

The Dawn and Eclipse of Personal Immortality

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[1] As long as there have been human beings, death has been enigmatic and terrifying. Certainly this is not surprising, nor of itself particularly interesting. What is more interesting is the different ways in which death has been understood and, by extension, the different reactions it has elicited. It is fair to say the Western attitudes toward death have been, for most of the past two millennia, powerfully conditioned by the hope for personal immortality. Indeed, the hope that the personality will somehow survive the death of the body is said by St. Paul, an important architect of the Christian vision, to be the foundation of the Christian faith. The scriptures of Christianity, its language, its psychology, its symbolism and images: all these are oriented toward one thing and one thing only— personal salvation:

Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there be no resurrection of the dead, then is Christ not risen: And if Christ be not risen, then [is] our preaching vain, and your faith [is] also vain. Yea, and we are found false witnesses of God; because we have testified of God that he raised up Christ: whom he raised not up, if so be that the dead rise not. *I. Corinthians 15:12-15*

[2] According to Paul, the Christian faith is *dead* if not for the promise of personal immortality. And again, this extraordinary valuation of personal immortality has dominated Western religious thinking for some two-thousand years. But it is important to note that the *oldest* literature of the Western tradition does not present the personal survival of death as an attractive prospect. I will briefly survey attitudes toward death as found in some pre-Christian roots of Western culture. Noteworthy in what follows is the extent to which the postmortem fate of individual persons is unattractive if not deplorable, and the fact that any positive aspects of immortality are not *personal* but *societal*.

[3] Ancient Greek views, as represented by the epics of Homer, depicted the state after death as one of horror. While in life and connected to the body, the psyche was portrayed as magnificent and intense. When disconnected from the body— from breath and life blood— its vitality was diminished from its living intensity; what was left had the status of a 'shadow,' a *shade*. In the first part of Book XXIV of the *Odyssey*, we see the shades of the late suitors of Penelope:

He [=Hermes] led them along, and they followed, gibbering. As when bats in the depths of an awful cave flutter and gibber, when one of them has fallen out the place in the chain that the bats form together; so gibbering, they went their way together. (lines 5-9. All citations from Homer are the Lattimore translation.)

[4] The story is one of radically diminished capacities— an extrapolation, perhaps, of the perceived weakening of the psyche in old age. What is so pathetic about the mental state of the shades is that, like a senile person, their memory is flickering and fragmentary. When Odysseus ventures into Hades, the underworld domain of the shades, he followed the instructions of Teiresias to keep the shades who confront him at bay. To do this, Odysseus menaces these psychic residues of living persons with a *sword*, and this reveals their lamentable state (see *Odyssey* XI, 42ff.). While the shades remember that a sword can hurt a human being, they forget that they are no longer human, and thus cannot be harmed by the sword. Soon afterward shadow of Odysseus' mother accurately characterizes the state of a shade:

It is only what happens when they die, to all mortals. The sinews no longer hold the flesh and the bones together, and once the spirit has left the white bones, all the rest of the body is made subject to the fire's strong fury, but the soul flutters out like a dream and flies away. (lines 205ff)

[5] What then is the *positive* aspect of immortality in the Homeric vision? It is not a subjective experience on the part of the deceased person, but a memory— or perhaps better, a glorious *reputation*— that lives on in *society*. Just this *social immortality* is spoken of in the seventh book of the *Iliad*, as the Trojan champion Hektor tries to entice a Greek warrior into single combat. Even if the prospective combatant loses, he will in the Homeric way of thinking nonetheless be a winner:

...the flowing-haired Achaians [Greeks] may give him due burial and heap up a mound upon him beside the broad passage of Helle. And some day one of the men to come will say, as he sees it, one who in his benched ship sails on the wine-blue water: "This is the mound of a man who died long ago in battle, who was one of the bravest, and glorious Hektor killed him." So he will speak some day, and his glory will not be forgotten. (lines 85ff.)

