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ASCETICISM, RELIGION AND BIOLOGICAL EVOLUTION*

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Introduction

The editors of a recent volume on asceticism, Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, make the following observation in their introduction (1995: xxv): "So we are left in the late twentieth century with a long history of scholarly exploration of asceticism that is as frustrating and confusing, as naive and limiting, as it is impressive in scope, productivity, diversity, and depth. We are still without a comprehensive theoretical framework for the comparative study of asceticism." This short statement expresses as well as any other a central problem of the study of asceticism, and of religious studies in general. We find asceticism in a variety of different cultures, and there seems to be no [375] end to the number of its manifestations. All these manifestations can be studied and compared, but what does all this lead to? Wimbush and Valantasis point out that no one among the scholars in the field really knows.

The contributions collected in the volume edited by these two scholars add to the richness of information we already have about asceticism. None of them appear to address the problem raised in the introduction head-on, even though there are some articles that address theoretical issues (Valantasis; Bushell).

The present study is meant to address the question (not addressed in the volume of Wimbush and Valantasis) how several million years of Darwinian evolution can have produced human beings that are apparently inclined to engage in asceticism and related activities. These activities are "counterreproductive", and this constitutes a riddle primarily for those who wonder how such a feature could have developed and survived. Already Edward O. Wilson, the founder of socio-biology, was aware of this challenge (1978: 169-193), and made some attempts to show the evolutionary advantages of religion. Socio-biology's successor, evolutionary psychology, which in its more refined form does not

* This article has gone through a number of stages. At different phases of its development it has profited from the reactions of the following scholars: Walter Burkert, Richard Gombrich, Axel Michaels. I thank all of them for their observations and criticisms, and also for their encouraging remarks: a scholar of humanities addressing the issues dealt with in this paper is likely to feel more isolated than ever. It goes without saying that the responsibility for the opinions expressed remains entirely my own.

claim that all human behaviour can be explained by the presumed survival value it once supposedly had, still has a hard time to account for behaviours that reduce or even annul reproductive success. One of its more sophisticated representatives, Henry Plotkin, formulates the problem in his book *Evolution in Mind* in the following manner (1997: 101): "There is no more stark illustration of the problem [of applying sociobiological theory to humans] than the existence of celibate priests. Biologically speaking, these are people of very low inclusive fitness, yet culturally they are persons often of high social standing and power. It is possible to spin a contorted tale about the evolution of celibacy in a small number of people in a social group because their teachings, which have a greater impact because of their sexual abstinence, raise the fitness of others, and hence their own inclusive fitness since such people will often have genetic relatives in the community. But this is just a story and a not very convincing one at that." Plotkin then continues: "The simple point, that results in untold complexity, is that our behaviour has at least two causal forces acting upon it, and sorting out what influence is coming from where is exceedingly difficult. It is the old nature-nurture problem writ large." A few pages later he adds (p. 110): "in the face of powerful cultural forces, the influence of inclusive fitness on our behaviour may be so reduced as to be undetectable by the gross methods of observation and questionnaire [376] studies. This is not a problem confined to obscure and rare practices like celibacy in priests."

It appears that evolutionary psychologists, or in any case some of them, are ready to concede that at least one often recurring aspect of asceticism, celibacy, is a particularly hard nut to crack. There is no "gene for celibacy", and the sexual abstinence among otherwise respected members of society is to be mainly explained in terms of "nurture". The question is whether evolutionary psychologists can get away with this answer. They are certainly right in pointing out that the cultural background of the ascetics must play an important role in explaining their behaviour. However, if it is true that asceticism, including celibacy, occurs in many altogether different cultures, the question has to be addressed why this particular feature is so wide-spread. The exclusively cultural approach might perhaps explain its presence in any one particular culture, but excludes, by its very nature, a generalised explanation that is valid for all cultures in which comparable features are attested. Cultural dissemination is no serious candidate for a solution either. In an important respect it begs the question. If it is true that otherwise unrelated cultures borrow from each other one specific feature, celibacy and asceticism in our case, but nothing else, this in itself might be seen as an indication that a universal predisposition selects or at least favours this feature.

Outside the limited area of evolutionary psychology, the human sciences do not seem to be in a hurry to address these baffling questions. A notable exception is the book *The Creation of the Sacred* by Walter Burkert (1996). Burkert emphasises that religious practices and beliefs are too widespread to be left exclusively to students of culture. His book concentrates on a number of aspects of religion which, though important and undeniably part of what is commonly called religion, are not the ones singled out for study here.[1] Only a short remark in a subsequent publication (Burkert, 1998) suggests that celibacy may be a good example of a "cultural parasite". In general Burkert's work reminds us of the fact that religion is hardly a unitary phenomenon, that a large variety of often widely differing phenomena are all simultaneously designated by this ambiguous term. We can learn [377] from this that it cannot be a useful exercise to try to "explain religion". Defining or redefining religion will not help either. On the contrary, we may be well advised to drop the concept itself for all but reasons of convenience, and concentrate on sets of phenomena that share as clearly defined features as possible. Any such set may happen to be a subset of what we commonly call religion, or it may combine "religious" with "non-religious" phenomena. The same applies to asceticism. It does not matter in the least what people traditionally call "asceticism". The phenomena combined under this banner may or may not share a common feature. But then again, in order to arrive at any kind of explanation at all, we will have to concentrate, not on what people call "asceticism" or "religion", but on features that are clear and well-defined to the extent possible. The features to be analysed in this study will be those that are presented in at least one tradition as belonging to a coherent set of phenomena.

The above reflections show the direction which our inquiry will take. The first question to be addressed will be: Is asceticism (including celibacy) wide-spread enough to allow us to conclude that it must be looked upon as more than an incidental feature of this or that particular culture? The second question, which cannot be separated from the first one, is: Is it possible to describe in more precise terms what exactly it is that recurs in different cultures? Asceticism and celibacy being notoriously vague terms, we will need to specify what we will be talking about. Is there something more specific that expresses itself in, or through, many (though not necessarily all) of the behaviours which we collect under these two terms? These questions will be addressed in §§ 1 and 2, which deal with some forms of

[1] A "Review symposium" dedicated to Burkert's book appeared in the journal *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* (10(1), 1998: Boyer, Braun, Burkert, Dennett, Masuzawa, Phillips); see further in the same journal Saler, 1999.

ascetic behaviour and their context in two specific cultural areas: classical India and early Christianity respectively. These sections will provide us with a set of features that might conceivably constitute something like a human universal. The identification of this provisional universal will then give rise to the general question what shape innate behaviours and ideas, if and when they exist, can be taken to assume; this question will be addressed in § 3. § 4 will then proceed to show that evidence from a variety of mainly tribal cultures support the idea that certain forms of asceticism and celibacy can indeed be looked upon as expressions of an innate predisposition. The problem that will remain concerns the adaptive value of that particular universal; this problem will be dealt with in § 5.

It will be clear from what precedes that no attempt will be made to collect all, or even an important part, of the evidence that may be taken to support the existence of the universal presented in this article. Evidence of that nature, I believe, can easily be multiplied, by taking other religious movements and cultures into consideration. At this point it is however more important, in my opinion, to try to attain clarity as to what a universal may look like and what role universals may, and may have to, play in the human sciences. The time has also come for the human sciences to stop ignoring what is happening in the biological sciences and to face the fact that human beings, whether we like it or not, are the result of countless generations of Darwinian selection.

