

FORUM

TERROR IN THE GOD-SHAPED HOLE: A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE ON MODERNITY'S IDENTITY CRISIS

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“Hell is truth seen too late.” (Anonymous)

ABSTRACT: Religiously inspired terrorism can be understood as a response to a fundamental problem of secular modernity: the “God-shaped hole” that motivates it. The key issue is *identity*, and the anxiety that lack of secure identity arouses. Secular values undermine the ontological identity that religion traditionally provided. By devaluing such religious solutions to the ungroundedness of our constructed sense of self, the modern/postmodern world aggravates the sense of lack that it cannot understand and with which it is unable to cope. This may seem too abstract, but the problems created are all too real. This essay discusses these problems and adumbrates a Buddhist solution. This challenge requires a spiritual growth that involves confronting our *lack*—that is, opening up to the groundlessness that we dread, which turns out to be a formless, ungraspable ground.

INTRODUCTION

Why would a small group of people want to crash hijacked airplanes into skyscrapers, killing thousands (including themselves) and terrorizing millions? Perhaps only religion¹ can provide the motivation and collective support for such heinous deeds. Does this mean that religious terrorism can be dismissed as just another example of religious fanaticism? Much more needs to be said because there is a “logic” to such fundamentalist terrorism, which makes it a regrettable but nonetheless understandable reaction to modernity.

Mark Juergensmeyer (2000) and Karen Armstrong (2000) have shown that religious fundamentalism is not a return to pre-modern ways of being religious. Jewish, Christian, and Islamic fundamentalisms are all recent developments reacting to what is perceived—to a large extent correctly, I shall argue—as the failure of secular modernity. Such fundamentalism, including the violence it occasionally spawns, is the “underside” of modernity, its Jungian *shadow*. Although such responses are themselves flawed, sometimes horribly so, there is nevertheless something insightful in their perception of the need for an alternative to secularity as we now experience it. While deploring its recourse to violence, we also need to appreciate the crucial problem that religiously-inspired terrorism points to: that is, the “God-shaped hole” in the modern world that motivates it. For that reason I suspect that the challenge of effectively combating this kind of terrorism generally will not be resolved until we find other ways to address the defect to which it is responding.

Since Nietzsche announced the death of God over a century ago, we have gradually become aware of a void at the heart of modernity. Recently the term has become

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popular, used in various ways in fiction and pop music lyrics. Some trace it back to Augustine, but Karen Armstrong (2000) attributes it to Jean-Paul Sartre, who referred to “the God-shaped hole in human consciousness, where the divine had always been but had disappeared, leaving an emptiness behind” (p. 199). Such a concept invites a Buddhist interpretation: our *anatta* ‘lack of self’ (in modern terms, the sense of self as an insubstantial construct) is usually experienced as a gaping hole at the core of our being, an ever-present *lack* that demands to be filled. It is the ultimate insecurity—and one that can be resolved only spiritually.

Religious critiques of modernity usually focus on our faith in self-sufficient human reason, but that is not the central point to be explored in this paper. The key issue is *identity*, and the security that identity provides – or the anxiety that lack of secure identity arouses. Traditional pre-modern religion provided an *ontological security*, by grounding us in an encompassing metaphysical vision that explains the cosmos and our role within it. Modernity and post-modernity question such transcendental narratives, and therefore leave us with *ontological anxiety* about the apparent meaninglessness of the universe and the ungroundedness of our lives within it. The result is that we are afflicted with “a deepening condition of metaphysical homelessness,” which is psychologically difficult to bear (Bergen, Bergen, & Kellner, p. 77).

That brings us back to the basic problem to which religiously inspired terrorists are reacting. By promoting secular values and goals, the modern world cannot avoid undermining the cosmic identity and therefore the ontological grounding that religion traditionally provides. Modernity offers us some other identities—as citizens, as consumers—but this-worldly alternatives cannot provide the ultimate security that we cannot help craving. Our modern identities are more obviously humanly constructed roles that can be exchanged, which therefore offer us no special place or responsibility in a meaningful Cosmos.²

This scenario highlights our fate as moderns. Lack of ontological security usually manifests as aggravated anxiety, which we experience as this or that “*fear of*,” most recently, of course, fear of terrorism. In terms of identity, the problem is not merely that our different modern identities involve a sense of self-worth that is more individualistic and competitive. Even many of the most successful are afflicted in remaining essentially ungrounded. To be grounded one needs something that a sacred worldview provides but contemporary secularity cannot. This ungroundedness means, among other things, that we do not have a solution to death, or to what I have elsewhere described as our “sense of lack” (Loy 1996, 2002). The Buddhist teaching of *anatta* or “non self” implies that each of us is haunted by a usually repressed sense of lack that must somehow be resolved. This lack is experienced as the gnawing suspicion that “there is something wrong with me,” but we never quite get a handle on what that something is. Sartre, as noted earlier, said that the death of God in the modern world has left a “God-shaped hole” at our core. Many of our problems today derive from the fact that we compulsively try to fill this bottomless pit, which gives a manic quality to our secular projects. . . . If this is also true collectively – if societies and nations can also be obsessed with a *group* sense of ungroundedness – we begin to see why modernity (and now post-modernity) has become such a problem.

A Buddhist way to describe this situation is with the basic Mahayana categories *form* and *emptiness* (the latter term understood, in this case, as *formlessness*). Identity is form: because formlessness (the original meaning of *chaos*) terrifies us, we cling to a fixed identity for stability, a secure ground. The traditional pre-modern guarantor of fixed identity has been religion, which purports to teach us who we really are and what we should do, but such myths were anathema to the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, which promoted in their place the freedoms we cherish today.

The destabilizing effects of modernity mean that modern fundamentalists must cling to their doctrines (orthodoxy) and rituals (orthopraxy) more tightly than their pre-modern forbearers needed to do. Unavoidably, such contemporary identifications are not only more literalistic but more self-conscious, which means they are less effective at allaying anxiety—which means that greater, often more violent measures are needed in defense of one’s religious commitments in a secular world that constantly threatens those identifications. Even a hundred years ago, Christianity for Westerners was (with few exceptions³) fate; today Christian commitment is a choice, even for those raised in all-Christian communities, who need only turn on the television or open a magazine to be exposed to seductive secular alternatives. Religious choice today is often driven by the perception that there is something wrong with those secular alternatives. I will argue that this understanding is largely correct, although this does not necessarily imply that a fundamentalist response is better.

Linking the issue of religious terrorism with ontological identity may seem too abstract and metaphysical. The problems that this relationship reveals, however, are all too real and immediate. Their linkage gives us insight not only into the sometimes violent tendencies of religious fundamentalism, but also into the basic problem with modernity itself, revealing why modernity is a contributing cause of religious terrorism, and why modern attempts to deal with the problems have been so unsuccessful. In Mahayana terms, our identity, like all other forms, is always empty (*shunya*), but the compensation for this basic groundlessness is that our emptiness/formlessness always takes on one or another form, according to the situation. Form is empty, yet emptiness is also form. Ironically, the metaphysical home we seek can be found only in homelessness itself, according to Buddhism. This requires a spiritual growth that involves confronting our *lack* – that is, facing and accepting the groundlessness that we dread.

