

# SELF-TRANSCENDING VALUES IN CHRISTIAN LIFE <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup>

*From Self-Sacrifice, Self-Fulfillment or Self-Transcendence in Christian Life? taken from HUMAN DEVELOPMENT Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 1982*

A recent New York University symposium entitled "The Relations of the Psychological and the Spiritual" asked some very difficult questions. Among these were: Does the "self" of the gospels and the "self" of psychology refer to the same reality? Are we speaking in the same universe of discourse when we commend the individual's search for self-actualization and when we say that the individual should deny self and take up the cross? Are humanistic psychology and Christian spirituality moving in the same direction or are they at odds?

In answering these questions, most participants at the symposium concluded that humanistic psychology and Christian spirituality are incompatible in some important ways. Granting the difficulties of definition, we suggest that such a dichotomy is unnecessary, and that the introduction of a third element offers a reconciling possibility beyond the dilemma of what we have termed self-fulfillment versus self-sacrifice. ***Our alternative is self-transcendence.*** And our suggestion is this: ***Christian spiritual life is realized in dynamic self-transcendence that reaches beyond either static self-fulfillment or self-sacrifice.*** Although we acknowledge the existence of acceptable human and Christian understandings of both self-fulfillment and self-sacrifice, we believe that common understandings of these ideals are often anti-human and anti-Christian.

## Self-Fulfillment in Vogue

Norman Mailer suggested ten years ago that ours is the *century of the ego*, and Tom Wolfe tagged the seventies for posterity as the "*me decade*." Self-fulfillment, self-enhancement, self-promotion, self-liberation were, and still are, promoted from paperback racks of nearly every bookstore and supermarket in America. The titles tell the tale: *Looking Out for #1*, *How to Be Your*

---

<sup>1</sup> Article *Self-Sacrifice, Self-Fulfillment or Self-Transcendence in Christian Life?* taken from *HUMAN DEVELOPMENT* Volume 3, Number 3, Fall 1982, pp.25-28, by Joann Wolski Conn is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Neumann College, Aston, Pennsylvania. Walter E. Conn is Professor of Religious Studies at Villanova University.

<sup>2</sup> **RECOMMENDED READING**

Conn, W. E. *Conscience: Development and Self-Transcendence.* Birmingham, Ala.: Religious Education Press, 1981.

Frankl, V. *Man's Search for Meaning.* Austin, Tex.: S. S. Press, 1980.

Nouwen, H. *Reaching Out.* Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1975.

Yankelovich, D. *New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down.* New York: Random House, 1981.

*Own Best Friend, Breaking Free, Pulling Your Own Strings, and How to Get Whatever You Want Out of Life.*

Jerry Rubin, sixties activist, may be atypical, but none of us completely escaped the self-absorbed spirit of his search. In *Growing (Up) at Thirty-Seven* Rubin writes, "In five years, from 1971 to 1975, I directly experienced EST, gestalt therapy, bioenergetics, rolfing, massage, jogging, health foods, tai chi, Esalen, hypnotism, modern dance, meditation, Silva Mind Control, Arica, acupuncture, sex therapy, Reichian therapy and More House - a smorgasbord in New Consciousness."

The modern search for self-fulfilment is a favourite target of social and cultural critics. Christopher Lasch's devastating critique in *The Culture of Narcissism* is only the best known of several attacks. Social researcher Daniel Yankelovich, in *Psychology Today* (April, 1981), points to the inherent contradiction he finds in the search for self-fulfilment – a search he characterizes as grassroots experimentation, involving in one way or another perhaps as many as eighty percent of adult Americans. Whereas the traditional ethic of self-denial and self-sacrifice has been replaced by an ethic that denies people nothing, Yankelovich found in his interviews that "many truly committed self-fulfilment seekers focus so sharply on their needs that instead of achieving the more intimate relationships they desire, they grow farther apart from others." This reflects something of the narcissistic character disorder discussed frequently in current psychiatric literature and of the self-centred affliction, as Robert Coles, in *The New Yorker* (August, 1979), describes it, of "one whose central, controlling ways of getting on give evidence of a strong avoidance of lasting attachments to other people, accompanied often by a hunger for just such human bonds."