[6] To be *remembered* in the culture in which one lived— this was the only positive sense of immortality in the Homeric view; it was the sole consolation in the face of the grim realities of a shadow afterlife in Hades. The ancient Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh* is similar in many ways to the Homeric vision, but in regard to the fate of the individual person after death the outlook is more ghastly. In a prescient vision as he is dying, Enkidu tells his friend Gilgamesh of an encounter with—

...an awful being, the sombre-faced man-bird.... His was a vampire's face, his foot was a lion's foot, his hand was an eagle's talon. He fell on me and his claws were in my hair, he held me fast and I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers.... There is a house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay is their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. . (*The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Sandars transl., Penguin Press, p.92)

[7] This 'house of darkness' is called *Kur*, and the image of the psyche reduced to the status of a bird flopping about in muddy darkness is a vivid evocation of diminished capacities. But like the Homeric Hades, it does not tell the whole story. In addition to this grim afterlife, there is a social conception of immortality that parallels that of the Homeric notions about glorious reputation. And for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, the killing of the monster Humbaba confers this immortality— the lasting fame that will live on after them. When Gilgamesh conceives the plan to go to the cedar forests and there kill Humbaba, Enkidu warns him of the dangers. But Gilgamesh answers:

Where is the man who can clamber to heaven? Only the gods live forever with glorious Shamash, but as for us men, our days are numbered, our occupations are a breath of wind.... Then if I fall, I leave behind me a name that endures; men will say of me: "Gilgamesh has fallen in fight with ferocious Humbaba." Long after the child has been born in my house, they will say it and remember. (*Gilgamesh*, p.71)

[8] It is worth noting that no sooner does he attain it than Gilgamesh realizes that this isn't the immortality that he really wants— he wants everlasting life in the sun, not in *Kur*. And the divine philosopher-barmaid Siduri poignantly explains to him that this is neither possible nor appropriate for humans. But Siduri does not counsel pessimism, for she continues:

Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things, day and night, night and day; dance and be merry, feast and rejoice, let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself and water. Cherish the little child that hold your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man. (*Gilgamesh*, p.102)

[9] Ancient Jewish views on the fate of the individual psyche after death are gentler than those of the Greeks and Sumerians. Indeed, Judaism offers a positive sense of immortality, something beyond the "lasting reputation" available in Homer and in *Gilgamesh*. That is the promise that God makes to Abraham, a promise repeated often throughout the book of Genesis: "You shall have descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky, as numerous as the grains of sand on the shore." And for Jews, Abraham is understood to be alive, genetically *present*, in the lives of those people— the "descendants of Abraham"— who constitute the Jewish community. Right down to the present.

[10] The psyches of the dead reside underground, but not necessarily in the undignified state depicted by Homer and the *Gilgamesh* epic. In the subsequent history of the Jewish people recounted in the Scriptures, they had been adopted a monarchy. And their first King, Saul is in trouble, for his advisor and guide, the Prophet Samuel, has just died. He entices the witch (or medium) of Endor to call up the departed spirit of the prophet Samuel:

And the woman said to Saul, 'I see a spirit coming up out of the earth... an old man, and he is wrapped in a robe.' And Saul knew that it was Samuel.... Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' (*I.Samuel* 28:13-15)

[11] The ancient Jewish view is that the underworld— conceived as a resting place for the ancestors— is the proper domain of the dead, a realm from which they can only be *disturbed* by contact with the living. This view is echoed in a later Jewish text, the book of *Job*. Responding to his vexatious friends, Job says:

Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go whence I shall not return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is as darkness. (*Job* 10:20-22)

[12] An underworld of darkness powerfully suggests diminished consciousness, and like the Homeric view it points to an existence that is but a shadow of earthly intensity. But when it comes to what remains of an individual person among the living, ancient Jewish ideas differed significantly from that of Homer and the *Gilgamesh* epic. Where the latter held out the hope of immortality through heroic fame, through glorious reputation, the ancient Jews placed their hopes in *biological* immortality. The departed

remained united with the community not through memory, but through descendants. In this view, Abraham is indeed alive— in his descendants who still exist in the 21st century.

[13] The three outlooks on death just considered are alike in that they conceive the fate of the individual psyche as, to use the word so regularly invoked to characterize it, gloomy. And setting aside for now differences in the immortality of fame on the one hand, and biological immortality on the other, these outlooks are also alike in rooting their positive hopes for immortality in the persistence of a coherent community among the living. The dead, shadows though they might be from the standpoint of subjective experience, would be objectively present (whether by way of fame or genetics) in the community that survived the death of its individual members.