TERRORISM IS A FORCE THAT GIVES IDENTITY

“A society provides an accepted—even heroic—social role for its citizens who participate in great struggles and have been given the moral license to kill. They are soldiers. Understandably, many members of radical religious movements see themselves that way.” (Juergensmeyer, 2000, pp. 188–189)

Engaging in terrorist mass murder/suicide is so horrific that it normally requires special support, not only to provide the material means but to reinforce the internal conviction necessary to carry out something so extreme. A legitimating ideology is needed, maintained by a community that encourages such desperate measures, by emphasizing, among other things, the violence-supporting texts to be found in almost all religious traditions. Such passages are normally a minor part of the tradition, but they can be de-contextualized from other doctrines, and groups can construct their belief-systems upon

violent historical events or myths. We should not be surprised that individuals can internalize terrorist-promoting beliefs. Despite our self-image as rational beings, the usual reason—or cause—for our beliefs is that other people whom we respect (and those whom we want to respect us) believe the same thing. Accepting their beliefs, makes us part of the group, and membership provides us with a reassuring identity.

This explanation by itself is not sufficient to understand the lure of terrorism, yet a community of believers supplies the conscious ideology that allows other less reputable factors the space to operate. Violence, once morally justified, opens the door not only to illusions of power but to fantasies of personal recognition that involve “proving oneself” in a virile, testosterone-fueled way. Popular culture also celebrates it as the solution to many problems. Violence can be cathartic, but it can also be a way to be noticed, to prove to others that *I am real* and need to be taken account of. As the novelist Don DeLillo has put it, terrorism is “the language of being noticed” (cited in Juergensmeyer, 2000, p. 139). If one’s self-image involves internalizing the perceptions that others have of us, the anonymity of mass society is part of modernity’s lack-of-identity problem. How to distinguish oneself, if, DeLillo has also said, “only the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for faith,” is taken seriously in modern society (cited in Juergensmeyer, p. 125). Better to be known as someone who was willing to die for his beliefs, than not to be known at all—than to *be* no one at all.

This backdrop helps us understand why terrorist attacks such as those on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, which seem strategically absurd and self-defeating, can nevertheless be desirable. They are not instrumental means to realize political goals but *symbolic*. As David Rapaport has observed, victims are chosen not primarily because they are threatening but because they are representative symbols that tie into “a special picture of the world” (cited in Juergensmeyer, p. 125). Juergensmeyer himself emphasizes that religion is crucial for such dramatic statements because it “provides images of cosmic war” that aid the perpetrators’ perspective of “waging spiritual scenarios” (p. xi). This brings us back to the position of how religion offers ontological identity.

In *War Is a Force that Gives Us Meaning* (2002) Chris Hedges, writing from his own experience as a war correspondent, reflects on why war is so addictive for some, despite all the suffering and danger it involves:

The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it can give us what we long for in life. It can give us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of much of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our airwaves [War] allows us to be noble. (p. 3)

Peace had again exposed the void that the rush of war, of battle, had filled. Once again they [victims of the Bosnian war] were, as perhaps we all are, alone, no longer bound by that common sense of struggle, no longer given the opportunity to be noble, heroic, no longer sure what life was about or what it meant. (p. 7)

The communal march against an enemy generates a warm, unfamiliar bond with our neighbors, our community, our nation, wiping out unsettling undercurrents of

alienation and dislocation. War, in times of malaise and desperation, is a potent distraction. (p. 11)

Notice the contrast: war provides a meaning lacking in peacetime. Despite its horrors, war remains attractive because it fills the void—the shallowness, loneliness, alienation and malaise—of everyday life: because it conceals better the *lack* of our everyday identities? That is the important question Hedges' book suggests: is this lack of purpose a general description of all peacetime life, which suggests a grim prognosis indeed, or is it particularly descriptive of the sense of lack in modern *secular* life, which seems to doom our lives to triviality insofar as it provides us with no cosmic role greater than consumerism or (occasionally) patriotism? Is it the secular alternative that makes religious war so attractive?

The return to a peaceful environment was often difficult for Hedges and other correspondents, who had become addicted to the excitement of war. But what if there is a grand spiritual war that is going on all the time, even in times of peace, although mostly unbeknownst to those who do not have the spiritual insight to perceive what is at stake? In that case, the vapidness of everyday life may be avoided indefinitely, since the noble struggle continues indefinitely.

Such soldiers have found new battles: the grand spiritual and political struggles in which their movements envision themselves to be engaged. These cosmic wars impart a sense of importance and destiny to men who find the modern world to be stifling, chaotic, and dangerously out of control. The imagined wars identify the enemy, the imputed source of their personal and political failures; they exonerate these would-be soldiers from any responsibility for failures by casting them as victims; they give them a sense of their own potential for power; and they arm them with the moral justification, the social support, and the military equipment to engage in battle both figuratively and literally. (Juergensmeyer, p. 190)

Transcendental struggle can provide a heroic identity that transcends even death, for death is not checkmate when you are an agent of God. What grander destiny is possible, than to be part of the cosmic forces of Good fighting against Evil? A heady alternative to languishing in a refugee camp without much hope for the future—or, for that matter, to channel surfing and shopping at the mall.

In such a war it is okay to kill “innocents,” for there are really no bystanders, just people unaware of whose side they are on, who do not understand the role they are already playing in this cosmic struggle. One's own violence is a defensive response to evil aggression, in an ongoing war that may have started a long time ago. To feel that one is on the side of the Good it is necessary to satanize the enemy—easy to do, since the primary Enemy here usually *is* Satan, in one or another of his nefarious roles. This means that no quarter should be given, for evil must be destroyed. One's own death as a martyr (literally, “witness”) becomes a sacrifice (literally, “making holy”) that ennoble one's victims as well as oneself. All this is justified because the context and the meaning of this struggle transcend this world and its inhabitants. The salvation—the spiritual identity and home—of such cosmic warriors is not to be found on this earth except insofar as its mundane events are related to higher, invisible spiritual developments.

The “Chosen Ones”

The need for ideological support reminds us of the importance of religious collectives in scripting such cosmic dramas. Of course, some groups have a more important role than others to play in this spiritual war, so they cannot be held to the same standards of behavior that others must follow. The Hebrews became a chosen people due to their covenant with God; Christians who worship the true Son of God are obliged to convert the heathen; the extraordinary military success of the first Muslims suggested that God looked upon them with special favor; and ever since the first Puritan settlers Americans have tended to view their new nation as a New Jerusalem, charged with unique responsibility to bring salvation (whether religious or secular) to the rest of the world. According to a 2003 Pew poll, 48 percent of Americans believe that the United States has had special protection from God for most of its history.

To have a special role is also to have a privileged destiny. According to the Israeli Rabbi Eleazar Waldman of the Gush movement, “the Redemption of the world *depends* upon the Redemption of Israel. From this derives our moral, spiritual, and cultural influence over the entire world. The blessing will come to all of humanity from the people of Israel living in the whole of its land” (cited in Armstrong, p. 286). Since world Redemption is the most important thing of all, if it involves expelling more Palestinians from Greater Israel—well, in the long run that will be for their own (spiritual) good too.