Critiques of self-fulfilment seem entirely appropriate when they are aimed at the pseudo-humanism, of consumer-oriented "pop psychology." Although the explicit goals of many self-fulfilment therapies appear humanistic in their interpersonal and social orientations, the implicit understanding of these approaches is often self-destructive in its naive individualism. The "self" of pop-psychology is a bag of desires, and self-realization means fulfilling as many of these desires as possible. Initiates run off in every direction to gratify their every impulse, only to end up deeply frustrated. Yankelovich cites countless divorces and wrongheaded career changes as part of the confusing fallout from the risky search for self-fulfilment. Unfortunately, people fail to **perceive the paradox that authentic realization of deep human yearnings occurs only when they turn their primary attention from selfish interests and desires to involve themselves genuinely in the needs and desires of others.**

### **Self-Sacrifice Misunderstood**

Pop-psychology is only the latest edition of the guide for the self-seeker. Through the ages there have been as many versions as there are forms of self-delusion. The traditional Christian response has always been rooted in the gospel injunction to renounce oneself, take up one's cross, and follow Jesus (Mark 8:34). ***The gospel call to follow Jesus has often been misunderstood to***

**require sacrifice or denial of the self's authentic realization.** Several recent studies argue that **misinterpretation of the gospel has been involved in legitimating the traditional relegation of women, for instance, to subordinate roles of passive, obedient service, implying that self-sacrifice is holy, whereas self-assertion is sinful.**

Mary Gordon does justice to the ambiguity of such reality in her novel *Final Payments*. Isabel Moore, the heroine who has sacrificed her young adulthood to care for her invalid father, does not regret a moment of her experience. Though adolescent guilt over a discovered fling with her boyfriend plays a key part in the relationship with her father, Isabel looks back on her sacrifice "not with self-pity but with extreme pride." Gordon sees **sacrifice rooted in affection** as having immense importance in life. But she is also deeply intrigued by powerful women who suddenly buckle under to the authority of a man.

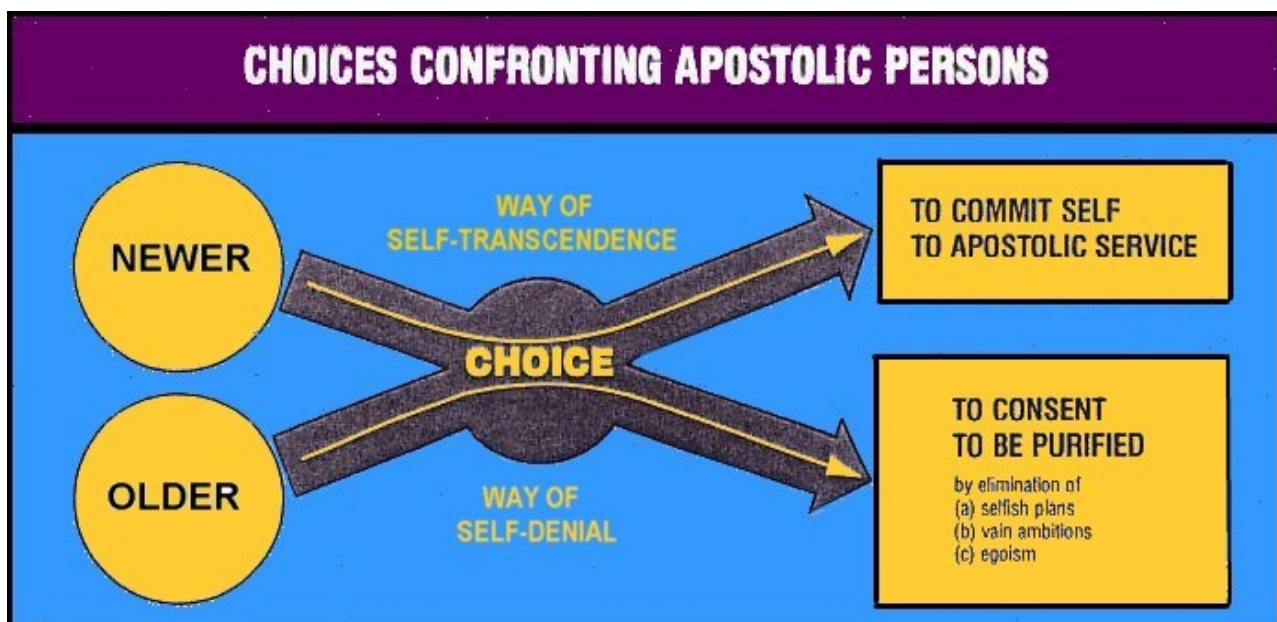
Misunderstood sacrifice of the self has also affected the preaching of the gospel, though in less personally destructive ways. For many men in the Western world, Christianity is a "woman's religion," and distortion of the gospel has been extended as ideological justification for many situations of oppressive servitude. **As long as this misreading of the gospel as a rationale for oppression continues, Nietzsche's judgment that Christianity is a religion for slaves will stand.**

