

Religion Without A Soul
A Response to Paul Razor's "The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion: A Constructive Critique"
Susann Pangerl

In the inaugural issue of *The Journal of Liberal Religion*, Paul Razor offers liberal religionists an etymological overview of the origins of what Razor names as the individualistic view of the human self embedded in liberal religion.¹ Razor argues, as does much of current social scientific research, that the human self is a complex socio/biological creature contextually embedded in particular spatial-temporal locations. Razor identifies our Enlightenment legacy of privileging as the most human, that self marked by autonomous reason and subjective introspection.

Razor sets for himself the rather daunting task of articulating the conceptual preliminaries of a religious anthropology for liberal religionists, drawing on the conclusions of numerous social scientists and contemporary theologians. The intent of his article is the conceptual construction of a notion of self as inherently a social, biological, historical, contextual phenomenon whose very existence is premised on the pre-existing social groups in which we, as persons, discover our existence. Razor extends Robert Bellah's warning that an excessive (and by implication, dangerous) individualism lies at the heart of Unitarian Universalism.² He suggests that this self perception of religious individualism is dangerous to the continued well being of liberal religion (and specifically, Unitarian Universalism). Razor illustrates this danger in his discernment of two contemporary crises in Unitarian Universalism: a crisis of religious identity and a justice crisis. The first crisis swirls around the dangers of a religious stance rooted in an ontological individualism. He suggests that the common difficulty Unitarian Universalists have in succinctly stating our religious and theological location in bullet points is an expression of this ontological individualism. The second identified crisis is the tendency of Unitarian Universalism to adopt a cultural stance of accommodation regarding the challenges of systemic injustices.³

Razor's concept of the self is rooted in the primacy of the social group. Within his framework, the group is primary, and the self is derivative.⁴ We, as human selves, are "fully social beings - not simply beings who come together in community, but as beings who are always already in community."⁵ The self cannot exist in isolation; by its very nature it requires other selves in order to survive. This human self, on the macro level, is a biological creature, continuously evolving. On a micro level, the human self is continuously evolving through an ongoing communicative interaction with other humans. As a historical creature, the human self exists only within time. There is no preexisting soul, no God given, or disembodied, essence distinguishable from our biohistorical selfhood.

Of particular import in Rasor's social notion of the self is the determinative role of language. Language is privileged as the primary medium for the construction of the actual identity mechanisms in human personalities, and in the shaping of moral selves.⁶ This view of human selfhood is circumscribed by the parameters of language: "the self's knowledge and experiences, [are] entirely mediated by language."⁷ By implication, there is no human experience which lies outside the realm of language. All experience is interpretation. Within this perspective, moral agency is social and requires communicative interaction with other social agents. This process presumes a qualitative interaction with others, which, in turn, leads to mutual transformation.⁸

Rasor suggests that this view of the self as thoroughly mediated by language undercuts an essential claim in liberal theology--the possibility of the religious as experienced in nonlinguistic mediums. There is, in this view, no unmediated realm of religious experiencing. Furthermore, in agreement with Lindbeck, he argues that religion is most succinctly understood as a cultural-linguistic practice in which theology has the narrative task of explicating the meaning claims of its tradition. Called into question is the liberal theological stance which appeals to some qualitative experiential phenomena which is then linguistically named as the "religious."⁹

The telos of Rasor's argument is found in his recommendation that we, as liberal religionists, adopt for ourselves this social self construct. Such an adoption would move us into participatory engagement with others. The adoption of this self understanding moves us into experiencing solidarity with others, especially those others who are the recipients of cultural and societal oppression. Our recognition of how we are embedded in particular historical locations and traditions would open us to appreciate the different locations of others. This recognition would become the vehicle of cultural critique for our complicity in the existing structures of oppression.

Several aspects of Rasor's article warrant further exploration. His cogently written argument addresses pressing questions for Unitarian Universalism, and liberal religionists -- as individuals. The questions he raises are germane both corporately and personally to those identified with liberal religion. I will, briefly, set out some of my concerns.

First, for Rasor rampant individualism is the disease, group or communal solidarity is the antidote. My characterization may be overstated, but the repeated emphasis on the social creation of the self does not sufficiently attend to the profound dynamics of power and trust that are inherently present in the emergence of selfhood and within the structures of groups or communities. Subtle dynamics which can as easily diminish or nurture what is creative and expansive in the experience of selfhood. This juxtaposition between atomistic individualism on the one hand, and the community on the other, does not offer any glimmers of a much needed analysis of the structured realities of religious

communities. For example, what are the operative models of relatedness or what are the varieties of selfhood we repeatedly nurture or diminish in our worship. I would suggest that, as academic literature has tended to create a polarized dichotomy between atomistic individual or group experience as some implicitly giving over of selfhood, we might consider traveling a different path. What if we began to think in terms of a community of selves--a reality that holds in creative tension "Inness" and "Weness," refusing to collapse either side of the equation?¹⁰