A juxtaposition of Special Destinies can lead to some peculiar alliances, as in the support of many conservative U.S. Christians for Israeli expansion into Palestinian homelands. According to their reading of the *Book of Revelation*, the Last Days will not occur until the Jewish people return to the Holy Land.⁴ According to the same 2003 Pew poll, 44 percent of Americans believe that God gave the land that is now Israel to the Jewish people, and 31 percent think that “the state of Israel is a fulfillment of the biblical prophecy about the second coming of Jesus.” If the turbulent days to follow, including the Second Coming, will condemn to eternal damnation those Jews who do not convert to Christianity—well, that too is unfortunate, but the important thing is to do whatever is necessary to encourage His return.

It ends up a hypocritical contract, or Faustian compact, between two Chosen Peoples each eager to use the other for its own higher destiny (and identity). In such a cosmic struggle, of course, the welfare of “bystanders” such as the Palestinians is trumped by the superior spiritual role of Jews and/or Christians. In Armstrong’s words, a “literal reading of highly selected passages of the Bible had encouraged them [Christian fundamentalists] to absorb the Godless genocidal tendencies of modernity” (p. 218). The same is true for those Zionists who will do anything deemed necessary to promote the Redemption of Israel. One’s identity as a spiritual warrior justifies the oppression of the less-spiritually-important Other.

It is quite remarkable how often the literature on terrorism cites *identity* as the basic issue. For example, the Sikh terrorist leader Bhindranwale “echoed the common fear that Sikhs would lose their identity in a flood of resurgent Hinduism, or worse, in a sea of secularism” (Juergensmeyer, p. 94). Many Japanese have understood the attraction of Aum Shinrikyo, which released sarin gas in a Tokyo subway, as “the

result of a desperate searching for social identity and spiritual fulfillment” (p. 103). Juergensmeyer concludes that the modern world as experienced by religious terrorists and their supporters is:

a dangerous, chaotic, and violent sea for which religion was an anchor in a harbor of calm. At some deep and almost transcendent level of consciousness, they sensed their lives slipping out of control, and they felt both responsible for the disarray and a victim of it. To be abandoned by religion in such a world would mean a loss of their own individual identity. In fashioning a “traditional religion” of their own, they exposed their concerns not so much with their religious, ethnic or national communities as with their own personal, imperiled selves. (p. 223)

Juergensmeyer describes a syndrome that “begins with the perception that the public world has gone awry, and the suspicion that behind this social confusion lies a great spiritual and moral conflict, a cosmic battle between the forces of order and chaos, good and evil,” in which a delegitimized government is seen as allied with the forces of chaos and evil (p. 224).

Of course, there are other ways in which the world might have gone awry. But then one would not have recourse to the familiar, even comfortable concept of war, and the heroic identity it provides for those engaged in it.

The idea of warfare implies more than an attitude; ultimately it is a world view and an assertion of power. To live in a state of war is to live in a world in which individuals know who they are, why they have suffered, by whose hand they have been humiliated, and at what expense they have persevered. The concept of war provides cosmology, history, and eschatology and offers the reins of political control. Perhaps most important, it holds out the hope of victory and the means to achieve it. In the images of cosmic war this victorious triumph is a grand moment of social and personal transformation, transcending all worldly limitations. One does not easily abandon such expectations. To be without such images of war is almost to be without hope itself Like the rituals provided by religious traditions, warfare is a participatory drama that exemplifies—and thus explains—the most profound aspects of life. (Juergensmeyer, p. 155)

Hedges’ book shows us that the worldview, meaning, and power provided by warfare are addictive for many. Elevate this struggle into a Cosmic War between Good and Evil and the attraction of warrior-identity is multiplied many times over.

Apocalypse Tomorrow

A striking characteristic of almost all the grand Cosmic Wars is the apocalyptic resolution that is just about to occur. Despite great variety in fundamentalist belief about the nature of this spiritual struggle, everyone seems to know that the last days are at hand. Often this includes the return of a Messiah, whose advent will set off (or crown) the final chain of events. In addition to the Christian *Book of Revelation*, Juergensmeyer refers to the “catastrophic messianism” dear to Rabbi Meir Kahane,

founder of Israel's rightwing Kach party: the Messiah will come—"fairly soon"—when Jews win a great conflict and praise God through their successes. The "messianic Zionism" taught by Avraham Kook, the chief Rabbi of pre-Israel Palestine, was much encouraged by the euphoria after Israel's success in the 1967 Six Day War, which was taken to imply that "history was quickly leading to the moment of divine redemption and the recreation of the biblical state of Israel" (Juergensmeyer, p. 55). "Kook really believed that he was living in the last age and would shortly witness the final fulfillment of human history" (Armstrong, p. 187). The tragic vision of Shiite Islam views the martyrdom of Muhammad's descendants as symbolizing a spiritual war in which evil always seems to get the upper hand, but the last days will bring the final re-appearance of the Hidden Imam (Armstrong, p. 45). Shoko Asahara, the Japanese founder of Aum Shinrikyo, predicted an Armageddon in which evil forces will use the most vicious weapons—including radioactivity and poison gas—to destroy almost everyone. Only the members of Aum Shinrikyo and a few others with "great karma" will survive. The March 1995 Tokyo subway attack releasing Sarin gas that killed twelve people and injured thousands, was expected to hasten the climactic cataclysm (Juergensmeyer, 2000).

How shall we understand this widespread expectation of an imminent apocalyptic resolution? Its historical recurrence suggests a persistent psychological need perhaps aggravated by modernity's preoccupation with temporal progress. The traditional self-understanding of premodern societies unites cosmology and temporality: rituals must be performed at certain times because they are needed at those times. An orderly continuation of the world cycle is preserved, and the identity of participants thus grounded, not by transcending the past but by reliving it. Pre-modern history is not a weight to be overcome but a harmonious pattern to be re-enacted. Our role in the cosmos is to keep enacting it, so the cosmic cycle will continue. Apocalyptic movements arise when re-enactment fails to resolve accumulated tension/lack; often it is social or economic crisis that inspires the quest for another spiritual alternative.

In contrast, secular modernity focuses on the future. The past is to be superseded; our own identities, like the world in general, can and should be improved upon. But technological developments and economic growth do not address our need for a metaphysical ground. Our sense of sin (anxiety, *lack*) is all the more difficult to cope with today since we are not supposed to have it and therefore lack the spiritual resources to deal with it. Our greater freedom is shadowed by greater anxiety.

Impending apocalypse is the solution to this tension. We can no longer secure ourselves by re-enacting the ancient rituals; the traditional cycle of time has been broken by our linear obsession with progress. If the solution to the awfulness of the present cannot be found in the past, it must be sought in the future—and not a distant future, for that would project the object of our hopes, the end of our *lack*, too far away to reassure and motivate us now. The event that will wipe away the past and purify the world, destroying the corrupt and redeeming the faithful, must be just around the corner. Life would be unbearable without that imminent prospect. We are about to attain our spiritual home! The greater our anxiety, the greater is our need for such a resolution, and the sooner the better.

A DISTORTED INSIGHT?