While preparing this publication it became clear to me that much of the biological and neuroscientific groundwork necessary to carry it to completion had been carried out in a remarkable recent book, *The Symbolic Species* by Terrence Deacon (1997). This book, though primarily dealing with "the co-evolution of language and the human brain" (its sub-title), presents a theoretical analysis of what distinguishes human beings from other animals which, beside being highly illuminating and convincing, contains the elements needed to make sense of the data from religious history here collected. It will be necessary to repeat some of Deacon's arguments in a very condensed manner in later sections. The danger of thus distorting Deacon's otherwise eminently coherent and impressive train of reasoning is of course great. Readers with a serious interest in the thesis of this article are recommended to turn to *The Symbolic Species* for further clarification on obscure points.

§ 1: Asceticism and religious thought in classical India.

India is famous for its holy men. Tourists who visit sacred places like Benares return home with pictures of almost (or fully) naked men with long hair who supposedly dedicate

their lives to spiritual practices and may to this purpose engage in difficult and painful observances. These same tourists may travel southward and visit Shravana Belgola, where they can admire the colossal statue of a naked Jaina ascetic, Bāhubali, who is believed to have remained standing for such a long time that creepers twine around his legs and arms. A journey further south may take them to another famous sculpture, the Descent of the Ganges, in Mahabalipuram. A detail of this enormous sculpture shows a cat in an ascetic posture — standing on one leg, with its 'hands' folded above its head —, clearly in order to impress a number of mice, depicted around the cat in a position of veneration.[2] This second sculpture reminds us, not only that asceticism of this kind was performed in India, but that it evoked admiration which could easily be abused. (We may be sure that the admiring mice pay with their lives for the veneration they display towards the cat.) Indian ascetics are reported to perform acts of endurance without regard for the fact that these may harm them. Some look into the sun until blindness results, others hold a hand raised above the head until it shrivels up, lifeless. Television documentaries confront us from time to time with these and other forms of ascetic behaviour, with the consequence that in the western imagination India and asceticism are inseparably linked.

This image is not new. Foreign visitors through the ages have been struck by the holy men they met in the subcontinent. At least since the campaign of Alexander the Great, reports on Indian ascetics have reached the western world. Onesicritus, who was to become the pilot of Alexander's fleet, supposedly encountered fifteen holy men, later called Gymnosophists, who were standing, sitting or lying in various positions which they maintained without moving until nightfall. Only one of them could be bothered to have an audience with Alexander.[3] This was Calanus, who acquired celebrity by accompanying Alexander's army from India to Persia and then burning himself to death on a funeral pyre in view of the army.

Alexander's empire did not survive the early death of its founder. The next western visitor to India parts of whose accounts have survived is Megasthenes, ambassador to India around 300 B.C.E. for Seleucus Nicator, ruler of one of the realms into which the empire had broken up. Megasthenes distinguishes various kinds of ascetics. Some "have their abode in a grove in front of the city within a moderate-sized enclosure. They live in a simple style, and lie on beds of rushes or (deer) skins. They abstain from animal food and

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[2] A picture of this detail, unfortunately not as clear as one might wish, figures on the cover of the reprint of my book *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* that has come out in 2000 (Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi). For a discussion of the story expressed in the sculpture, with references to the original and earlier secondary literature, see Roesler, 2000: 469 ff.

[3] Sedlar, 1980: 68.

sexual pleasures, ... Death is with them a very frequent subject of discourse. They regard this life as, so to speak, the time when the child within the womb becomes mature, and death as a birth into a real and happy life for the votaries of philosophy. On this account they undergo much discipline as a preparation for death." Others "live in the woods, where they subsist on leaves of trees and wild fruits, and wear garments made from the bark of trees. They abstain from sexual intercourse and from wine." Others again "are engaged in the study of the nature of man. They are simple in their habits, but do not live in the fields. Their food consists of rice and barley-meal, which they can always get for the mere asking, or receive from those who entertain them as guests in their houses." With regard to all of these Megasthenes adds that they "practise fortitude, both by undergoing active toil, and by the endurance of pain, so that they remain for a whole day motionless in one fixed attitude."[4]

India remained a country famous in the western world for its naked philosophers throughout antiquity and the middle ages.[5] For eye-witness accounts we next have to turn to visitors from China. A number of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims visited the home region of their religion during the middle centuries of the first millennium and left accounts of what they saw and experienced during these extended journeys. Unlike most other foreign visitors, these Chinese pilgrims were primarily interested in Buddhism, and much less in the religious practices and beliefs of others. The Buddhist monks they visited lived in monasteries and were not particularly given to ascetic practices. Yet one finds the occasional remark about non-Buddhist practitioners, like the following one by Hsüan-tsang (seventh century): "There are men who ... 'are content in seclusion', leading lives of continence. These come and go outside of the world, and promenade through life away from human affairs. Though they are not moved by honour or reproach, their fame is far spread. The rulers treating them with ceremony and respect cannot make them come to court. ... Though their family be in affluent circumstances, such men make up their minds to be like the vagrants, and get their food by begging as they go about. With them there is honour in knowing truth (in having wisdom), and there is no disgrace in being destitute."[6]

Moslem travellers visited India in the centuries that followed. The Persian al-Bīrūnī, who spent a considerable time in India in the eleventh century, recognised the importance of asceticism in Indian life; he left us a chapter "On the nature of liberation from the world, and on the path leading thereto", as well as an Arabic translation of the classical text of

[4] McCrindle, 1877: 99-102; Bronkhorst, 1998: 20 f.
[5] Karttunen, 1987.
[6] Watters, 1904-05: 160-161.

Yoga, the Yogasūtra.[7] An acquaintance of al-Bīrūnī, Gardīzī, left us descriptions of various kinds of Indian ascetics, one of which reads as follows:[8] "There is a group ... from which devotees go out to the desert. A large throng accompanies such a man, reciting a prayer and encouraging him. Then he parts with them and sits alone in the desert. Birds of prey, such as eagles, hawks, falcons, gerfalcons, kites, ospreys, and such like gather round him, while he sits quiet. The birds approach him growing bolder and bolder until they peck him with their beaks. They pierce his limbs, peck his flesh, and he keeps silent and doesn't resist until (the birds) have taken off his flesh and eaten it. He loses his life without making a movement."

The Arab Ibn Baṭṭūṭah, who passed a number of years in the subcontinent during the fourteenth century, describes the miraculous feats ascribed to yogis, some of whom go without food or drink for months on end. This traveller himself saw a Moslem who had taken instruction from yogis: this man had passed twenty-five days on a specially erected platform without drinking or eating. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah adds that these yogis were held in high esteem by the local sultan.[9]

The period of Moslem dominance in India was followed by one of increased presence of Europeans. Some few examples must, once again, suffice. In the 17th century, the Frenchman François Bernier saw ascetics who remained standing seven days and nights, without sitting or lying down, leaning against ropes while asleep.[10] Tavernier reports that some maintain this same position for many years. Others keep their hand above their heads until death, being naked and exposed to rain, heat and stinging insects. Thevenot reports having seen yogis standing on one leg for several weeks. Sonnerat speaks of people taking a vow to remain until death in a particularly disagreeable position, such as keeping their fists clenched so that the nails grow through the hands.[11]

All these reports — and the list is far from complete — confirm that foreigners have always seen India, at least in part, as a country in which asceticism flourished. Ascetics attracted the attention of visitors for their endurance and for the severity of their practices. Judging by the reports of these foreigners, one might be tempted to think that in this respect India has not changed much over more than two thousand years of history.