[14] But what if these coherent *communities* were themselves subject to *mortality*? Just that is what happened with the rise of Hellenistic culture, a culture based not on local city-states with their attendant local deities, but on cosmopolitanism. The historian M.W. Meyer describes it this way:

Alexander's triumphant achievements changed the Greek world forever.... he founded a network of municipalities that aided in the realization of new ecumenical interests. With Alexander and those who came after him, the Greek provincialism of the polis was modified, and in the Hellenistic period there emerged a new sense of the *oikoumene*, the "inhabited" world, as the international stage for human action. The Hellenistic world was not simply another classical world with Greek values and classical deities. Rather, it was more "cosmopolitan": the *kosmos*, or "world," was the polis, and the citizens and gods of this world were not only Greek, but also Anatolian, Asian, African, and Indian." (M.W. Meyer, ed. *The Ancient Mysteries: A Sourcebook*. Harper San Francisco, 1987, p.2.)

[15] In today's dangerously fragmented world, the concept of *cosmopolis* is something of an ideal; in the Hellenistic period it was a social reality. People who were 'cosmopolitan'— who were not bound by poverty and daily drudgery to survive, who were *educated*, who spoke Greek— such people could travel and reside all over what for practical purposes constituted 'the world.' This cosmopolitanism made people "detachable"— rather the way we are in contemporary American society. In the globalized world of the 21st century, as in Hellenistic cosmopolitanism, one's birthplace means far less than it had in earlier times; residence was increasingly *accidental*, rather than definitive. To the extent that people were cosmopolitan, they were to just that degree less an Athenian, an Alexandrian, a Theban, etc.

[16] The fluidity of movement across older political and cultural borders gave rise to new assumptions about personal identity. Individual birth, in the Hellenistic world, no longer decisively *connected* a person to a local community and its gods. Indeed, local communities were all but eclipsed by the huge cosmopolis. And the cosmopolitan individual was connected not to the familiar community of her or his birth, but to a vast and impersonal welter of power and *change*. What then of the positive aspects of immortality, the glorious reputation or the biological immortality, that depend for their meaning on the *continuity* of the community where one is remembered, or in which one's descendants would live?

[17] In the Hellenistic world, there were philosophical trends that characterized the gods as remote and indifferent to human concerns. This was the view of the Epicureans. Others like the Stoics tended to understand the gods as allegories of natural forces, and evolved a vision of the cosmos governed not by the gods, but by a vast and impersonal inherent design— a *Logos*. Both schools of thought, but particularly Epicureanism, taught an uncompromising doctrine of human *mortality*.

[18] These sophisticated and cosmopolitan views were taken to be intellectually respectable, but were at the same time emotionally unsatisfying. And they were unsatisfying in two ways: as a basis for living life, and also as a vision with which to face the prospect of death. In regard to life, the vision of cosmopolitanism undercut any significant social identity. How so? Because the majority of humans cannot successfully identify with a collective as vast as *cosmopolis*. And so, lacking meaningful local community, and being repulsed by the thought that death is no more than personal annihilation, many in the Hellenistic world became attracted to the idea of establishing a sense of identity and immortality in *private* terms, as *individuals*.

[19] And it was the rise of the private identity that correspondingly gave rise to a desire for *personal*, individual immortality. The loss of a sense of local community gave rise to an increasing sense of fragmentation and alienation, and to an impending sense of *dread* in regard to death. This dread arose because there was no longer considered to be a sense of the continuity of the community to serve as sufficient consolation in the face of the individual's death.

[20] In addition, then, to the more philosophical religions of Epicureanism and Stoicism, there arose what are known as "Mystery" religions. These were generally associated with 'super' gods or goddesses— deities syncretically constructed from a variety of local religions. These super-deities were conceived as significantly more satisfying to the alienated Hellenistic cosmopolitan than earlier religious. For one thing, they were not sublimely indifferent to human affairs as were the Epicurean gods. Nor were they simply identified with the natural order, as the Stoic philosophers held. Nor, and this was important, were these super-deities helpless against a natural order. To appreciate the significance of this last point, we need to return briefly to Homer. In Book XVI of the *Iliad*, we are shown Zeus, the most powerful of all the gods, contemplating the imminent death of his dear son Sarpedon:

"Ah me, that it is destined that the dearest of men, Sarpedon, must go down under the hands of Menoitios' son, Patroklos. The heart in my breast is balanced between two ways as I ponder— whether I should snatch him out of the sorrowful battle... or beat him under at the hands of the son of Menoitios." (lines 433ff.)

