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In Search of the Self: Eastern versus Western Perspectives

Derek C. Wolter

Oglethorpe University, dwolter@oglethorpe.edu

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“I believe that if we are honest with ourselves, that the most fascinating problem in the world is ‘Who am I?’ What do you mean, what do you feel, when you say the word I—I, myself. I don’t think there can be any more fascinating preoccupation than that,”¹ begins a lecture by the late British philosopher Alan Watts, who is known for his interpretations of eastern philosophy and mythology. I agree with Watts, in that the question “Who am I?” is *the* question—the essential question that lies at the heart of all philosophic, religious, spiritual, and scientific endeavors. One of the most fascinating ways to view this question, beyond personal introspection, is to view it through the eyes of others: to look at how the great civilizations of the world have attempted to answer this question, the differences in their answers, and the similarities. In doing so, one might be able to shed light on one’s own views of the Self, and perhaps arrive at some inkling of the fundamental truths that unite them all. In another of his lectures, as well as in many of his books, Alan Watts goes on to discuss the world’s two great myths of the Self—myth in this sense not used as something false, but rather as a way of interpreting oneself and one’s reality. There is the myth that pervades in the West, the myth of the “world as an artifact,”² wherein there is a clear distinction between the creator and the created, the godhead and his creations, in the same way as a potter is distinct from pots, and a carpenter from his constructions. In East, however, there is the myth of the world as a drama, “in which all of the things in the world are not made, but acted, in the same way as a player acts parts,”³ wherein there is no distinction made between creator and created, and the godhead is not distinct from the creation. All that exists is a function of the one same existence. According to Alan Watts, “these are the two great images which govern respectively the religions of the West, descending from Hebraism, that is to say Hebraism itself, Christianity and Islam, and on the other hand, the myth that governs those religions which have had their origins in India, most particularly, Hinduism itself, and to a lesser extent Buddhism.”⁴ Watts is quick to clarify his statement by saying that this is how the two great myths of the Self are expressed at a popular level—that is to say they are what it is *like*, not what it *is*, and that most sophisticated adherents to the particular religions of the East or the West have a much deeper and profound understanding of themselves and of their reality.

In analyzing any culture or mythology, a proper understanding of the role of man and his relation to the Cosmos is vital for accurate interpretations. In this paper, I will examine the mythological roots of the religions that influenced most

¹ Alan Watts, *The Tao of Philosophy: Myth of Myself*, Original Live Recording captured by Electronic University, San Anselmo, CA, 1965.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

the East and the West respectively, in an attempt to support Watt's thesis on the two great myths of the Self in the East and the West. Through analyzing the literature of the Vedas and the Upanishads of the East, and Mesopotamian, Semitic, and Christian literature of the West, I will show clear and factual evidence in the texts themselves that respectively support the two great myths of the Self in the East and the West as purported by Alan Watts.

The earliest religious writings in the East are known as the *Vedas*, and form the basis of Hindu philosophy and religion. They were written over a time period that stretches from 1500 BCE to 600 BCE,⁵ and as the scholar Max Müller puts it, the Vedas were "the first word spoken by the Aryan Man."⁶ The first of the Vedas is known as the Rig-Veda, and is a series of hymns dedicated to various gods, and an explanation of the origin and nature of reality. The second hymn in the Rig-Veda called "The Song of Creation" describes the creation of the universe, and is poetic and esoteric in nature. The beginning of it reads:

Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it. What covered in, and where? and what gave shelter? Was water there, unfathomed depth of water? Death was not then, nor was there aught immortal: no sign was there, the day's and night's divider. That one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.⁷

Right from the beginning, it is obvious that this way of thinking varies greatly from the traditional western, logical mode of thinking. "Then was not non-existent nor existent," reads the first part of the hymn, an apparent logical contradiction, a paradox of sorts. In traditional Western dualistic understanding, something is either existent or non-existent—there is no third category that is *neither* existent nor non-existent. However, viewed from a non-dualistic standpoint, this utterance makes complete sense; for something to be existent, there must be non-existence, and for something to be non-existent, there must be existence. Each is defined in terms of the other, and implies the other. There could not have been nothing, because that would imply something, and there could not have been something, because that would imply nothing: it is therefore that something is not existent nor non-existent, but *is* and always *was*. This non-dualistic idea of existence and non-existence is paralleled in the next part of the hymn where it is stated that there was no death, nor immortality. The hymn

⁵ Vasudha Narayanan, "The Hindu Tradition", in *World Religions: Eastern Traditions*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 22.