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[7] Al-Biruni, India p. 33 f.; Pines & Gelblum, 1966; 1977; 1983.
[8] Minorsky, 1948: 640.
[9] Ibn Battûta, III: 171 f.
[10] Bernier, 1724: 242.
[11] Schmidt, 1907: 151-157.

A look at the indigenous literary evidence brings to light that there have been major developments in Indian asceticism, and that there have always been, and still are today, important differences between ascetics. Ascetics differ among themselves in numerous ways. Many are members of groups. This may find expression in the way they dress; indeed, some wear no clothes at all. The religious beliefs of ascetics may vary, as do the reasons why they practice asceticism. Their practices, too, can be very different, ranging from gentle meditation to self-inflicted torture (not to mention those who do not practise anything in particular). All this implies that it would be misleading to speak of Indian asceticism without specification as to what group or current one is talking about.

However, there are features that are common to many currents, and the history of which can be traced from an early time onward. One of these is particularly striking, and has indeed drawn the attention of many visiting foreigners. Recall that Onesicritus was struck by the fact that his fifteen holy men would for a long time keep various positions — whether standing, sitting or lying — without moving. Megasthenes, too, described the Indian ascetics as remaining motionless for a whole day in one fixed position. Ibn Baṭṭūṭah was struck by the extended fasts undertaken by yogis, Gardīzī by the way some would have themselves be eaten by birds without as much as reacting. Bernier and others witnessed ascetics who remained standing for extended periods, without sitting or lying down. What all these visitors saw — and which a modern traveller might confirm — can be summarised in a few words: the ascetics they witnessed tried to abstain from vital activities, or to remain motionless altogether, for long periods of time.

Motionlessness is a recurring feature in Indian asceticism. This is not to say that all of Indian asceticism can be reduced to the sole concern of reducing or suppressing bodily action. But remarkably many Indian ascetics, both past and present, did and do pass at least part of their time being immobile, often in specially chosen uncomfortable positions. The duration of this motionlessness may vary. Religious literature is full of stories of human or divine beings who maintained such positions — e.g. standing on one leg — for thousands of years. Most others had to content themselves with less, but we will see that some invited death precisely by abstaining from all activity.[12]

It is this extreme form of motionlessness that deserves our attention.[13] It manifests itself for the first time in extant Indian literature in the religion of the Jainas. This religion is associated with a historical teacher who was a contemporary of the Buddha, the founder of

[12] Cp. Settar, 1989.
[13] Most of the remainder of this section is based on research which has been published separately (e.g. Bronkhorst, 1993; 1993a; 1995; 1998; 1998a; 1999; 2000; 2001; 2003).

Buddhism. This teacher of Jainism is known by the name of Mahāvīra, but he was not, it appears, its first teacher. Followers of his predecessor Pārśva are mentioned in the Jaina canonical texts, and the Buddhist sources are acquainted with the (minor) points of doctrine in which Pārśva differed from Mahāvīra. The early Jainas, i.e. both the followers of Pārśva and those of Mahāvīra, dedicated themselves to forms of asceticism in which motionlessness played a particularly important role. The statue of Bāhubali, mentioned earlier, is eloquent testimony to this interest in motionlessness, even though it dates from many centuries after the days of Pārśva and Mahāvīra. Equally eloquent are the stories told about Mahāvīra. One, which has found repeated pictorial expression, depicts the great ascetic as being pestered by village people who put spikes in his ears, right through his head; Mahāvīra, of course, does not react.[14]

We do not depend on sculptures and stories alone. The sacred texts of the Jainas depict, sometimes in great detail, how a person who is advanced enough to face death through inaction should go about it. They emphasise the need to abstain as far as possible from all activity, and many Jainas through the ages have chosen for such a death. Voluntary death through fasting has remained popular — if that is the expression to use — in Jainism right up to the present day. Shravana Belgola, the hill on which the statue of Bāhubali, mentioned earlier, is situated, has for many centuries been a centre for such chosen deaths. Inscriptions on this hill testify to some one hundred and fifty deaths of this kind during the last one thousand five hundred years.[15] Recent cases of ritual fasts to death of this kind (which the Jainas refuse to characterise as suicides) include that of Śāntisāgara in 1955 (Jaini, 1979: 1), and that of a nun in 1989.[16]

Jainism is not the only religious movement in India in which immobilisation plays an important role. We will consider further cases below. Jainism, however, presents us with more than a remarkable practice. It also provides a theoretical context in which this practice makes sense. Jaina practitioners invite death through motionless asceticism in order to escape from the effects of their actions. The theoretical background of this search for liberation is the belief that actions have consequences — positive or negative, depending on the nature of the action concerned — in a future life. The deeds of a person are responsible for a renewed birth after his death, and this in a repetitive cycle that will potentially go on for ever. The inspiration behind Jaina religious practice is the hope to escape from this ongoing cycle. Clearly good deeds are useless to attain this goal, for they give rise to good

[14] Cp. Wujastyk, 1984.
[15] Settar, 1989: xxvii.
[16] Dundas, 1992: 156 comments: "the recent interest and excitement elicited by a Sthanakvasi nun who died at the ate of eighty-seven after a fast of fifty-one days is testimony to the relative rarity of the religious death."

rebirths. In order not to be reborn at all, one has to somehow stop all activity. This is what Jaina ascetics tried to do.

Even this simple sketch shows that religious practice and religious belief go hand in hand in this case. The practice of immobility could thus be interpreted as a response to a problem posed by a particular theoretical position, often vaguely referred to as the doctrine of karma. It is of course equally possible that the doctrine of karma came to be developed to make sense of the ascetic practices. However this may be, we note that practice and theory together constitute a coherent whole, the elements of which cannot be separated from each other painlessly.

It will be clear that Jaina ascetics pushed their convictions to extreme lengths. Moreover, they believed that their ascetic practices had a double effect. On the one hand, abstaining from actions would call forth no further results; this part is almost tautological, given the way they interpreted the doctrine of karma. However, these same Jainas had carried out deeds before they had become ascetics, both in their present and in earlier lives. Those earlier acts clamoured for retribution and had to be dealt with somehow. Jaina doctrine had an easy answer: the suffering evoked by immobilisation destroys whatever traces of earlier acts are still present. A correctly executed course of asceticism will therefore solve both sides of the problem, allowing the ascetic to reach liberation at the moment of his death. He will not be reborn, and never again be part of the cycle of deaths and births that keep most other living beings in their grip.