[21] Zeus is inclined to save his son from death, but his wife Hera warns him that such an act will cause him trouble: "Do you wish to bring back a man who is mortal, one long since doomed by his destiny [= *moira*], from ill-sounding death and release him?" (lines 440-441) Zeus, who is always very smart when it counts, acknowledges the reality of the situation and controls himself— but in a state of profound sorrow:

...yet he wept tears of blood that fell to the ground for the sake of his beloved son, whom now Patroklos was presently to kill." (lines 459-460)

[22] The point of the episode is that the Homeric Zeus is subject to the order of nature as much as is his mortal son Sarpedon. And the order of nature has fated that this day is the day of Sarpedon's death. Zeus' desire to save his son from death is impotent: all he can do is *cry* over Sarpedon's mortality, which is all that a mortal father can do over the death of a son.

[23] We return to the Hellenistic period now, and consider by way of contrast the description of the super-goddess Isis as found in Apuleius' novel *Metamorphoses* (also known as *The Golden Ass*), written in the middle of the second century CE as a devotional tribute to the Mystery religion of the Great Goddess Isis:

Most holy and everlasting Redeemer of the human race, you munificently cherish our lives and bestow the consoling smiles of a Mother upon our tribulations.... You can untwine the hopelessly tangled threads of the Fates. You can mitigate the tempests of Fortune and check the stars in the courses of their malice. The gods of heaven worship you. The gods of hell bow before you. You rotate the globe. You light the sun. You govern space. You trample hell. The stars move to your orders, the seasons return, the gods rejoice, the elements combine. (Meyer, *op. cit.*, p.190.)

[24] Here is a deity of *hope*. In contrast to the divine indifference of Epicureanism, She is the "Redeemer of the human race," and is said to "cherish our lives." In contrast to the helplessness of Homer's Zeus, She is able to "untwine the...threads of the Fates." The Isis mystery religion as related by Apuleius provides a mythical context in which *exemption* from death— personal immortality— becomes a reasonable hope. But the scenario is not a simple one. As ruler of the cosmos, the super-deity of a given mystery religion was assumed to exist *outside* the cosmos, outside nature. Further, the salvation of the individual was taken to be a salvation from *nature*: within the cosmos all particular things are fated to die; to be exempt from death was to be exempt from the laws that govern the cosmos. The fate of the body at death is a matter of empirical observation. If psyche is not to share the fate of the body (either by way of Epicurean annihilation or relegation to the status of a Homeric shade) then it must be at least potentially *independent* of the body. And so the quest for personal immortality came to be understood as a quest for *autonomy*— autonomy from the *body* and, by extension, from *nature*.

[25] It was Plato who maintained that within each individual human being there is an individual psyche, a psyche that is *imprisoned* within the body. And since it is the body that relates to the social collective, the psyche is ultimately autonomous from society. In addition, since the psyche is autonomous from the body, it must also be autonomous from the body's matrix, nature. Plato articulated this vision of the autonomous psyche *before* the emergence of the cosmopolitan social world in which his vision would be useful— a case, not uncommon in history, of a poet anticipating the spiritual direction of his culture. The mystery religions embraced the individualism inherent in Plato and such individualism gave the mystery religions a unique suitability to the Hellenistic cosmopolitan's sense of fragmentation and alienation. As historian of Mystery religions Walter Burkert puts it:

In the ancient world, mysteries were anything but obligatory and unavoidable; there was an element of personal choice, an individual decision in each case. Initiation was not inescapably prescribed by tribal or family adherence. Mysteries were initiation rituals of a voluntary and secret character that aimed at a change of mind through *experience* of the sacred. (Burkert, *W. Ancient Mystery Cults*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1987, pp.10-11.)