Should this Cosmic War between Good and Evil be understood as merely a fantasy of the spiritually unsophisticated? Or might it be an insightful realization that we are indeed in the midst of a worldwide spiritual/psychological struggle?

Karen Armstrong describes the “battle for God” as an attempt to fill the empty core of a society based on scientific rationalism. “Confronted with the genocidal horrors of our century, reason has nothing to say. Hence, there is a void at the heart of modern culture, which Western people experienced at an early stage of their scientific revolution” (p. 365), or *began* to experience. The void is still there; we have just gotten used to avoiding or repressing the great anxiety associated with modernity—and not noticing the consequences. Armstrong reminds us of Nietzsche’s madman, in *Zarathustra* and *The Gay Science*, who declares that the death of God has torn humanity from its roots and cast us adrift “as if through an infinite nothingness,” ensuring that “profound terror, a sense of meaningless and annihilation, would be part of the modern experience” (p. 97). Today politicians and economists urge us to keep the (secular) faith, keep telling us that we are approaching the promised land, but “[a]t the end of the twentieth century, the liberal myth that humanity is progressing to an ever more enlightened and tolerant state looks as fantastic as any of the other millennial myths” that her book examines (p. 366). The nameless dread still haunts us. Fundamentalists and secularists seem to be “trapped in an escalating spiral of hostility and recrimination” (p. 371). Moreover, the stakes after September 11th have become much higher.

Juergensmeyer notices three aspects common to the violent religious movements he has studied. All of them reject the compromises that more mainstream religious organizations have made with liberal and secular values. They refuse to observe the sacred/secular distinction that is so sacred to modernity, which banishes religion from the public sphere by consigning it to private life. Finally, they replace modernity’s attenuated religious forms with more vigorous and demanding expressions. He “was struck with the intensity of their quests for a deeper level of spirituality than that offered by the superficial values of the modern world” (p. 222).

These three attributes can be summed up as *a rejection of modern secularity*. It is not difficult to feel some sympathy for this position, since some of the fundamentalist criticisms ring true. However, the secularity of contemporary life is a hard-won historical legacy that seems necessary for the freedoms we enjoy today, including freedom of religious commitment and expression.

Nevertheless, the fundamentalist perception that there is something basically problematical about the modern distinction between sacred and secular is fundamentally valid. Although the separation between those spheres is one of the finest achievements of Western civilization, it is also *the* basic problem of Western civilization, the tragic flaw which may yet destroy it. The contemporary struggle between them can indeed be understood as a spiritual war, whose significance is difficult to exaggerate.

“We have never been so prosperous. Yet we have never been so secular and pagan We are making secularism our national religion.”—Jerry Falwell, *A National Rebirth Needed* (2000)⁵

The basic problem for Falwell and other fundamentalists is not so much other religions as *the ideology that pretends not to be an ideology*. Juergensmeyer concludes by focusing on the widespread loss of faith in the values of secular nationalism (p. 226). Mahmud Abouhalima, convicted for his role in the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was emphatic that the problem with America is not Christianity but its ideology of secularism; secularism has no life and secular people are “just moving like dead bodies” (Juergensmeyer, p. 69).

Sayyid Qutb, an Islamic scholar who became the intellectual inspiration for most Islamic terrorist groups including al Qaeda, built his philosophy on a critique and rejection of secularism. His major work *In the Shade of the Qur'an* emphasizes that the modern world has reached *jahiliyya*, a pathological “moment of unbearable crisis,” not only because of its faith in human reason but more generally because of the Christian split between the sacred and secular dimensions of life, which later evolved into the modern Western separation of church and state. For Qutb, secularist morality is “ersatz religion,” and a life in *jahiliyya* is “hollow, full of contradictions, defects and flaws” (as quoted in Euben, 1991, p. 22). This “hideous schizophrenia” becomes worse when Christians try to impose it on Islam, because it is alien to *shari'a*, the Islamic moral code that regulates everyday life in great detail. Qutb rejected the Muslims leaders of his time, including “the Pharaoh” Nasser who jailed and then executed him in 1966, as modernized and pagan products of the “new ignorance” sweeping the world. Their secularism is an attempt to destroy Islam, hence it must be resisted by any means possible (Berman, 1991, p. 28).

We do not need to accept Qutb's call to violent resistance to benefit from his perspective: the modern Western bifurcation between sacred and secular remains foreign to the core teachings of Islam. Muhammad was a social and political leader as well as a spiritual adviser, and his legacy includes detailed instructions on how to incorporate one's religious commitment into the practices of everyday life. The fact that some of those guidelines no longer seem appropriate in the twenty-first century is part of Islam's difficulty today, but the challenge of modifying them does not imply that Muslims must accept the basic premise of Western modernity. “Western thinkers rightly note that Islam has never grasped the need for a secular realm. They fail to note that what passes for secular belief in the West is a mutation of religious faith” (John Gray, 2003, p. 11). This mutation is inconsistent with Islam.

Since I intend to raise questions about what is, in effect, the foundation of our modern world, I ask readers not to read into my argument claims that I do not make. I share the usual appreciation of the freedoms usually associated with the distinction between sacred and secular. The liberty to believe what one wants, or not believe, is a hard-won and essential right. Nevertheless, the “naturalness” of the secular worldview must be challenged, in order to gain a better understanding of what has been lost as well as gained.

To anticipate, the basic problem, from my Buddhist perspective, is this: our sense of *lack* remains oblivious to any distinction we might make between a sacred or secular worldview. Our *lack* continues to fester regardless, although a secular understanding of the world (e.g., a world without Abrahamic sin or Buddhist delusion) tends to repress it, since a rationalistic and humanistic orientation acknowledges no such deficiency at our core. The result is that we end up trying to fill up that *lack* in ways that are doomed to fail, by grasping at something or other *in* the secularized world. We need to appreciate the fundamentalist insight that no solution to *lack* can be found in this way. That does not mean we should accept fundamentalist solutions, but we do need to find ways to *re-sacralize* the world—or, from a Buddhist perspective, to realize its inherent sacrality.

The Spirituality of Secularity

The main problem with our usual understanding of secularity is that it is taken-for-granted, so we are not aware that it *is* a worldview. It is an ideology that pretends to be the everyday world we live in. Many assume that it is simply the way the world really is, once superstitious beliefs about it have been removed. Yet that is the secular view of secularity, its own self-understanding, no more to be accepted at face value than Falwell's or Qutb's neo-orthodox alternatives to secularity. The secularity we presuppose must be "de-naturalized" in order to realize how unique and peculiar such a worldview is—and, as I shall try to show, inherently unstable.

Western secularity, including its capitalist economy, originated as the result of an unlikely concatenation of circumstances. To survive within the Roman Empire, early Christianity had to render unto Caesar what was Caesar's, and keep a low profile that did not challenge the state; spiritual concerns were necessarily distinguished from political issues. Later struggles between the Emperor and the Papacy tended to reinforce that distinction. By making private and regular confession compulsory, the late medieval Church also promoted the development of a subjective interiority that encouraged more personal religiosity. New technologies such as the printing press made widespread literacy and hence more individualistic religion possible.