⁶ Ralph J. H. Griffith, "Hymns from the Rigveda", in *The Wisdom of China and India*, ed. Lin Yutang, (New York: Random House, 1942), 11.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

continues, “That one thing, breathless, breathed by its own nature: apart from it was nothing whatsoever.” Nothing was apart from “that one thing,” the all encompassing *it* of existence, for “apart from it was nothing whatsoever.” From the earliest Vedic text, a non-duality of existence is created that supports the idea of the Self in the East presented by Alan Watts—a universe of non-duality, a creation that is completely unified with the creator, with no distinction.⁸

In the Upanishads, we find the supreme description of the Self in Hindu philosophy. The first part of the Upanishads is called “The Story of Creation,” and it tells of the creation of the universe and of man. It begins,

In the beginning this was Self alone, in the shape of a person (*Purusha*). He looked around and saw nothing but his Self. He first said, ‘This is I’; therefore he became I by name. Therefore, even now, if a man is asked, he first says, ‘This is I,’ and then pronounces the other name which he may have.⁹

Again, a state of supreme non-duality is described. All that he could see, and all that could be perceived was the Self; nothing was separate from him. It continues to say that even today when a man is asked for his name, he first says, “This is I,” and then describes what other names he might have been given. This is saying that even when “different” people meet, they first recognize their innate oneness, saying, “This is I.” The story continues describing how this Self, called Purusha, was lonely, and so decided to create another person out of himself, and so he created a wife. Purusha and his wife embraced, and thus Man was born. However, after she had bore children, “She thought, ‘How can he embrace me, after having produced me from himself? I shall hide myself.’”¹⁰ She then transformed herself into a cow, but Purusha followed, transforming himself into a bull, and so cows were made. She then becomes a mare, and he a stallion. This game of hide and seek continues, until “he created everything that exists in pairs, down to the ants.”¹¹ This view of creation is radically different from the Hebraic idea; here, all creation, even in the mythological sense, is all made up of the same Self. We also see the idea of a game in creation: we see Purusha chasing his wife around throughout the animal kingdom in the grandest game of hide-and-seek, and the resultant creation is merely a byproduct of this game between Purusha and his wife, or rather Purusha and himself. In this story at least, man and all

⁸ Alan Watts, *The Tao of Philosophy: Myth of Myself*, Original Live Recording captured by Electronic University, San Anselmo, CA, 1965.

⁹ F. Max Müller, “The Upanishads”, in *The Wisdom of China and India*, ed. Lin Yutang, (New York: Random House, 1942), 34.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

creatures have at their core a sense of *play*, of being part of some divine drama between Purusha and his wife.

In the Upanishads, Man's true nature is described as "Brahman," meaning "the Self," the same Self that is talked about when it is said "In the beginning this was Self alone." In describing the creation of Man, the Upanishads further states,

He (Brahman or the Self) entered thither, to the very tips of the fingernails, as a razor might be fitted in a razor-case, or as fire in a fire-place.