[26] In order to be exempted from the laws of nature, the laws that entailed death, it was seen as necessary to evolve a conception of a radically transformed self. And initiation was the emblem of that transformation. Stories of ascents to the heavens— to a realm beyond the cosmos— are at the same time in the mystery religions stories of radical transformation. Plato's mythic account in Book VII of the *Republic* of an ascent out of the 'cave' of nature is typical of such stories. The realm outside the cosmos, the realm of the super-deity of the mystery religions, was seen as the *place* of transformation— a transformation that would allow exemption from either annihilation or the depressing realities of Hades.

[27] We turn now to connect the details of these ancient mystery religions to the belief in personal immortality that has dominated Western civilization for the past two millennia. And that brings us to consideration of the most successful of those ancient mystery religions— Christianity itself. Pointing to parallels between ancient Christianity and the Isis religion presented in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass* mentioned above, the historian David Ulansey says:

The belief expressed... by Apuleius in the capacity of his favorite divinity to conquer the forces of the cosmos and thereby grant salvation is similarly articulated by early Christian authors, as in the following passages from Paul (of Tarsus), written in the middle of the first century C.E.: "Our homeland is in the heavens, from where we also expect a savior... who will transform our humble bodies so as to resemble his glorious body, by means of the power he has to subdue the entire universe" (Phil. 3:20-21). "When we were children, we were enslaved to the elemental forces of the cosmos, but when the fullness of time came God sent his son...in order to free [us]" (Gal. 4:3-5) (Ulansey, D. *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1989, p.85.)

[28] Here we see that the power of the super-deity to rule the cosmos and subdue Fate, including that aspect of Fate which mandates individual human death, is imputed to the God who had formerly been Yahweh, who is now in Paul's Christian scenario taken to be God the Father. Christianity won in the competition of Hellenistic mystery religions, and in its victory it vigorously suppressed close rivals like Mithraism and the Isis cult. Christianity became the dominant outlook of the West: its mythic drama became the touchstone of Western theology and philosophy; its symbology provided the images of much Western art. But most important, its promises conditioned the desperate hopes of the people of Western civilization— people of stations varying from Kings and Queens to illiterate peasants and slaves. And as has been stated, this dominance of the Western psyche by Christianity has lasted almost two millennia.

[29] But Western culture is changing again, perhaps as decisively as it changed during the Hellenistic period. The changes afoot are not new, if by 'new' we mean occurring at the end of the twentieth century. It is well known that in 1882 the German philosopher Nietzsche poetically announced that "God is dead." What he meant by that, he tells us, is that the traditional Western conception of God had become *unbelievable*— that as a culture we had outgrown our traditional myth, or metaphor, of the divine. While Nietzsche's pronouncement is certainly the most famous assault on traditional Christianity, it did not occur in a cultural vacuum. More than half a century earlier, in 1830, a more decisive stroke was made by Ludwig Feuerbach. I say that Feuerbach's was more decisive because it announced not the death of God, but the death of the *individual self*. He argues that personal immortality, the *raison d'etre* of Christianity from St. Paul to pious believers in the present, is an illusion, and an unworthy illusion at that. Here's how he puts it:

Life itself has its necessary limitations, above and below which there is no life.... Life is possible and actual only within...the general measure that nature on earth assumes. It is *the essence of life itself* to exist only on earth, to be possible and actual only within the limitation that nature possesses in the form and shape of the earth. (Feuerbach, L. *Thoughts on Death and Immortality*, translated by J.A. Massey. Univ. of California Press, 1980, p.75.)

[30] Feuerbach suggests that 'everlasting life,' life without limit, is oxymoronic, because life is something which by its very nature occurs within limits. Human life occurs 'on earth,' by which he means in *nature*, and thus is conditioned by the realities through which nature operates. The belief in a super-deity who rules nature and bends its laws on the basis of personal preference ("I will save some, but not others") is for Feuerbach no more than superstition— superstition rooted not in revelatory experience but in a morbid fear of death. To live in a state of desperate evasion of one's own fundamental reality, that we are *mortals*, can only lead to spiritual compromise and inauthenticity. And that we have done so as a culture, that there is a consensus of belief in personal immortality in the West, does not mitigate its unworthiness.

