussed in this essay on the topic of ego death are compared and contrasted their views both converge and diverge. Some describe a process of transcending the ego without actually ridding oneself of one's ego. Others are adamant about ridding oneself of one's ego before the goals of their belief systems can be realized. The various terms used by these practitioners for the preferred type of self are the authentic self, the higher self, the inner self, or the true self. The traditional visible symbols of religions such as Buddhism or Hinduism are sometimes purposefully forgone for the stated purpose of making them appear more "authentic" in a Western cultural context. However, by removing traditional religious symbols, East-meets-West practitioners also may be inadvertently catering to the needs of Western egos by allowing practitioners to retain and develop individualistic symbols of themselves in terms of clothing, hairstyles, and behaviors.

CONCLUSION

I have explored how six prominent authors of East-meets-West spirituality conceptualize the treatment of the ego in their writings with a view to identifying similarities and differences among them. The analysis shows that some take a conciliatory and inclusive approach to the ego and others take an exclusionary and less conciliatory approach to negotiating with one's ego in order to succeed in realizing the ultimate goal of their belief systems. The discussion explored the social context in post-traditional Western consumer culture that has become fertile ground for the adaptation of traditional religious belief systems to the needs of individuals within such a cultural context. The discussion reflected upon how the aspiration for a full and free individual identity in Western consumer culture relies upon the modification and adaptation of traditional religious belief of whatever kind. However, Eastern religious thought in particular is the perfect vehicle for the process of modification and adaptation required by free-floating identities in a Western post-traditional consumer society.

Further research could explore the feelings and experiences of followers of East-meets-West spiritualities in terms of their attitudes toward and treatment of their ego. The implications of such research may uncover individual and/or collective effects of the diverse perspectives contained in the writings of East-meets-West spiritual writers and whether such effects increase or decrease the efficacy of such practices.

NOTE

A version of this essay was presented at the ISA Research Committee on the Sociology of Religion, International Sociological Association's World Congress, Brisbane, Australia, 7–13 July 2002.

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