The belief in the double efficacy of asceticism is an essential part of early Jainism. This is clear from the fact that not only the early Jaina texts themselves explicitly say so; it is confirmed by early Buddhist texts which characterise the fundamental beliefs of their religious competitors. As an example of such a statement from an early Jaina text consider the following: "By being without activity the soul does not bind new karma and destroys the karma that was bound before."[17] An early Buddhist text ascribes exactly the same point of view to the Jainas, in the following words: "As a result of the annihilation of former actions by asceticism, and of the non-performing of new actions, there is no further effect in the future; as a result of no further effect in the future there is destruction of actions; as a result of the destruction of actions there is destruction of suffering; as a result of the destruction of suffering there is destruction of sensation; as a result of the destruction of sensation all suffering will be exhausted."[18]

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[17] *Uttarajhayaṇa* 29.37, cited in Bronkhorst, 1993: 37, 27.
[18] *Majjhima Nikāya* I.93 l. 2-10.

And yet it is by no means evident that present motionlessness should destroy the traces of past acts. Interestingly, another early religious movement, known by the name of Ājīvikism, rejected this notion. Ājīvikism seems to have split off from Jainism around the time of Mahāvīra, and one of the reasons for doing so appears to have been precisely this issue. For the Ājīvikas motionlessness had but one effect, viz., that of not producing new acts. Traces of earlier acts would not be influenced by it, with as result that even total motionlessness would not stop rebirth after death for most people. The Ājīvikas incorporated this idea into a deterministic vision of reality, in which each living being has to pass through a pre-determined number of births and states of existence until, after countless aeons, all acts have been retributed and no traces of them remain. Motionlessness at that point will be the appropriate and inevitable thing to do, just before leaving for good the cycle of rebirths.[19]

What has been said about early Jainism applies with equal force to early Ājīvikism. Both were ascetic movements whose attempts to suppress all activity fitted the theoretical position they accepted. Belief in the efficacy of acts and the practice of inaction were for them two sides of the same coin.

It bears repetition that the belief in the doctrine of karma and the practice of motionlessness do not always go hand in hand, not even in India. There have been ascetics who performed remarkable feats of motionlessness without believing in the efficacy of acts, as there have been believers in the doctrine of karma who did not perform, or even approve of, asceticism. For the time being, however, we will continue to concentrate on those Indian thinkers and practitioners (and they are very numerous) for whom the truth of the doctrine of karma is beyond all question. Many of them were not Jainas, but shared with them the conviction that motionlessness is an essential part of the way to liberation, even if they do not all preach motionlessness until death. Beside restraint of movement in general, many texts emphasise the importance of immobilising the mind, or the breath; abstaining from food and drink is a particularly wide-spread aspect of the termination of bodily activities. All these restraints, in various combinations, are recommended in a large number of early Hindu texts.[20]

In order to evaluate the theoretical implications of the close parallelism between ascetic practice and religious conviction in these cases, we have to consider some other responses that have been proposed to the problem associated with the doctrine of karma. According to

[19] Bronkhorst, 2003.
[20] Bronkhorst, 1993: chapter IV.

this doctrine, acts lead to retribution, usually in a future life; the non-performance of acts is a vital step towards avoiding rebirth. However, other responses than asceticism are possible, and some of them may indeed be as old in India as the ascetic response. Common to these other responses is the belief that the essential part of human beings, their self or soul, is inactive by its very nature. According to an important number of thinkers, the knowledge, or realisation, that one's soul, i.e. that what one really is, is not involved in any form of activity whatsoever, guarantees that one is not involved in the retribution provoked by the acts carried out by one's body and mind.

Central to this response is the notion of a soul that is inactive by its very nature. Such a notion is almost omnipresent in the religious literature of classical India, and has been worked out in detail in the main schools of Brahmanical philosophy. They do not all agree on the details, but they do agree on one thing: the soul does not act, it does not do anything.

This central notion finds its simplest expression in the current of thought commonly known as Sāṃkhya. Sāṃkhya exists in various forms, and finds expression in a large number of texts and movements. In its systematised form it is known as the Sāṃkhya philosophy, a variant of which is adopted in the classical texts on Yoga. Systematised Sāṃkhya, as well as many of its less systematised expressions, divides the world into two fundamentally different kinds of entities: those that are active, and those that are not. Inactive are the souls of living beings, which are presented as being pure, i.e., motionless, consciousness. Everything that can act, that is changeable, falls under the heading Material Nature (*prakṛti*), which covers more than mere matter. Indeed, mental activity, being active, does not take place in the soul, but in Material Nature, which therefore includes something one might call subtle or mental matter. The notion that consciousness can be still, or rather is still by its very nature, is fundamental to this vision of the world. Without this notion, the soul would be deprived of consciousness, its one remaining feature (don't forget that the soul is and has to be totally inactive), in which case one might seriously question the need to postulate the existence of a soul at all. Sāṃkhya has a great deal to say about the structure of Material Nature. On the other hand, the problem how to explain that an inactive but conscious soul interacts with Material Nature which is unconscious and active, a problem which is inseparable from the fundamental structure of Sāṃkhya thought, proved very difficult, and no solution that gave full satisfaction was ever found.

Philosophical Sāṃkhya postulated the existence of numerous souls — one for each living being — beside Material Nature conceived of as single. Since all souls are nothing but consciousness, without activity or even memory, and therefore indistinguishable from

each other, there is no real need to postulate so many souls. Theoretically a single soul might do for all living beings, and there are indeed variants of Sāṃkhya where this position is taken. We will have more to say about this position in connection with Vedānta, below.

An altogether different, and by and large more sophisticated, vision of the world was elaborated within the school of philosophy called Vaiśeṣika. Here, too, the fundamental notion was that of an inactive soul, but the way it was conceived of was very different from that of Sāṃkhya. The soul — or rather the souls: one for each living being — was thought of as a substance, like other substances such as vases and human bodies. Unlike the latter, however, each soul was believed to be omnipresent, to fill the universe, and therefore to be incapable of movement. Since action in Vaiśeṣika is primarily thought of as movement, the soul, being motionless, is inactive by its very (omnipresent) nature. This does not prevent it from interacting with the rest of the world. Like other substances, the soul too is thought of as having, or being able to have, qualities. These qualities are not, however, the same as the qualities that inhere in, say, a vase: colour, smell, etc. The soul has as one of its qualities what is called "effort" (*prayatna*), which can have an effect on the body. This can lead to the unexpected situation that the soul, though itself inactive, can be the agent of the activities of the body. Vaiśeṣika was careful to specify that mental activity, far from being an activity of the soul itself, is nothing beyond the fluctuation of other qualities of the soul, which do not affect the soul itself (i.e. the soul without, or abstracted from, its qualities). Vaiśeṣika succeeded in this way in offering a solution to the problem that baffled Sāṃkhya. It managed to present a model in which an inactive soul can interact with the rest of the world in a way that accounts in a more or less satisfactory manner for the world of our experience. Note that Vaiśeṣika was not obliged to postulate, as Sāṃkhya had been, the existence of motionless consciousness. Indeed, the liberated soul as conceived of in Vaiśeṣika, i.e. a soul without qualities, was thought of as being unconscious. Liberation, it was maintained, resulted in a state of unconsciousness similar to that of a stone. No wonder that Vaiśeṣika had some difficulty inspiring enthusiasm among religious-minded people.