Such interpretations of self-sacrifice must be rejected as anti-Christian. Jesus calls us to loving service of our neighbour as a friend, not to self-destructive servitude. **No valid Christian interpretation can recommend denial or sacrifice of the conscious, creative, critical, responsible, free, and loving aspects of the self.** To follow Jesus genuinely in his life of service to others requires a commitment of the self that such self-sacrifice would destroy. To follow Jesus means to live one's life as he lived his; a reader of the gospels need not psychologize Jesus to realize that **the Christian life of creative and responsible love requires courageous assertiveness as much as realistic humility.**

What is a Christian understanding of self-sacrifice if not sacrifice of the self? Quite simply, **Christian self-sacrifice consists in the denial of all those otherwise quite legitimate desires, wishes, and interests of the self that interfere with a single-minded commitment to follow Jesus in love.** Such commitment does not demand sacrifice of the self, its development and realization, but it entails sacrifice of anything that stands in the way of loving our neighbour, even the sacrifice of life itself. From the viewpoint of Christian commitment to neighbour and genuine self-realization, pop-psychology's list of possible desires is endless, and particular desires are often contradictory. Many of the goods sought by seekers of self-fulfilment are legitimate and positively worthwhile, but the gospel tells us that the search for such genuine personal goods through focusing exclusively on the self is **fundamentally illusory.** The renunciation of fulfillment-seeking allows the possibility of authentic self-realization in the loving service to which Jesus calls us.

## Gospel Enjoins Self-Transcendence

Complementing the idea that both self-fulfilment and self-sacrifice, when selfish, are deadly for a Christian life of loving service, a living image of dynamic self-transcendence has been presented by a number of contemporary theologians, including Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, John Macquarrie, and David Tracy. ***Self-transcendence, as an image suggestive of the dynamism of Christian spiritual life, stands in total opposition to the image of self-sacrifice understood as denial, repudiation, or harmful negation of the self. (Only a self-affirmed in the reality of its subjectivity and realized in its essential potentiality for objectivity is capable of transcending itself.)*** The self is not negated through transcendence; it is realized in its authentic being. ***Self-transcendence is genuine self-realization.*** The image of self-sacrifice, understood as a sacrifice of the self as responsible for a life of loving service, must be rejected by an understanding of the gospel in terms of self-transcendence.