All that made the Reformation possible. By privatizing an unmediated relationship between more individualized Christians and a more transcendent God, Luther's emphasis on salvation-by-faith-alone eliminated the intricate web of mediation—priests, sacraments, canon law, pilgrimages, public penances, etc. that in effect had constituted the sacred dimension of this world. The religiously-saturated medieval continuity between the natural and the supernatural was sundered by *internalizing* faith and *projecting* the spiritual realm far above our struggles in this world. "These realms, which contained respectively religion and the world, were hermetically sealed from each other as though constituting separate universes" (Nelson, 1981, p. 75). The medieval understanding of our life as a cycle of sin and repentance was replaced by the more disciplined character-structure required in the modern world, sustained by a more internalized conscience that did not accept the need for external mediation or the validation of priests.

As God slowly disappeared above the clouds, the secular became increasingly dynamic, accelerating into the creative destruction to which today we must keep

readjusting. What often tends to be forgotten in the process is that *the distinction between sacred and secular was originally a religious distinction*, devised to empower a new type of Protestant spirituality: that is, a more privatized way to address our sense of *lack* and fill up the God-shaped hole. By allowing the sacred pole to fade away, however, we have lost the original religious *raison d'être* for that distinction. That disappearance of the sacred has left us with the secular by itself, bereft of the spiritual resources originally designed to cope with it, because secular life is increasingly liberated from any religious perspective or supervision.⁶ When religion is understood as an individual process of inner faith-commitment, we are more likely to accede to a diminished understanding of the objective world “outside” us, denuding the secular realm of any sacred dimension.

The basic problem with the sacred/secular bifurcation has become more evident as the sacred has evaporated. The sacred provided not only ritual and morality but a grounding *identity* that explained the meaning of our life-in-the-world. Whether or not we now believe this meaning to be fictitious makes no difference to the metaphysical security and ultimate foundation that it was *felt* to provide. A solution was provided for death and our God-shaped sense of *lack*, which located them within a larger spiritual context and therefore made it possible to endure them. Human striving and suffering gained meaning; they were not accidental or irrelevant, but served a vital role within the grand structure of things.

What may be misleading about this discussion of an enervated sacred dimension is that it still seems to suggest *superimposing* something (for example, some particular religious understanding of the meaning of our lives) onto the secular world (that is, the world “as it really is”). My point is the opposite: our usual understanding of the secular is a *deficient* worldview (in Buddhist terms, a delusion) distorted by the fact that one half of the original duality has gone missing, although now it has been absent so long that we have largely forgotten about it.

This may be easier to see if we think of God and the sacred dimension as, most broadly, symbols for the “spiritual” aspect of life in a more psychological sense: that is, the dimension that encompasses our concerns about the meaning and value of human life in the cosmos. The sacred becomes that sphere where the mysteries of our existence—birth and death, tragedy, anxiety, hope, transformation—are posed and contemplated. From this perspective, the secular is not the world-as-it-really-is when magic and superstition have been removed, but the supposed objectivity that remains when “subjectivity”—including these basic issues about human role and identity—has been brushed away as irrelevant to our understanding of what the universe really is. In the process our spiritual concerns are not refuted; there is simply no way to address them in a secular world built by pruning value from fact, except as subjective preferences that have no intrinsic relationship with the “real” material world we just happen to find ourselves within.

A metaphorical understanding of the spiritual makes it more obvious that the sacred cannot be avoided, although it can be repressed if we accept a diminished understanding of ourselves to accommodate our diminished understanding of the world. It is easy to dismiss the outdated beliefs and antiquated rituals of traditional religions, while missing the fact that these are expressions, however unsatisfactory

today, of a *basic human orientation to sacralize the world we live in, in the sense of integrating practices that address our sense of lack*. By throwing out the spiritual baby with the bathwater, we overlook the fact that the subjective implications of the “objective” secular are an indivisible aspect of that secular. *The secular world is secular only in relation to a particular kind of subject*, which understands its *lack* in a particular way—or, more precisely, does *not* understand its *lack* in a way that helps to successfully resolve it. The deep-rooted anxiety of living in a technologically- and socially-rationalized world, which deprives us of the spiritual identity that traditionally served to ground us, is not some accident of modern history. Metaphysical terror is implicit in the basic figure-ground relationship that secularized humans have with their secularized world.

The secular world is deficient in the sense that we do not experience the world as it really is, but as distorted perceptually and emotionally by our repressed, unacknowledged need to find something in it that will fill up the gaping wound at our core. Obsessed with the emptiness of a God-shaped hole that our rationality cannot understand and so does not recognize, we now try to *make ourselves real* by making the best of the possibilities that the secular world offers. Individually, we are obsessed with symbolic realities such as money, fame, and romantic love. Collectively, our *lack* empowers transnational corporations that are never big or profitable enough, nation-states that are never secure enough, and accelerating technological innovation that is never innovative enough to satisfy us for very long. Insofar as these preoccupations are driven by a need to fill up our *lack* that they cannot fulfill, they tend to become addictive and demonic.

In short, we cannot understand what is unique about a secular world without also acknowledging the unique identity-crisis haunting the people who live in that world. By liberating us from the more confining identities of the pre-modern world, modernity also liberated our *lack*, and secularity implies that we can find a solution to that *lack* only by identifying with something *in* the world. In contrast, Buddhism emphasizes that there is nothing to successfully identify with, because the impermanence of everything gives us no fixed perch anywhere.

That brings us to what Buddhism has to say about *samsara*, literally “going round and round.” *Samsara* is the way this world is experienced due to our greed, ill will, and delusion, which makes it a realm of suffering. One could argue that technological development gives us the opportunity to reduce suffering, but for Buddhism the greatest suffering is due to our sense of *lack*, the shadow-side of a deluded sense-of-self that in compensation tries to real-ize itself. In that sense, a secular world is more *samsaric* and addictive for us than a pre-modern one, because we are more haunted by the modern loss of traditional securities. The Buddhist solution is to undo the habitual thought-patterns and behavior-patterns that cause us to experience the world in the diminished way that we now do. The point is not to re-sacralize the world, but to realize the “sacral” dimension of everyday life that has always been there although we have been unable to see it.

I am arguing that religious fundamentalists are right, after all. The tragedy of secular identity projects is that they cannot succeed. The modern world can keep many of us alive longer, and sometimes makes death less physically painful, but it has no answer

to the groundlessness that plagues us right now, for nothing *in* the world can fill up that bottomless God-shaped hole at our core. That is the basic point of the Buddhist critique of attachment. Without understanding what motivates us, all we can do is cling—not only to physical objects but to symbols and ideologies, which tend to be more troublesome—insofar as we are driven to fixate our identities one way or another. The fundamental problem, at least for those likely to read this paper, is not securing the material conditions of our existence but grounding our constructed identities in an impermanent world of accelerating change where everything, including ourselves, is constantly being reconstructed.

To sum up, the distinction between sacred and secular originally developed as *a new way to be religious*. And the fact that our *lack* cannot be evaded means that our secular world remains a way (although an inadequate way) to be religious. That we do not usually understand what motivates us does not make our motivations any less religious, it means only that our concern to ground ourselves is expressed in compulsive ways that do not and cannot work.