A third way of dealing with the nature of the soul is most clearly exemplified in the currents of thought collectively known by the name Vedānta. Here the soul of each individual is believed to be identical with a "world-soul", often designated by the term Brahma, and invariably described as immutable (often *akṣara*). This idea already finds expression in the early Upaniṣads which are part of Vedic literature. It is variously elaborated in the different schools of Vedānta that make their appearance from the second half of the first millennium C.E. onward. The best known of these schools is the so-called Advaita Vedānta whose most famous representative is Śaṅkara (7th cent.?). His system

adds to the identity of individual soul and Brahma the notion that phenomenal reality is not real, which of course facilitates the task of showing that the soul and Brahma are by their very nature inactive. This is not the place to further explore the various ways in which this particular conception of the soul has been embedded in elaborate systems of philosophy. It is however interesting and important to note that Vedānta in its multiple forms became the most widely accepted philosophy of India, and has to a considerable extent been able to dislodge other philosophies (such as Sāṃkhya and Vaiśeṣika) in the course of the second millennium C.E.

The insight that one's real self, one's soul, is different from both body and mind, and never acts, is useful, but a practical question may remain. What does the body do once this insight is obtained? The Bhagavadgītā offers an answer which has found many receptive listeners. The Bhagavadgītā may very well be the most widely studied and recited text of Hinduism these days, and has been so for a long time. This text preaches an attitude of separation of soul from body. This is obtained by cultivating non-attachment with regard to the results of one's actions. Once non-attachment attained, Material Nature (i.e., body and mind) will act according to its own devices, no longer involving the soul. The activity of a person who is no longer attached to the results of her deeds, the Bhagavadgītā teaches, follows the rules of the caste to which she belongs. The warrior Arjuna, to whom this teaching is primarily directed, will behave like a warrior and exterminate without qualms the members of his family that fight in the opposing army, if only he does not fight in order to win the battle or to obtain a kingdom. He must remain aloof, and will in this way remain unsoiled.

The direct link between this teaching and the doctrine of karma is, once again, undeniable. Deeds bind the soul to unwelcome results as long as the soul is involved in those deeds and in the results aimed at. When the soul takes its distance, the material world (which includes the body and the mind of the person concerned) may move on, even though it may no longer act exactly the way it acted as long as the soul was involved. But the activities of a person's body and mind bring no karmic consequences to her soul, if this soul has succeeded in dissociating itself from them.

It will be clear from the above that a very important part of Indian religious practice and thought presents itself as a set of coherent answers to the problem of karma. Since activity leads to undesired consequences, one must either abstain from all activity, or dissociate oneself from it, or find out that one's real self is by its very nature inactive. In practice these different answers are often combined, so that one may practise asceticism *and* believe in the

unchangeable nature of the self, etc. The situation might have been even clearer, and even more coherent, had it not been for the disturbing presence of Buddhism, which for many centuries exerted an enormous influence both on non-Buddhist religious practice and thought, and in this way muddled the waters considerably.

It seems clear that early Buddhism — and this means here first of all the historical founder of Buddhism himself — rejected both immobility asceticism and the notion of an inactive soul. He rejected both because he did not accept the doctrine of karma in the form in which many of his contemporaries accepted it. Early Buddhism accepted the doctrine of karma in a different form. Not one's acts, but one's desires and intentions bring about karmic consequences. This implies that immobilisation in itself cannot influence the process of karmic recompense, nor indeed the notion of an inactive soul. Buddhism therefore taught an altogether different path to liberation, essentially a psychological path culminating in the destruction of the roots of desire. No asceticism, no insight into the true nature of the soul could bring about this destruction. The way taught by the Buddha involved a lot of interiorisation, in the form of heightened awareness and meditation, meant to prepare the adepts for the crucial mental transformation from which they would emerge as "awakened" and liberated persons.

The Buddhist path was difficult to practise, and the alternative understanding of the doctrine of karma was difficult to grasp. An analysis of Buddhist literature shows that many early converts apparently did not find it easy to abandon the doctrine of karma to which they were accustomed and in which the deeds rather than the desires of a person play a central role. Buddhism allowed some of the foreign practices in, and even developed ideas that were not altogether different from the notion of an inactive self which it had rejected. Influence in the opposite direction — from Buddhism to other, non-Buddhist, religious currents — started later, but became very strong. The result is that a number of practices taught in the Yogasūtra and other "ascetic" texts have been shown to be borrowings from Buddhism, and that "orthodox" Brahminical philosophies such as Vaiśeṣika and Advaita Vedānta have been thoroughly influenced by it.

This is not the place to disentangle the various strands of influence that come together in the religious texts of classical Brahmanism. It is sufficient to point out that, in spite of the entanglement, the features mentioned earlier are still recognisably present. Forms of asceticism in which immobilisation plays a central role remain "popular" in India, and visions of the self as being inactive by nature have lost none of their appeal. The popularity of the Bhagavadgītā is well-known.

In the next chapter we will discover that features similar to the ones here identified occur elsewhere, too. However, the Indian material connects these features in a way other cultures may not. The forms of religious practice studied (asceticism and non-attachment to the fruits of one's deeds) as well as the notions about the true nature of the self encountered are, in India, responses to one and the same problem situation: the belief in the future effects of acts as embodied in the doctrine of karma. The fact that the same features can co-occur elsewhere in situations where there is no belief corresponding to the doctrine of karma might suggest that asceticism and belief in the immutable nature of the self are not *really* responses to the doctrine of karma, not even in India. The doctrine of karma might then be a kind of rationalisation, a cultural construct which unites a number of practices and beliefs that are not *really* related.

Rather than discarding a potential insight that the Indian material presents us with, it will be preferable to take the hint and see whether these phenomena may really be related. This does not mean that the modern scholar should accept the doctrine of karma. Various related religious phenomena do not call for an explanation in terms of a theory about what the world is like, but rather in terms of a shared human predisposition. It is in fact rather easy to see that the phenomena under consideration, all of them, can easily be understood as expressions of a shared disinclination to identify with body and mind. The ascetic takes the decision to abandon his or her body (which, Sanskrit *kāyotsarga*, is exactly the term used in Jainism to refer "to one of the best known of Jain ascetic practices, frequently portrayed in art, performed by assuming a motionless position, with arms hanging down without touching the sides of one's body"; Dundas, 1992: 148). Followers of the Bhagavadgītā do the same, with this difference that they are convinced that the body (including the mind), when left to its own devices, will behave in a manner which agrees with the caste to which they belong. The philosopher, finally, gains the insight that he is different from his body and mind.

Note that no Indian text that I know of identifies a "disinclination to identify with body and mind" as a factor behind the practices and beliefs at stake. Identifying this disinclination does not help us to arrive at a better grasp of the self-understanding of Indian ascetics and philosophers. Their self-understanding, as I pointed out above, is embodied in the doctrine of karma. This does not however mean that there may not be such a disinclination. We will see that the assumption that there actually is one is helpful in dealing with material from other cultures.

§ 2: Some concerns of early Christianity.