He cannot be seen, for, in part only, when breathing, he is breath by name; when speaking, speech by name; when seeing, eye by name; when hearing, ear by name; when thinking, mind by name. All these are but the names of his acts.¹²

The Self, or the Brahman, entered everything in existence. He cannot be seen in an ordinary way, because when a person would try to look for it, it would be the Self trying to look at the Self—like trying to perceive directly one's own eye. Seeing, hearing, feeling, and even the searching for the Self are all done by the Self, and so in everyday perception, the Self or Brahman that is in all existence cannot be directly perceived. One of the main points of Hindu religious practice is to change one's perception so as to be able to perceive the Brahman in oneself and others. The story further continues by saying,

And he who worships (regards) him as the one or the other, does not know him, for he is apart from this (when qualified) by the one or the other (predicate). Let men worship him as the Self, for in the self all these are told. This Self is the footsteps of everything, for through it one knows everything.¹³

Here too it is directly stated how man ought to relate to the Self—as not "the one or the other," again giving credence to the idea of a non-dualistic existence. "Let men worship him as the Self," refers the Self or Brahman inside everyone and everything. Here the creator and the creation are unified, and to worship one is to worship the other. Later on the same text reads, "Now if a man worships another deity, thinking the deity is one and he another, he does not know."¹⁴ Creator and creation are inextricably linked. All of these concepts of Brahman, Purusha, God, and Self can be summed up, as it is in the section of the Upanishads "The Subtle Essence," in which the Hindu sage Uddalaka Aruni is giving a teaching to his son, which reads:

¹² Ibid., 35.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 36.

‘Now that which is that subtle essence, in it all that exists has its self. It is the True. It is the Self, and *thou*, O Sventaketu, art *it*.’¹⁵

The most profound of Hindu wisdom can be summed up thusly: Thou art *it*. Thou, you, are all there ever was, is, and will be—the works—the whole universe expressing itself in this particular instant as *you*. This is directly in line with Alan Watt’s interpretation of the image of the Self in the East: the creation, Man, *is* the creator, the Self. There can be no separation between the two, and any appearance otherwise is merely an illusion. In Hindu thought, Man is merely one part of the divine dance of the Self, acted out in innumerable different ways.

Having analyzed the Eastern perspective on the Self, what does the Western, Judeo-Christian tradition have to say about the Self? To analyze the Western Judeo-Christian perspectives of the Self, one has to first analyze the mythology and philosophy that helped shape Judeo-Christian mythology: Mesopotamian.

The Sumerians were the first civilization to occupy Mesopotamia, and it is here that some would argue the first Western mythology was created. In the Sumerian creation myth, we see a story strikingly similar to that in the later Hebrew creation myth in the book of Genesis. In the Sumerian Myth, the Gods are toiling in the hot sun to create bread to eat. The Primeval Sea, who is said to have given birth to all of the other gods, commands her son Enki, the God of wisdom, to fashion them servants of some kind to do the work for them. Enki, after all the God of wisdom and wit, decides that servants made out of the clay that nourished the plants would suffice, and so with the help of the other gods, he creates Man out of clay taken from the river.¹⁶ Here a clear distinction is made in the Sumerian mythology between the creation, Man, and the creator, the Gods. Not only is Man made from a mundane, different substance than the Gods, he is created to take the place of the Gods toiling in the sun to procure nourishment; if Man were not distinct from the Gods, they would not have created him to suffer in their place.

In the Babylonian creation myth, called the *Enuma Elish*, a somewhat different story is portrayed, although with the same conclusion of the distinctness of creator and the creation. When the Semitic Akkadians conquered the Sumerians around 2500 BCE and founded the Babylonian civilization, they adapted and adopted much of the Sumerian mythology and mindset. In Babylonian mythology, man is created out of the blood of a slain God, in order to serve and placate the Gods.¹⁷ Although made from the blood of a God, and

¹⁵ Ibid., 38.

¹⁶ Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, (Ann Arbor: Edward Brothers, Inc., 1947), 70.

¹⁷ John Mackenzie, *Mythology of the Babylonian People*, (London: Bracken Books, 1996), 138-149.

therefore arguably of divine origins, Man is still portrayed as separate from the Gods, and created for the sole purpose of serving the Gods above them.