At the same time, the image of self-transcendence stands firmly against any image of self-fulfilment that focuses on the self merely as a collection of desires to be fulfilled. Such an image of the self is essentially that of a passive receptacle, a self whose happiness consists in being filled to the brim. Even if this image were accurate, such a self would condemn practically everyone to a hellish state of angry frustration. From the standpoint of fulfilling desires, the self is not a receptacle but a bottomless pit. Even the most talented and successful elite will find endless frustration in the search for such self-fulfilment. By contrast, ***the self-implicit in the image of self-transcendence, the opposite of a passive receptacle, is a dynamic, flowing spring that is realized by moving beyond itself. Freed from the illusion of quantitative fulfillment, such a self-senses the peace of authentic realization in the very activity of realistic knowing, responsible choosing, and genuine loving.***

Like the gospel, the image of self-transcendence suggests the paradoxical view that true self-realization results not from a selfish effort to fulfill one's desires but from extending beyond oneself in an attempt to realize the good of others. Such realization of the self through transcendence is a form of self-fulfillment, a fulfillment of the fundamental desire for truth, value, and love that we possess as personal beings. Although fulfillment of self through self-transcendence brings a sense of tranquil happiness, the very nature of this basic human inclination defies any self-centred striving for happiness through fulfillment. In fact, ***fulfillment of the radical personal drive toward self-transcendence requires that one empty oneself, in the sense of sacrificing the fulfillment of otherwise legitimate desires.*** The gospel makes clear that the life of the true self is saved only by giving up everything else, even life itself in the ultimate case, in loving service to our neighbour.

### **Psychologists Employ Same Concept**

Though the concept of self-transcendence has been developed most extensively by theologians, it can also be found in the works of many psychologists. Viktor Frankl, for example, discusses self-transcendence in each of his many works. His early treatment of this fundamental human dynamism in *Man's Search for Meaning* contains an arrestingly direct statement of his basic thesis regarding self-transcendence: "*Human existence is essentially self-transcendence rather than self-actualization. Self-actualization is not a possible aim at all, for the simple reason that the more a man would strive for it, the more he would miss it.*" Only to the extent that a person is committed to life's meaning, Frankl asserts, is he or she actualized, for "*self-actualization cannot be attained if it is made an end in itself, but only as a side effect of self-transcendence.*"

Even when the reality of self-transcendence is not named as such, it can play a central role in the interpretation of human existence. From the perspective of Christian spirituality, Henri Nouwen, in *Reaching Out*, conveys the dynamism of different dimensions of self-transcendence through the image of "reaching out." ***For Nouwen, the spiritual life is a relationship among three constant movements of reaching out to ourselves (moving from loneliness to solitude), to others (moving from hostility to hospitality), and to God (moving from illusion to prayer).***

Perhaps the most detailed and comprehensive articulation of the image of self-transcendence is that of Bernard Lonergan. Over the course of a professional lifetime Lonergan has attempted to map the route of self-transcendence in its many dimensions. This is not the place to examine his charts in detail, but a brief comment will shed some light on the role of self-transcendence in the spiritual life.

## Complex Fundamental Drive

***For Lonergan, self-transcendence occurs in a person's response to the urgent demand of the human spirit for meaning, truth, value, and love.*** Though single in source and goal, this inborn tendency manifests itself in interconnected questions. The drive for understanding, for example, seeks meaning in questions for intelligence. Once attained, such meaning is critically scrutinized by the drive for truth in reflective questions heading toward realistic judgment. Then, with understanding and judgment oriented toward action, a further moral question follows: Given my judgment of the situation and the action required, what am I going to do about it? Such practical questioning occurs within a matrix of affectivity that must be strong enough to support the required action over the various obstacles of conflicting interests.

Thus, ***every achievement of creative understanding, realistic judgment, responsible choice, and genuine love is an instance of self-transcendence.*** Among all the possible realizations of human potential, this cognitive, moral, and affective self-transcendence is the yardstick of authentic self-realization. The gospel call to intelligent, responsible, loving service of our neighbour requires the fulfillment of this fundamental personal drive for self-transcendence.

***Self-transcending love is also the norm by which every other personal concern, interest, need, desire, or wish must be judged and, if necessary, sacrificed.*** Fidelity to this kind of love is the only appropriate Christian response to God's love for us and to the divine life we carry within us and express to the world.