

The Spirit and the Ego: A Brief Cognitive Model for Thinking about Spirituality

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The Spirit is that of us connected to the Unity of all.

The Ego is that of us concerned with our separate, individual, life.

The ego is not the Spirit's enemy, but its child.

The ego is a formation of the Spirit, necessary to individualized existence.

We might think of the Spirit as a bridge, from divine Unity at one end to individualized existence (ego) at the other.

Each ego has its own bridge, its own Spiritual conduit, to divine Unity.

But somehow the ego loses touch with its experience of the Spirit.

In the East this alienation of ego from Spirit is called 'Ignorance' (*avidya*). In the West it is associated with 'sin'.

Ignorance and sin are closely related ideas, but not identical. Ignorance refers to our failure to recognize and experience our connection to Spirit. Sin refers to the exclusionary self-involvement and self-centeredness that results from such Ignorance.

To make sense of this we must posit that within Spirit itself lies the potential for self-alienation. Alienation gives rise to anxiety on the part of the resultant, alienated, ego.

Such anxiety is, at base, frustrated longing for reunion with the Spirit. But the alienated ego is ignorant of the meaning of its anxiety.

This frustrated longing finds expression in greed, lust, rage, violence, etc., as the alienated ego seeks to overcome its alienation through dominating the world from which it feels alienated.

A world of egos seeking to dominate one another is a world of strife, heartache, violence, and war.

When its pursuit of domination fails, the alienated ego falls into despair and then seeks to escape itself – through drugs, alcohol, fantasy, hedonism, etc.

But the struggle to dominate and the struggle to escape are but two sides of the same coin - the struggle to rid oneself of the anxiety of alienation.

"Spirituality" is the endeavor to bring one's ego back into communion with the Spirit.

Since the ego is itself a formation of the Spirit, we must not think of this need for reunion as strictly a need of the ego. It is a need of the Spirit as well. Indeed, the ego's need and the Spirit's need are one.

The aim of spiritual life is not the eradication of the ego, but its sanctification. The ego is sanctified as it is brought into harmony with the Spirit.

Harmony is achieved through a transformation of emotive and cognitive dispositions within the person as a whole. In the New Testament, this transformative process is called "*metanoia*" - rather poorly translated as "repentance."

Such sanctification finds expression in a life of love, justice, inner peace, and joy, as the sanctified ego lives in recognition of its essential unity with others and its essential rootedness in the ground of being.

In Christianity, the fully sanctified person is represented by the figure of Christ. In Buddhism, Buddha.

In both cases, the ego has transcended its sense of self-enclosure and come to experience its unity with the whole of being.

This process of sanctification is sloppy and complex and, for the vast majority, is far from complete at the time of death.

The purpose of religion is to guide us through this process, into the life of the Spirit, which is to say, the life of divine Unity.

But religions are imperfect guides, and frequently become usurped and corrupted by the domineering and escapist egoic inclinations they seek, ideally, to resolve.

Hence the ongoing need for careful, critical, reflection on the spiritual project.