Next we turn to the Hebrew mythology concerning the creation of man. The Hebrew culture in part grew out of the Semitic Babylonian civilization, and according to Samuel Noah Kramer, the foremost expert on Sumerian mythology, "The form and contents of the Hebrew literary creations and to a certain extent even those of the ancient Greeks were profoundly influenced by them [Sumerian mythology]."¹⁸ The Hebrew creation myth comes from the book of Genesis in the Bible. After stating simply in the first chapter of Genesis that God created Man in his image, the story goes on in the second chapter to say,

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.¹⁹

Here, like in the Sumerian myth, we have Man being created out of the mundane substance of dirt. The purpose of Man's creation, however, is much more vague compared to Sumerian and Babylonian Myths. In Genesis, we are only given tantalizing information, such as,

Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.²⁰

However, in later books like Isaiah we are given a clear definition to the purpose of man's creation:

Everyone who is called by My name, Whom I have created for My glory; I have formed him, yes, I have made him.²¹

As with the Sumerian and the Babylonian myths, it would appear that in the Hebrew myth Man is also created expressly for the purpose of serving its creator, and in this particular case, to worship him so as to provide him with glory. The distinction between creator and created is apparent in the Hebrew myth; if Man were not distinct from God, it would seem that God would be worshipping himself, and so creating man would be superfluous. If we are to accept the

¹⁸ Samuel Noah Kramer, introduction to *Sumerian Mythology*, (Ann Arbor: Edward Brothers, Inc., 1947), viii.

¹⁹ Gen. 2:7-9 New King James Version

²⁰ Gen. 1:27-31

²¹ Isa. 43:7

purpose of Man's creation as stated in Isaiah, then it is clear that God in the Hebrew myth is distinct from his creation, Man.

This interpretation of the Self as distinct from a creator God is also apparent in the writings of Christianity in the New Testament, particularly in the writings of the apostle Paul. In Paul's famous letter to the Romans, he addresses a hypothetical complaint by a follower of Christ, in which the follower is purported to ask, in regards to God's absolute control over Man's will, "Why does He still find fault? For who has resisted His will?"²² Paul responds by saying,

But indeed, O man, who are you to reply against God? Will the thing formed say to him who formed *it*, "Why have you made me like this?" Does not the potter have power over the clay, from the same lump to make one vessel for honor and another for dishonor?²³

This was the unequivocal response of Paul, the founder of the church, and remained the dominant attitude towards that question until St. Augustine would later attempt to redress it. In Paul's response, we again see a clear distinction between God and Man, between the formed and the one who formed. He even uses the analogy of the potter and the clay, giving further credence to the idea that God and Man are fundamentally different substance.

Throughout Sumerian, Babylonian, Hebraic, and Christian mythology, it is clear that Man is a distinct entity from his creator or creators. Man is in no way merely an extension of his creator(s), but is rather a fundamentally different entity made of entirely different substance. In the Western sense, Man is indeed the 'artifact' of a god or gods, the distinct piece of pottery formed by the divine potter for completely utilitarian purposes.

After delving into the literature of India in the East, and Mesopotamian and Judeo-Christian literature in the West, it is clear that, at least within the traditions and mythologies analyzed, the conception of the Self in the East and the West is in line with what Alan Watts proposed. In the East, the idea of the Self is indeed one of complete unity with the creator—Man *is* God, acted out in a multitude of different ways, as an actor plays a part in a drama. In the West, it is clear that the idea of the Self is perceived as distinct from God—the pot distinct from the potter, with Man as the artifact of creation.

Within all mythology, there are certain reoccurring archetypes and ideas that speak to the universality of the human experience. However, what can be fundamentally different in mythologies, as I have just shown, is the role of Man and his relation with the Cosmos at large. Not only is understanding these differences useful in analyzing the writings of a mythology, but also in

²² Rom. 9:19 New King James Version

²³ Rom. 9:20-21.

understanding the various conceptions and images of the Self currently held by individuals around the world, and their implications for how people behave and act on a grand scale. Only through knowing and understanding these differing conceptions of the Self can people begin to truly understand other cultures and ways of thinking, as well as perhaps glean a small portion of the vast knowledge and wisdom encoded in the great mythologies and religions of the world.

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