The complex of Indian ideas and practices discussed in the preceding section is not unique. Christianity, during the early centuries of its existence, took many different forms, some of them succeeding each other, others existing side by side. In this richness of currents, practices and opinions, something very similar to what we have come to know in India can be recognised.

Putting chronological considerations for the time being aside, let us first concentrate on asceticism, as we did in the case of India. In India we were struck by the theme of immobility; Christian asceticism offers numerous examples of the same. Literal immobility was practised among Christian ascetics. The *Historia Lausiaca* reports that the monk Adolius would stand all night on the Mount of Olives praying and singing, remaining immobile even if it rained or there was frost.[21] This same text describes how Macarius of Alexandria visited the monks at the monastery of Tabennisi, incognito. Macarius observed that during the Lent the monks practised various forms of asceticism. Some would remain standing all night, but would sit during the day. Macarius, however, took his stand in a corner and stayed there until Easter without kneeling or lying down.[22] Elpidius observed a rigorous fast for twenty-five years, eating only on Saturdays and Sundays; he would remain standing all night.[23] Theodore of Sykeon, in spite of a grave injury, is said to have stood like an iron statue through a night, continuing in praise to God without sleep.[24] A certain monk called John, according to the *Historia monachorum*, spent three full years standing under a rock, virtually without sleep, and eating nothing but the Eucharist brought to him on Sundays by the priest, until his feet began to rot and exude pus.[25] Theodoret, fifth century bishop of Cyrrhus, describes various forms of asceticism that were in use in his days. Among those who exposed their bodies to the open air, thus enduring the opposite conditions of being now frozen stiff by the bitter cold, now scorched by the blazing sun, he discerns some subvarieties: some stand continually, while others divide the day between sitting and standing. Specific examples are the monk Abraham whose body was subjected to such sleeplessness, standing, and fasting that for the longest time he remained motionless, not even able to walk; similarly Moses, Antiochus and Antony; and Zebinas,

[21] Delehaye, 1923: CLXXXII.
[22] Williams, 1985: 87.
[23] Delehaye, 1923: CLXXXII.
[24] *Life of Theodore of Sykeon* ch. 115; tr. Dawes and Baynes, 1948: 164.
[25] Festugière, 1964: 87.

Polychronius, and Damianus.[26] The so-called stylites belong in this same category. Simeon, the first stylite, stood on a pillar for thirty years. Daniel spent thirty-three years on three pillars, at the end of which "his feet had been worn away by inflammation and the gnawing of worms".[27]

We have seen that practices like those described above were in India accompanied by theoretical developments which stress the immovable nature of the true self. Something similar happened in a number of religious currents collectively known (perhaps without sufficient justification)[28] by the name 'Gnosticism'. We are particularly interested in those Christians who believed that knowledge concerning the true nature of the self, which is utterly distinct from the body and even from the mental activities, is the means by which salvation is attained. The real self is spirit and identical with God, a divine spark. Numerous passages in the Gnostic gospels show that God, and by implication the real self of each human being, never acts.

God, or the 'established truth', is described as 'immutable, imperturbable, perfect in beauty'.[29] The light of truth is immutable.[30] The Father, who is the root of everything, is 'inimitable and immutable',[31] 'immeasurable and immutable'.[32] He is unchanging good, characterised by unchanging glory.[33] His words are eternal and unchanging.[34] He is invariable, unchanged, unalterable, unchangeable, 'with immutability clothing him', unchanging.[35] "In an unwavering and immovable way he grasps those who have received the restoration while they grasp him."[36] The heavenly realm is called the 'Adamantine Land'.[37] The *Untitled Text* from the Bruce Codex applies the epithets 'immovable' and 'adamantine' to the Father.[38]

Those who possess the *gnosis* constitute the 'immovable race',[39] which is 'incorruptible',[40] or 'immutable'.[41] The *Dialogue of the Savior* exhorts the disciples that

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[26] Williams, 1985: 88-89 with n. 36; Delehaye, 1923: clxxxiii-clxxxiv.
[27] Dawes and Baynes, 1948: 69.
[28] Williams, 1996.
[29] *Gospel of Truth*, tr. NHL p. 38.
[30] Id., tr. NHL p. 46.
[31] *Tripartite Tractate*, tr. NHL p. 55.
[32] *The Second Treatise of the Great Seth*, tr. NHL p. 337.
[33] *Eugnostos the Blessed*, tr. NHL p. 210, 213.
[34] *Discourse on the Eighth and the Ninth*, tr. NHL p. 294.
[35] *Tripartite Tractate*, tr. NHL p. 55-57.
[36] Id., tr. NHL p. 94.
[37] *The Hypostasis of the Archons*, tr. NHL p. 154; see Layton, 1976.
[38] Williams, 1985: 65.
[39] This term occurs in the *Apocryphon of John*, the *Sophia of Jesus Christ*, the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, the *Three Steles of Seth*, and in *Zostrianus*. All occurrences have been discussed in Michael Allen Williams's monograph on this subject (1985).

"we should leave behind our labor and stand in the rest; for he who stands in the rest will rest forever." One must weep because of the deeds of the body. The Lord will bring to his disciples ‘everything that does not move’, for they are from that place. The text concludes: "It behoves whoever has understood the actions to do the [will] of the Father."[42]

"The aeons who really exist dwell in silence. Existence was inactivity ... ."[43] The *Allogenes* observes, similarly: "... if you wish to stand, ascend to the Existence, and you will find it standing and stilling itself according to the likeness of the One who truly stills himself and apprehends all these in silence and effortlessness." ‘Standing’, here as well as elsewhere, implies immovability, as has been pointed out by Williams (1985: 35 f., 71 f., 82 f.). The same text admonishes: "... when you become perfect in that place, still yourself." And again: "... [do not] further dissipate yourself, [so that] you may be able to stand, and do not desire to be [eternal] lest you fall [in any way] from the inactivity in you of the Unknown One." "Cease hindering the inactivity that exists in you ..." Stillness and silence are often used in this text as attributes of God. ‘Nothing activates him in accordance with the Unity that is at rest’; he ‘stands continually’, is ‘the One who is at rest’ possessing stillness within himself.[44]

The emphasis on the immovability and stillness of the soul, and of God with whom the soul is identical in essence, is all the more noteworthy since these views on the self and on God are often incorporated into an elaborate system of mythology. Mythology needs ‘actors’, not ‘non-actors’. The unavoidable result is that the myths do not always seem consistent, and occasionally seem to contradict themselves. This was no doubt the price that had to be paid for the attempt to keep the main actors ‘immovable’. This in its turn was apparently too essential and central a feature of Gnostic thought to be dropped.

Gnosticism and Christian asceticism do not date from the same time. The ascetic practices which we considered above have been recorded from the fourth century onward. We know that the young Antony started living in the desert around 275 C.E., and the *Vita Antonii* (3) records that he was inspired by an old man who had been a hermit since youth. But this is the earliest information concerning Christian ascetics we possess. Gnosticism, on the other hand, flourished already in the second and third centuries C.E., and perhaps earlier.