The Secular Antichrist

This gives us the perspective needed to understand the personal and collective preoccupations of the modern world, which involve using the resources that secularity provides to (try to) fill up our God-shaped hole. This has meant, most of all, an obsession with power, including of course that convertible form of congealed power known as money. We usually prefer to flatter ourselves by focusing on reason as the defining characteristic of modernity, but then the emphasis must be on instrumental reason, as Max Weber and critical theory have argued. Human rationality itself is no substitute for a sacral dimension, whereas widespread craving for power is perhaps inevitable in a world where human meaning must define itself in secular terms. Insofar as this craving is a secular substitute for a now-unobtainable spiritual goal, it too can never give us the sense of security we seek from it, although, if we do not know what else to try, we may conclude that our problem is *not enough* power.

The Reformation distinction between sacred and secular developed into a widening bifurcation between the otherworldly *ends* of life and the *means* that this world provided. For the Protestant reformers our life in this world still derived its meaning from reference to a world-to-come. Secular life is a preparation for our eternal destiny. As God slowly evaporated, however, that spiritual purpose evaporated along with Him, leaving . . . only the *means*, now liberated from any relationship to its original ends. Disappearance of an otherworldly sacred did not lead to a re-sacralization of this world. Old habits die hard, especially when they have been internalized (the disciplined, goal-oriented character of post-Reformation individuals) and institutionalized (in capitalism and the nation-state). From this perspective, our personal and collective obsession with various types of power is not so much a new goal as increased preoccupation with the old means divested of its ends—for want of anything better to do, although we may give up the struggle and abandon ourselves to the hedonism of consumerism.

In other words: since our ever-itching *lack* means that the issue of ends (the meaning of life, etc.) cannot be evaded, the disappearance of the original ends (eternity with

God in heaven) has, by default, left the original means as our ends. Max Weber pointed out that capitalism is the archetypal victory of means over ends: instead of providing us with what is needed for a good life, now ever-more profit, growth, and capital accumulation have become understood as the good life itself. Money is liquid power, lubricating the whole as the most quantified form of power, convertible into anything we like. Yet power, by definition, can only be a means—unless, of course, we can never have enough of it, which is what the God-shaped hole implies.

Darwinism provided the transition to such a secular ethic. Evolution by natural selection undermined the strongest remaining reason for believing in God, the argument from design. There was no longer any good reason to postulate a deity that created us; all species including *Homo sapiens* are produced by an impersonal biological process. Although random mutation does not really support a doctrine of progress, Darwin's theory was used to rationalize a new secular paradigm: life as struggle, in which only the fittest survive. This seemed to justify the most ruthless forms of competition, both economic (the plutocrats of the late nineteenth century, the globalizing corporations of the late twentieth century) and political (the imperialistic rivalries of Western nation-states, resulting in two horrendous world wars, followed by a Cold War-to-the-finish between the two remaining superpowers).

Let me now carry the argument one step further. Not only are fundamentalists right to be suspicious of such secularism, they are also correct to believe that there is a Spiritual War going on. To use the favorite Christian term, there is indeed an Antichrist that needs to be challenged, in fact one that parallels the original coded reference to the Roman Empire in the *Book of Revelation*: the corporate-military-state, which has become the main institutional beneficiary of the unbridled secular authority that Luther effectively liberated from sacred supervision.

The Reformation created a need and a place for secular divinities, to replace the Big One soon to disappear. The compulsion to find a more worldly solution to our *lack* enabled European rulers to become absolute monarchs, with enhanced authority deriving from the aura of their new religious charisma, because their now-majestic being became a secular substitute wherein their subjects were encouraged to ground their own lack of being. The political revolutions that eventually overthrew these monarchs did not thereby escape the concentration of power that had accumulated around them. State power merely became more impersonal, invested now in the bureaucracy of the administrative apparatus. In short, the unrivaled power of the contemporary nation-state, as the political authority of our secular world, is another legacy of Luther's spiritual innovation.

Unfortunately, a self-destructive tension is built into the nation-state system. Each state is a *secular god*, because the Reformation eventually freed them from any authority external to themselves. Unlike the Holy Roman Emperor who was in principle spiritually subordinate to the Pope, a state's "national interest" acknowledges nothing higher than itself to which it is subordinate or responsible. As Hitler is reputed to have said, "We wish to have no other God, only Germany." There are, however, many other such gods, each having a monopoly on authority (including violence) within a physical area delimited by others. This makes for an unstable polytheism, given that the power of each is, in principle, sovereign. According to

R.H. Tawney (1880–1962), a British economic historian and important social critic, “If men recognize no law superior to their desires, then they must fight when their desires collide” (cited in Lawrence, 1977, p. 514). That adage has turned out to be even truer for the secular nation-state, which by definition acknowledges no law superior to itself.

The implications of this tension were evident from the beginning, as war became woven into the fabric of the nascent states. The need to finance large standing armies and their campaigns led to the development of modern banks. New military technologies and forms of human organization were also required—for example, the drill techniques that integrated recruits into a more efficient fighting machine. In short, “war made the state and the state made war” (Tilly, 1975, p. 42). It is no coincidence, then, that periods of peace have been the exception over the last five hundred years. Since its inception, the nation-state system has been more or less synonymous with war. According to Lewis Mumford, “all the great national states, and the empires formed around a national core, are at bottom war states; their politics are war politics; and the all-absorbing preoccupation of their governing classes lies in collective preparation for armed assault” (Mumford, 1970, p. 349).

Of course, the international political system can function this way only because we have created these secular gods, by learning to identify with them. Nationalism has flourished because it offered itself as an alternative secular identity providing a this-worldly security in shared beliefs and communal values. Schools indoctrinate us into the myths of national origin that make our own country special, and a spurious immortality is sometimes promised to those who sacrifice themselves in defense of (the supposed “national interests” of) their beloved homeland.

War is the health of the State. It automatically sets in motion throughout society those irresistible forces for uniformity, for passionate cooperation with the Government in coercing into obedience the minority groups and individuals which lack the larger herd sense . . . the nation in war-time attains a uniformity of feeling, a hierarchy of values culminating at the undisputed apex of the State ideal, which could not possibly be produced through any other agency than war . . . The State is intimately connected with war, for it is the organization of the collective community when it acts in a political manner, and to act in a political manner towards a rival group has meant, throughout all history—war. (Bourne, 1918, p. 31)

Recent international events such as the second Gulf War remind us forcefully that the basic unit of political and military power remains the nation-state which, if powerful enough, may act without any constraints on its behavior. There are no other gods—certainly not religious ones—to trump its sovereign power.

Today, however, we do better to refer to the *corporate-military-state*, since little effective distinction remains between the economy and the government. As Dan Hamburg (1997, p. 25) concluded from his experience as a U.S. congressman (Democrat, California): “The real government of our country is economic, dominated by large corporations that charter the state to do their bidding. Fostering a secure environment in which corporations and their investors can flourish is the paramount

objective of both [political] parties.” This is increasingly true of all “economized” nations: their governments have become so preoccupied with the vicissitudes of the economy that they operate largely to service its needs. Economic growth is almost unanimously endorsed by political leaders as the criterion by which to judge the well-being of a nation, and one that justifies whatever burdens might be imposed upon society (Poggi, 1978 p. 133). So in the days after September 11th President Bush told the shocked and grieving American people to go shopping. Do not stop consuming. We can not let the economy be damaged by what has happened! Consumption has become a sacred rite because consumerism serves the national-economic goal of capital accumulation and GNP growth. This is indoctrinated into us, with increasingly pervasive advertising, as another secular solution to the (essentially religious) question about the meaning of one’s life.