Second, in contrast to Rasmussen, I suggest that our first principle "the inherent worth and dignity of the individual" is a particularly precious gift in a globalized world economy. Furthermore, it is a rather rare happening for most individuals to know this about themselves and others, not just intellectually, but their bones. The world context which frames our current expression and practice of corporate and personal religious practice feels a little like an invisible elephant on the table--so big but such a given as to become invisible. Ours is an increasingly globalized world economy, shaped by postmodern sensibilities in which human interactions are structured by economic metaphors. Several noted sociologists have identified certain critical features in the operative postmodern cultures.¹¹ The shifting vagaries of urban life become the experimental crucible for the articulation of three characteristic features of contemporary human society: the stranger, the economic exchange (i.e., the exchange of money) as the metaphor of human interaction, and the metaphor of relation as nonrelation.¹² What are strangers? They are socially distant, yet physically close. They pose a threat in that their presence can challenge the certitude and surety in how we order our worlds. In urban settings, we usually use the tried and true strategy of "mismeeting" as a way of negotiating around and between strangers. Through mismeeting, we maintain a nonrelation while in the presence of the other. We choose not to recognize the face of the other. We deny the moral space between ourselves and the other.¹³ To recognize the other requires a measure of trust that the space between is negotiable. Whom and what to trust is not always easily discerned--both individually and corporately. Organizationally, to function with the ruling metaphor of nonrelation, removes the ambiguity and messiness of dealing with the bodily, cultural, and psychic realities of other beings. Nonrelation is clean; it is controllable. It does not require us to pause and see if what we are engaged in "makes sense." Our first principle could be an important link that binds us one to another, and, in fact, allows us a bit of a security blanket in extending ourselves to strangers.

Third, I question whether Rasmussen's social concept of the self goes far enough. I question Rasmussen's overly heavy reliance on language in the development and construal of the human self. I will briefly raise several concerns. First, this heavily linguistic understanding of the self falls prey to what Nancy Frankenberry refers to as the "linguistic gap," when the codeterminate relationships between immediate experiencing and inherited language are ignored. Second, the findings of the last decade of brain research and infant studies challenge as sufficient a notion of self as circumscribed by language. Studies of right and left brain

hemispheres point to distinctive styles of perception. The left sphere perceives analytically, linguistically, and mathematically. It is perception entered into through language and logic. Right brain perception involves spatial relations, attitudinal dispositions (i.e., trust, loyalty) and affective resonance. It is perception as relational and simultaneous, through multisensory combinations of environmental immediacy. It is concrete synthesis, expressed more in sensation than words, and neither wholly nor easily translated into the logical ordering of language. To privilege the linguistic as sufficient to circumscribe the human self and the boundaries of religious experience is, I would suggest, to subtly keep the Enlightenment Man (that one of autonomous reason) that Razor set out to dethrone, heir apparent.¹⁴ There is a second theme of the social self -- that of varieties of selves, formed by the associations in which we participate.¹⁵ This notion begins to reach toward a richer appreciation of human selfhood. These potential varieties are not given substantive elaboration. Such elaboration would enhance our repertoire in putting flesh on the bones of difference.

Fourth, Razor's reduction of religious experience as "a quality of experiencing" to another indication of our dangerous individualism disregards profound aspects of human experiencing not expressed via the logic of language. Infant research gives us some interesting entries.¹⁶ Language, especially for adults, is only the narrative envelope, containing the themes and variations of procedural memory of the self interacting with others. Procedural memory refers to the patterns, such as rates, rhythms, and movements, by which we live. I would suggest that it is not language that motivates us, but affective resonance. Language may be our envelope, but it is not the meaning of the letter that it encloses.

I will close with two stray thoughts that refused to align themselves with any of the above paragraphs. From my perspective, Unitarian Universalism seems a mirror of the dominant American myths and how they have been told. We contain irresolvable ironies: standing often on both the margin and the center of socioeconomic, political, and cultural realities. It is my guess that we are a kind of religious and cultural barometer for directional winds of American culture. My second stray thought revolves around Razor's concern that we cannot succinctly state what we believe. Is this measure of adequate communal identity a religious version of power point? I would suggest that succinctly stating what you believe does not necessarily tell me who you are-it gives me only words.

Notes

1 Paul Razor. "The Self in Contemporary Liberal Religion: A Constructive Critique." *The Journal of Liberal Religion: An Online Theological Journal Devoted to the Study of Liberal Religion*. vol. 1, no. 1 (October, 1999).

2 Robert Bellah. "Unitarian Universalism in Societal Perspective" (Unitarian Universalist Association, General Assembly, Rochester, N.Y., June 27, 1998).

3 Razor, *ibid.*, 9.

4 Razor, *ibid.*, 15.

5 Razor, *ibid.*, 14.

6 Razor, *ibid.*, 16.

7 Razor. *Ibid.*, 4.

8 Razor, *Ibid.*, 17.

9 Razor, *Ibid.*, 10.

10 I am indebted to my colleague Scott Olbert for the phrase "community of selves." Similar understandings are explored in the writings of Iris Young.

11 See for example, Zygmunt Bauman. *Postmodern Ethics*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.

12 Bauman argues that the operative metaphor of nonrelation lies at the heart of business culture. By implication I would suggest that this metaphor has surreptitiously filtered into virtually all facets of our private and corporate lives. Interestingly, this metaphor is premised on the plentiful existence of strangers.

13 See Susann Pangerl. "Feminism, Postmodernism, and Self Psychology: Searching for Spiritual Community," Plenary Address, Center for Religion and Psychotherapy 30th Anniversary, Chicago, IL, March 3, 1996.

14 Factors of class, gender, race, and western vs. nonwestern cultural locations are significantly linked to left or right brain sphere domination.

15 Razor, *ibid.*, 16.

16 See for instance the works of Beatrice Beebe, Daniel Stern, and Joseph Lichtenberg.