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[40] *Gospel of the Egyptians*, tr. NHL p. 199, 200, 202, 203, 205.
[41] Id., tr. NHL p. 204-05.
[42] NHL p. 230, 231, 233, 238.
[43] *Zostrianus*, tr. NHL p. 391.
[44] *Allogenes*, tr. NHL p. 449-452.

The cult of martyrdom can be looked upon as a predecessor of asceticism that is to a considerable extent contemporaneous with Gnosticism. The ideal of martyrdom plays a major role already in the books of the New Testament, and in the Christian writings of the immediately ensuing period. Martyrs are no mere victims of religious persecution. In fact, they are no victims at all. The ideal martyr is a victor who, in spite of being subjected to the most atrocious tortures, remains courageous and does not flinch. Like ascetics, martyrs prove that they are in control of their senses in the most extreme of circumstances. Like ascetics, they do not give in even when they are free to do so. It is indeed a characteristic of the ideal martyr that they be given one or several chances to avoid their sufferings. The ideal martyr is until the end encouraged by his torturers to abandon his or her Christian convictions, or to just sacrifice for the emperor.

Christian martyrdom is already referred to in the New Testament.[45] The Christian must take up his cross and follow Jesus.[46] "There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, but he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, *with persecutions*; and in the world to come eternal life." (Mark 10.29-30). "Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the profits which were before you." (Matthew 5.11-12). The disciples are continuously warned in the Gospels that they will be persecuted for Jesus' sake.[47] When the apostles faced their first difficulties with the ruling powers, they rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for his name" (Acts 5.41). Soon Stephen was to be the first martyr who followed the fate of his master by being stoned to death (Acts 7.54-60).

For our present purposes it is interesting to turn to the Acts of the Martyrs, where the essential features of martyrdom are clearly depicted. The *Martyrdom of St. Polycarp* describes the nobility and courage of the martyrs in Smyrna:[48]

> "Who indeed would not admire the martyrs' nobility, their courage, their love of the Master? For even when they were torn by whips until the very structure of their bodies was laid bare down to the inner veins and arteries, they endured it, making even the bystanders weep for pity. Some indeed attained to such courage that they

[45] See Baumeister, 1980: 66 f.; Frend, 1967: 58 f.
[46] Mark 8.34; Luke 14.27; Matthew 10.38.
[47] Mark 13.9-13; Matthew 24.9-13; Luke 21.12-19; John 15.18-21.
[48] For the following passages, see Musurillo, 1972: 3, 13, 25, 27, 47, 53, 67, 69, 107 f.

> would utter not a sound or a cry, showing to all of us that in the hour of their torment these noblest of Christ's witnesses were not present in the flesh, or rather that the Lord was there holding converse with them."

Polycarp himself, when about to be nailed to the equipment on which he will be burned alive, asks his torturers not to do so, "For He who has given me the strength to endure the flames will grant me the strength to remain without flinching in the fire even without the firmness you will give me by using nails." Carpus, in the *Martyrdom of Saints Carpus, Papylus, and Agathonicê* (Greek recension), while being hung up and scraped, kept screaming 'I am a Christian' until he grew exhausted and was no longer able to speak. Papylus, passing through the same ordeal, did not utter a sound. Both then were burnt alive, praying and smiling. The martyr Justin expects to ascend to heaven after being scourged and beheaded, if he endures. An extreme example of endurance is Blandina who, during the persecution in Lyons, received refreshment and rest, and acquired insensibility to her present pain on account of her admission 'I am a Christian; we do nothing to be ashamed of'; this in spite of the fact that her torturers admitted that they were beaten, that there was nothing further they could do to her, after having tortured her in every way from dawn to dusk. Sanctus, similarly, resisted his torturers with such determination that he would not even tell them his own name, his race, or the city he was from, whether he was a slave or a freedman. To all of their questions he answered in Latin 'I am a Christian!' He maintained his firmness even though his body was stretched and distorted out of any recognisably human shape; and again when the same tortures were applied to his swollen and inflamed limbs some days later. Perpetua had to be firm against the urgent requests of her father to abandon her faith, before she is led to her death in the arena.

[The cult of martyrdom was no Christian invention. It had been present for more than a century preceding the birth of Christ.[49] Clear instances occur in ii *Maccabees*. Chapter 7 deals with the martyrdom of seven brothers and their mother. Refusing to eat porc, they are one after the other tortured to death while their brothers and mother are forced to watch. None of them can be persuaded to taste the forbidden food, even while the torture is in progress. Eleazar in chapter 6 steps freely forward to the instrument of torture, refusing even to eat permitted flesh under the pretense that it is porc. The much later iv *Maccabees* announces right at the beginning that the rulership of inspired reason over the passions will be investigated. It is from this perspective that the same cases of martyrdom

[49] See Baumeister, 1980: 6 f.; Frend, 1967: 22 f.; van Henten, 1989.

as in ii *Maccabees* are here told. This same attitude towards death for the sake of religion became part of the Jewish tradition, as is clear, for example, from the works of Flavius Josephus.[50] Perhaps the earliest theology of martyrdom is found in *Daniel* 11 and 12, dating from soon after 168 B.C.E. Suffering on the part of the wise as a result of firmly resisting attempts to corrupt them is depicted as purification (11.32-35), which will be followed by everlasting life (12.2).]

The connection between martyrdom and asceticism did not escape the Christians themselves.[51] Restraint was considered the preparation of martyrdom. This is clear from the *Martyrs of Lyons*, where the apostates are said to be those who had not exercised themselves, while the others had learned to confess their faith. Tertullian is likewise of the opinion that he who has killed his flesh is sure to be victorious in the battle of martyrdom. A Christian should not remarry; in that way he will be better prepared for persecution and firmer in martyrdom. Virginity, widowhood, continence in marriage, along with fasting and asceticism, are preparations for martyrdom. Origen observes that beside the perfection of martyrdom, obtained in a short time, there is the slow practice of all virtues, and the progressive perfection of a man which consists of the perfection of all virtues. Cyprian considers virgins the most illustrious among the Christians and admonishes them to live in the spirit of the martyrs. Other early Christian authors are of a similar opinion.[52]

There is another interesting parallel between martyrdom in early Christianity and asceticism in India and subsequent Christianity. The case in India may be taken as example. There insight into the true nature of the soul was seen as an alternative to asceticism, even though some considered a combination of the two most desirable. We find a similar belief among certain Gnostics, who held that their *gnosis* made martyrdom unnecessary.[53] The *Testimony of Truth*, for example, ridicules those who think that mere testimony secures salvation; they fall in the clutches of the authorities. They are "[empty] martyrs, since they bear witness only [to] themselves." The true testimony, which leads to salvation, is when man knows himself and God who is over the truth.[54] Public confession and subsequent martyrdom are decried in the *Apocalypse of Peter*, because it is wrongly thought that this makes one pure. The orthodox Christians are accused of oppressing their

[50] Frend, 1967: 41 f.; Baumeister, 1980: 56 f.
[51] See Viller, 1925; Malone, 1950.
[52] Viller, 1925: 106-108, 110-11, 113 f.; cf. Malone, 1950: 14 f.
[53] This has been discussed by Elaine Pagels in chapter 4 of her book *The Gnostic Gospels* (1980).
[54] NHL p. 407-08, 411.