Only when the human once again recognizes that there exists not merely an appearance of death, but an actual and real death, a death that completely terminates the life of the individual, only when he returns to the awareness of his finitude will he gain the courage to begin a new life... (*Op. cit.*, p.17.)

[31] Now it might be argued that thinkers like Feuerbach (and after him Nietzsche) are not really representative, that they are idiosyncratic, that they are not Christians anyway, and that their effusions do not have great impact within the Christian tradition. But recent developments in Christianity strongly suggest otherwise. The end of the twentieth century has been described as a 'post-Christian era.' Critics maintain that the religion is an empty shell, consisting mostly of televangelism and mellow consolations for those who are afraid of death but don't really want to think about religion. Other Christians insist that, although God may be dead, Christianity is vital. A contemporary theologian, Thomas Altizer, insists that an authentic Christianity of the future will move beyond both theism and the hope for personal immortality:

The night brought on by the death of God is a night in which every individual identity perishes. When the heavens are darkened and God disappears, man does not stand autonomous and alone. He ceases to stand.... The death of the transcendence of God embodies the death of all autonomous selfhood, an end of all humanity which is created in the image of an absolutely sovereign and transcendent God. (Altizer, T.J.J. *The Descent into Hell: A Study of the Radical Reversal of the Christian Consciousness*. Seabury Press, 1979, pp.153-4.)

[32] Nor is this radical rethinking of Christianity restricted to what might be thought of as the ivory tower ambience of academic theologians. Working clergy, those whose familiar churches constitute the 'trenches' of the transformations sweeping Christianity, are themselves powerfully caught up in the crisis:

Newsweek reported, in their Easter issue [Mar. 7, 1989], that Christian clergy are not much given to talking about the afterlife anymore; some avoid the subject because they think their listeners don't want to hear about it, and some because they don't believe it themselves. "The problem," a theologian told the magazine, "is that the (mainstream Protestant) clergy simply don't believe in the afterlife themselves, either the Biblical view or any other view. (Anderson, W.T. *Reality Isn't What It Used To Be*. Harper and Row, 1990, p.202.)

[33] For some, the demise of belief in God and personal immortality evokes the ambience of a Samuel Beckett play. But times of radical change, our own as well as the Hellenistic, are typically rich and creative times. And as the belief in personal immortality arose as an exciting prospect in ancient Greco-Roman culture, so the present transitions elicit some exciting new ways of thinking. This is evident in the enthusiastic reception given to James Lovelock's book *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*, in which he says:

The Second Law [of Thermodynamics] states unequivocally that the entropy of an open system must increase. Since we are all open systems, this means that all of us are doomed to die. Yet it is so often ignored or deliberately forgotten that the unending death-roll of all creatures, including ourselves, is the essential complement to the unceasing renewal of life. The death sentence of the Second Law applies only to *identities*, and could be rephrased: 'Mortality is the price of identity.' The family lives longer than its members, the tribe longer still, and *homo sapiens* as a species has existed for several million years. Gaia, the sum of the biota and those parts of the environment coming under its influence, is probably three and a half aeons old. (Lovelock, J. *Gaia: A New Look at Life on Earth*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1979, p.125.)

[34] The issue turns powerfully on how one conceives the self, how one answers the question "Who am I?" If the self is understood exclusively in terms of the *individual*, the individual personality and perhaps even the individual *body*, then the eclipse of God and personal immortality spell annihilation. And when we recall the stories of Hades and Kur— and the even more horrifying images of everlasting torment in the Christian Hell— it might be conceded that annihilation is far from the worst of alternatives. On the other hand, if we answer the question "Who am I?" in broader terms we may come to find that exclusive identification with individuality is a limited perspective. We can, many contemporary thinkers insist, establish a broader and more *realistic* identity by conceiving identity in terms of *interconnectedness* rather than separation. Identity by way of separation was, recall, endemic to the mystery religions, which understood the true self to be *separate* from the body and *separate* from nature. A move beyond the mystery religion that has dominated the West will entail a transition beyond that commitment to establishing identity in terms of separateness. The jury on such matters of cultural evolution stays out for centuries, but there are significant indications that just such a transition is underway.