



## Identity versus Community?

No one of us is an island, observed John Donne profoundly.<sup>1</sup> But can I be so much “a piece of the continent, a part of the main” that I lose track of myself? Can my community rob me of my identity—or, contrariwise, can an insistence on my identity separate me from community? How do I find the proper balance?

I doubt if most of us spend much time worrying about this. Still, we probably all know people who sometimes get too close and others whom we would like to draw out. Sometimes we are probably those people. How do we find the balance? Friends and family might help, certainly, or, if necessary, counselors or support groups.

Or maybe the Bible. Some years ago, thinking about these things, I turned to the psalms—those biblical texts that are perhaps at the same time most communal and most individual. My question then was whether the psalms or any biblical texts could envision the individual in anything like the modern sense. The answer to that is probably negative, but there is still much there for our consideration. Many, including myself, have found the psalms valuable tools for prayer precisely because of their communal yet individual character.

The self, I discovered in my investigation of the psalms’ use of the term *nephesh*—the soul, the self—emerges in extremity.<sup>2</sup> Especially in times of pain and despair, in alienation and suffering, the self becomes sufficiently “other” for the psalmist that it can be independently addressed, as, for example, in Ps 42:5: “Why are you cast down, O my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?” In a situation of complete equanimity, it seems unlikely I would ever need to come to know myself—my self as self, apart from the other, especially my self in relation to God. But then would I ever be truly human? Stanley Leavy thought not:

[The human] is a discontented animal....[C]ritics of religion, both within and outside psychoanalysis, often and tiresomely charge that we are religious because of our unhappiness, trying to make up for the woes of life with beliefs in a life to come, a beneficent savior, and so on. We ought not protest too vigorously against such charges. They contain the Christian truth that the church from its beginning has always preached: that it is out of our unhappiness, our fear, our guilt, that we can recognize the gift of salvation. In the end, the only difference in this respect between the fathers of the church and its critics is that for the critics salvation is a fantasy, a mirage, while for believers it is the gift of

<sup>1</sup>John Donne, “Meditation XVII,” in *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624); online at [http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23772/23772-h/23772-h.htm#Page\\_108](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/23772/23772-h/23772-h.htm#Page_108) (accessed February 17, 2014).

<sup>2</sup>Frederick J. Gaiser, “The Emergence of the Self in the Old Testament: A Study in Biblical Wellness,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 14/1 (1992) 1–29.

God through Jesus Christ. The critics are quite right in supposing that a fully satisfied human, with no failures, no sense of wrongdoing, no griefs, no fears, no longing for the eternal, would have no occasion to look to God. But it is they who are indulging in fantasy when they imagine such a creature and suppose it to be human.<sup>3</sup>

So also William James:

There is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it positively refuses to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life's significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.<sup>4</sup>

So, no pain, no suffering, no trauma, no self. Seems like a high price to pay. However, things don't end there. Even if the self—something like human self-consciousness—is discovered in extremity, extremity is not the goal of human life, surely not biblically. To the contrary, we are given ourselves, we come to have ourselves, for the sake of the other. Without self, I have nothing to give. Without the other, I have nowhere to devote the self—no real purpose for my self-discovery. It may seem that complete narcissism would be full self-rewarding pleasure, but T. S. Eliot knew better. To have oneself alone, and only alone, would be hell:

What is hell? Hell is oneself,  
Hell is alone, the other figures in it  
Merely projections. There is nothing to escape from  
And nothing to escape to. One is always alone.<sup>5</sup>

God knew this well: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen 2:18). Thus, the gift of the other, the gift of community. A pretty good balance, as it turns out. I am given the self for the sake of the other. I find the self most fully in giving it away. Identity and community. Identity in community. As God meant it to be.

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<sup>3</sup>Stanley Leavy, *In the Image of God: A Psychoanalyst's View* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988) 67–68.

<sup>4</sup>William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (Pennsylvania State University: An Electronic Classics Series Publication) 162; at <http://www2.hn.psu.edu/faculty/jmanis/wjames/varieties-rel-exp.pdf> (accessed February 17, 2014).

<sup>5</sup>T. S. Eliot, *The Cocktail Party* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1950) 98.