In sum, the secular corporate-military-state deserves the label *Antichrist* because its dominion depends upon exploiting not only the biosphere but the spiritual motivations of the people who constitute it and who end up being used by it. Consumer-nationalism takes advantage of our spiritual groundlessness, feeding upon our *lack* by seeming to provide a secular solution to the God-shaped hole. By diverting what is basically a spiritual drive (to resolve our *lack*), such solutions gain their attraction; without it they would lose their power over us. Our spiritual insecurities are manipulated by the corporate-military-state for its own self-aggrandizing purposes.

If our God-shaped hole is oblivious to whatever distinction we may make between sacred and secular—if we cannot avoid trying to fill up our *lack*, one way or another—then secular values and identities cannot avoid competing with more ostensibly religious ones. Then is there another alternative besides the void at the heart of modern secular identities, on the one side, and the traditional religious identities that fundamentalisms promote, on the other? Given where we are now, what is the best way to address the groundlessness of our post/modern identities?

POST-MODERN IDENTITY: HALF AN AWAKENING

“We burn with desire to find solid ground and an ultimate sure foundation whereon to build a tower reaching to the infinite. But our groundwork cracks and the earth opens to abysses.” (Pascal, quoted in Gergen, p. 81)

The distinction between modernity and post modernity—where the one ends and the other begins—is controversial, but according to one view (Jameson, 1992) the postmodern is an *acceleration* of the modern. By deconstructing the self to reveal our groundlessness, post modernity aggravates the God-shaped hole in a way that makes us more aware of it, even while continuing to deny (as modernity does) that our groundlessness is really a problem. With this denial post modernity remains true to its own secular roots, rubbing our noses in the *lack* it cannot see.

Karen Armstrong points out that no culture before the modern West could have afforded the constant innovation we take for granted today. Pre-modern societies are naturally conservative in that social order and stability are viewed as more important

than freedom of expression or action, which can be destabilizing. Traditional societies fulfill their potential by modeling themselves on past ideals (the Golden Age); novelty threatens that security (pp. 33–34). Today Protestant fundamentalists try to fill the God-shaped hole by seeking absolute certainty in strict, inerrant doctrinal correctness. Ultra-Orthodox Jews seek ritual certainty by minutely observing divine law and customary observance. Fundamentalist Muslims seek literalist certainty in God’s words (the Koran) and by making *shari’a* the law of the land. Each form of spirituality “reveals an almost ungovernable fear which can only be assuaged by the meticulous preservation of old boundaries, the erection of new barriers, a rigid segregation, and a passionate adherence to the values of tradition” (p. 204).

Psychoanalytically, this is recognizable as a repetition-compulsion, which attempts to ward off anxiety—*lack*—that cannot or will not be more directly confronted. There are, of course, other types of repetition-compulsion. More secular and very popular examples are the addictions reflected in the high rates of obesity, gambling, and substance abuse in the U.S. All these repetition-compulsions provide a context to keep in mind as we evaluate the new liberative prospects of the polyvalent world that postmodernists herald. They suggest the important question: how well are we able to cope with this liberation?

Kenneth Gergen’s book, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, remains one of the best accounts of how new technologies of social saturation (air travel, email, cell phones, etc.) expose us to a much wider range of persons and to novel types of relationships. Like it or not, this leads to “a populating of the self, the acquisition of multiple and disparate potentials for being” (p. 69).

Under postmodern conditions, persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction: it is a world where anything goes that can be negotiated. Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questioning, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality. The center fails to hold. (p. 7)

He argues that the sense of psychological *depth* formerly attributed to individuals was an effect of print technologies and the widespread literacy they made possible. Electronic media, especially television and the internet, shatter that self-unity by dissociating our experience. According to Jean Baudrillard, “we no longer exist as playwrights or actors, but as terminals of multiple networks” (cited in Gergen, p. 69). We become pastiches of each other, splitting into a multiplicity of self-investments that Gergen calls *multiphrenia* (p. 73). He is by no means oblivious to the downside of this. “One bears the burden of an increasing number of oughts, self-doubts, and irrationalities” (p. 80), yet he emphasizes the new possibilities for self-expression:

as the technologies are further utilized, so do they add to the repertoire of potentials. It would be a mistake to view this multiphrenic condition as a form of illness, for it is often suffused with a sense of expansiveness and adventure. Someday there may indeed be nothing to distinguish multiphrenia from simply “normal living.” (p. 74)

Gergen suggests that there are three phases of postmodern self-construction. In the first, one “increasingly and distressingly” finds oneself playing roles to obtain one’s goals. The second and third phase, however, are described in wholly positive terms. The stage of pastiche personality liberates one from essence, as one learns to “derive joy” from new forms of self-expression, and the final stage of relational self leads to immersed interdependence in which relationships construct the self (p. 147).

From a Buddhist perspective, this is an insightful account, especially Gergen’s presentation of the last phase, which resonates with Buddhist claims about our emptiness (*shunyata*) and interdependence. But this optimistic description tends to downplay the sometimes-paralytic anxiety involved, which can subvert the process or distort the outcome. For Buddhism, intuiting our lack-of-self is more than just temporarily distressing, since it requires realizing and adjusting to our groundlessness. Does the multiphrenic lifestyle that Gergen celebrates address the sense of *lack* at the core of our being, or does it involve new ways of evading what Buddhism understands to be the fundamental spiritual challenge?

Understanding that the self is an uncentered, ungrounded construct brings us halfway towards the Buddhist resolution, yet we still need to ask: if the self is constructed, who or what is doing the constructing? And what effect does re-construction have on the God-shaped hole? The usual answer, which Gergen elaborates, is that the self is normally constructed/reconstructed in a largely unconscious fashion, by internalizing bits of other selves. This understanding offers no answer to the sense-of-self’s sense-of-*lack* because it remains unaware of our *lack*; so the hole continues to fester, with psychological and social consequences that continue to plague us. A more Buddhist response is that our *lack* reflects something mysterious at our empty core, an unfathomed center that offers new potentialities unbeknownst to secular multiphrenia, but potentialities that require a further transformation to be actualized.

Gergen’s own book also offers support for this less-positive take on post-modernity. He quotes the sociologist Louis Zurcher, whose concept of the “mutable self” affirms its openness, tolerance and flexibility, but who also notices that this tends to give rise to a narcissism suffusing everyday life with the search for a self-gratification that makes others into implements to satisfy one’s own impulses (cited in Gergen, p. 154). That is exactly the problem we would expect if the sense of *lack* at one’s core has not been squarely addressed in the process of postmodern self-reconstruction. Our inability to evade *lack* makes us narcissistic and obsessive.⁷

Buddhism agrees that our sense-of-self is a delusive construction. How that construction occurs is explained in the most important (and the most difficult) doctrine of early Buddhism: *pratitya-samutpada* “dependent-origination,” which deconstructs our experience into a set of twelve impermanent processes, each conditioned by and conditioning all the others. The interaction of all these impersonal processes creates and sustains the sense of self, but the most crucial factor is *upadana* “clinging.” The early Buddhist texts identify four types of *upadana*, which, curiously, correspond quite closely to the types of modern clinging that the previous paragraph has identified as our main responses to our secular groundlessness. “There are these four kinds of clinging: clinging to *kama* [sensual pleasures], clinging to *ditthi* [views], clinging to *sila* [rules and observances], and

clinging to *atta* [self, or a doctrine of self] (Majjhima Nikaya: Sammaditthi Sutta, 1995, pp. 137–138). Clinging to *kama* is consumerism and other types of hedonism. Clinging to *ditthi* is the fundamentalist (e.g., Christian) obsession with orthodoxy [not to be confused with the Eastern Orthodox religion]. Clinging to *sila* is the fundamentalist (e.g., Judaic and Islamic) obsession with orthopraxy. Clinging to *atta* can be understood in various ways, but the essential point is that there is no self to cling or to cling to. In postmodern terms, even a protean, multiphrenic self is *shunya* “empty”; until we are able to realize that, we continue to be haunted by the groundlessness at our core.

The translators of the above passage about clinging append a note to it: “Clinging in any of its varieties represents a strengthening of craving, its condition” (p. 1186). In other words, none of these four types of clinging can solve the problem of the *lack* of our God-shaped hole; instead, they strengthen it. The Marxist literary critic Frederic Jameson refers to our present situation as “late capitalism,” and I wonder if we can also describe it as “late secularism,” in which individual and collective clinging becomes intensified because our groundlessness is becoming more apparent and therefore more threatening. As the secular sense of self becomes more problematic, the gravitational pull of the black hole at our core becomes more insistent. We are driven to more extreme ways of filling it up (but nothing can fill it up): stronger drugs and other diversions, more dogmatic views and rigid observances, more narcissistic multiphrenia . . .

TRANSFORMING RELIGION

It is time to recap what has been said. Terrorism was our port of entry into these issues, but the problem of post/modern *lack* of identity led to a broader critique of secularity that focuses on how much we are afflicted by the desacralization of the world including the desacralization of ourselves. A figure-in-field approach means we cannot understand our secular world except in relation to the *lack* of our secular identities within it, which tend to become burdened by compulsions we do not understand. Our communities need to acknowledge this fundamental existential problem and find ways to help its members address it. The fate of the secular world and the fate of human religiosity turn out to be inextricably intertwined.

More specifically, what does this imply? For individuals, the Buddhist response, which emphasizes the problem of clinging and the importance of realizing our groundlessness/formlessness, has been mentioned several times. But what about the social dimension?

From the secular side, what we need to remember is that the secular is incomplete by itself, for the-return-of-the-repressed *lack* has negative consequences unless a more spiritual dimension is more consciously acknowledged. This means, among other things, bringing religious partners into the public conversation and decision-making process now dominated by the corporate state, by allowing more of a role for spiritual and ethical concerns. Gandhi believed that the modern state needs to be “civilized” by integrating spirituality and morality into it, something that could be realized through “democratic-political engagements with the basic teachings of the

different religions.” His version of Indian secularism would still preserve the relative autonomy of the political and the religious (ethical, spiritual) spheres, “so they can engage each other in a reconstructive way” (Pantham, 1991, p. 183). Juergensmeyer’s study of religious terrorism led him to conclude that rapid global transformation provides an occasion for religions and their ideas to reassert themselves as a public force. The devaluation of purely secular authority highlights the need for alternative conceptions of public order (p. 15).

The intolerant role of conservative Christianity in recent U.S. politics does not provide a very positive example of the engagement that Gandhi calls for. What *is* called for will not be easy but is becoming inescapable, due to the accelerated communication and transportation systems that are globalizing us whether we want it or not. As the world becomes smaller, we find ourselves rubbing elbows with other people and other cultures often living literally next door. This offers a particularly serious challenge to traditional religions, which have always interacted with each other but have usually had more time and space to develop according to their own internal dynamics. Living among a plurality of religious traditions puts us in a new, often uncomfortable but potentially liberating position, one that encourages us—and in the end may require us—to awaken from our dogmatic slumbers.

If and when we learn to approach religious traditions from a perspective that highlights the problem of our identity and its groundlessness, we will realize that what remains most important about religion today is its role in encouraging personal transformation, and that its dogmas and practices are heuristic to that process. The forms of religious clinging described earlier, such as preoccupation with orthodoxy and orthopraxy, should be recognized as types of repetition-compulsion that are, in the end, counter-productive. We should have no illusions that this understanding of religion will soon or easily become the most prominent aspect, but it may have become inescapable if religions are to fulfill the role that is needed today.

In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror, published by the American Psychological Association, the authors (Pyszczynski, T.A., Solomon, S., & Greenberg, J., 2003) conclude with a dilemma. All of us are more or less securely embedded within some humanly created system of meaning and value, but which is the most beneficial, or least harmful? The most secure and comfortable worldview is rigid in its certainties, while more relativistic and tolerant worldviews, being less certain, may not be enough to base the meaning and value of our lives upon. Is there a middle ground? “Is there a vision of reality substantial enough to serve our deep psychological needs for death-transcending meaning and value—but flexible enough to endure peaceably the existence of alternative worldviews? If we are unable to find this safer place, then perhaps the human race is doomed to ignominious self-extinction” (p. 198).

The solution to this dilemma, I suggest, is spirituality not as a vision or place but as a *process*, one that involves clarifying and emphasizing the transformative role of religion—religion not as opiate or defense but as tool-kit: helping us understand and transform our God-shaped hole.

NOTES

¹ Religion, as used in this article, includes the perspective that the modern nation-state is a secular God for some, in what I discuss later as the crisis of modernity.

² In place of a heroic identity furthering God's purpose, consumerism offers us the distraction of titillation alternating with boredom. Nationalism, the best god that the secular world can provide, sometimes offers heroic roles, such as during wartime.

³ The main exception in Europe has been Jews. Unfortunately for them, because they demonstrated an alternative to Christianity, they threatened the "natural" ontological security of Christians.

⁴ In the opinion of many historical-critical New Testament scholars (e.g., Rossing (2004)) *The Book of Revelation* is the most political book of the New Testament, but not quite in the way that most conservative Christians understand it today. For an overview see also http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Revelation#Historical-Critical_Interpretation), the *Antichrist* is a coded reference to the Roman Empire; in contemporary terms, therefore, perhaps the closest parallel would be the new U.S. empire.

⁵ As quoted in Pyszczanski, Solomon, and Greenberg, 2003.

⁶ For example, the voice of conscience, now understood in a secular way as the product of social conditioning.

⁷ Christopher Lasch's work on narcissism in American culture comes to similar, although more negative, conclusions about the changing character of the contemporary self (*The Culture of Narcissism*. NY: Norton, 1979).

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