brothers, claiming that God has pity on them through martyrdom, since salvation comes through it.[55]

This aspect of Gnosticism is confirmed by a number of early orthodox authors. Justin the Martyr complains that the Gnostics 'are neither persecuted nor put to death'. Irenaeus tells us that the Gnostic heretics 'even pour contempt upon the martyrs, and vituperate those who are killed on account of confessing the Lord'. Tertullian goes to the extent of claiming that Gnosticism exerts its greatest attraction upon weak Christians in times of persecution. Ignatius, who joyfully met his fate of being eaten by wild beasts, rejects the Gnostic view that Christ was a spiritual being and only **appeared** to suffer and die; in that case martyrdom would be in vain. Hippolytus uses the same argument.[56]

It may not be correct to think that all Gnostics rejected martyrdom. Yet it seems likely that martyrdom played the same role vis-à-vis the Gnostic sects as did asceticism vis-à-vis the notions about the inactive nature of the soul in India. And this is not surprising. Voluntary martyrdom and asceticism share some striking features. Both the martyr and the ascetic refuse to act on the urges of the body even where these are extreme. In the case of martyrs these urges are provoked by outsiders; ascetics often provoke them themselves.

Those Gnostics who rejected martyrdom did not for that reason choose for a life of ease and comfort. The author of the *Testimony of Truth*, for example, while rejecting martyrdom (see above), speaks out for restraint: "No one knows the God of truth except solely the man who will forsake all of the things of the world, having renounced the whole place ...; he has subdued desire every [place] within himself." Renunciation of wealth, of sexual intercourse and of the world are advocated.[57] The *Apocalypse of Peter* goes to the extent of accepting the martyrdom of some.[58]

When comparing the situation in early Christianity with the one prevailing in classical India a number of similarities strike the eye. In both cultural spheres there were individuals — whom we may call ascetics or martyrs depending on the circumstances — who were determined to face extreme circumstances without reacting to them. In both cultural spheres we also find people, often different from the former ones, who are convinced that their souls are inactive, immovable. The Gnostic Christians identified their souls with God, who is described in terms of immovability. This corresponds to the Indian identification of the

[55] NHL p. 341, 343.
[56] Pagels, 1980: 83-89
[57] NHL p. 410, 414.
[58] NHL p. 343. Cf. Pagels, 1980: 94.

soul with Brahma. (The Indian conceptions elaborated in the classical Sāṃkhya system and in the Bhagavadgītā appear to have no parallels in early Christianity.)

The coexistence of (so-called) Gnosticism and martyrdom/asceticism in early Christianity might be looked upon as no more than historical coincidence. Such a position is difficult to maintain in the face of the Indian evidence. There asceticism and the belief in the inactive nature of the self are clearly related, the intermediate factor being the doctrine of karma. In the case of early Christianity, too, one might therefore consider the possibility that Gnosticism and martyrdom/asceticism are related to each other, even if there is no explicitly formulated doctrine of karma to constitute the link.

How can this be explained? Did the early Christians borrow these ideas and practices from India, or vice-versa, did the Indians borrow them from the Christians? The second of these two possibilities has to be discarded, at least in this form, for purely chronological reasons: religions like Jainism existed many centuries before Christianity came into being.

However, the thesis of borrowing in whatever form is not likely to take us very far.[59] It is conceivable that someone takes over an idea from a distant culture. It is much harder to see how such a borrowed idea could become fundamental to an important religious movement. (Don't forget, there was no large scale missionary activity of Indians in the Roman world, nor of Westerners in India.) It is even more difficult to conceive of the transfer of a two-branched system, presumably from India to the Roman world, without the intermediate link (the doctrine of karma) coming along. But the most unsatisfactory aspect of this thesis is that, even if borrowing did take place, we would still need an explanation why such a complex of ideas should be so widely accepted at the other end.

In other words, borrowing is unlikely to have played a role. Even if it had, we would still be in need of an explanation — another kind of explanation — for the fact that two closely similar complexes of ideas are found in two altogether different cultures, separated from each other by thousands of kilometres.

It has already been suggested that the whole set of practices and ideas in India may be expressive of one and the same underlying predisposition, described so far in negative terms: the disinclination to identify with body and mind. It will be clear that the same formulation can be used to cover the features of early Christianity discussed in this section. Both the martyr and the ascetic were determined to let their bodies be their bodies, and the Gnostic was in possession of knowledge which confirmed that his real self was indeed

[59] Compare the remarks about cultural dissemination in the Introduction, above.

altogether different from his body. Both the Indian and the early Christian evidence therefore suggest that a common human predisposition expresses itself through their various forms of asceticism, martyrdom and wisdom teaching. It is time to have a closer look at what we may expect from a "common human predisposition".

§ 3: What do innate predispositions look like?

It would be easy to concentrate on the different cultural contexts in classical India and early Christianity, and to accumulate data that would "prove" that the similarities presented in the preceding sections are no more than superficial, that they are interpreted very differently in the two cultures. Any textual scholar worth his salt can drown the similarities pointed out above in a flood of reflections, arguments and textual passages that can convince almost anyone that it would be rash to make hasty comparisons, and that much more textual study will be required before anything in this regard can be said with a minimum of certainty. These scholars overlook that their conclusion is already part of their method. It is obvious that any human universal — supposing for argument's sake that there are any — will be completely overgrown by traits belonging to the specific culture in which it expresses itself. The more we concentrate on those cultural traits, the more the universal will, predictably, recede into the background. This does not prove that there are no universals, but merely that those scholars follow a methodology which excludes a priori that there might be any.

It will be useful to make a comparison with language. Languages are infinitely diverse, and the more languages one studies, the more differences are likely to appear. It is possible to study what language users in different cultures have thought (and think) about their language and language in general, but the results, though interesting, may not be of much use to the linguist. (An important exception is constituted by the indigenous tradition of Sanskrit grammar, which has been able to provide European linguists with new insights.) In spite of this great variety, there is a growing consensus among linguists that language has an innate component.

More will be said about language below. The few remarks so far made allow us already to draw some provisional conclusions. If — and for the time being I emphasise *if* — the set of ascetic practices and religious beliefs studied in the preceding sections are somehow expressive of one or more general human predispositions, it is not necessarily of interest to know what the actors involved thought about this themselves, or how it was embedded in the cultural situation to which they belonged. An exclusive emphasis on

"understanding in context" might have the effect of obfuscating the universal predisposition that expresses itself through the phenomena at stake. This does not exclude that the local understanding of these phenomena — such as the Indian conviction discussed above to the extent that certain forms of asceticism and beliefs about the inactive nature of the soul are inherently related to each other — may occasionally add to our understanding of them.

Partly because of the specific cultural situations in which innate predispositions are always embedded, they may be difficult to recognise. If it is true, as has been suggested above, that the parallel complexes of religious practices and ideas found in India and in European antiquity are to be understood in terms of a common innate predisposition, the question has to be addressed how such an innate predisposition can be described and distinguished from the no doubt numerous accompanying features that reflect the cultural situations in which it finds expression.

There can be no doubt that human beings are born with a variety of innate predispositions. Perhaps the most obvious one is sexuality, which humanity shares with a large number of other animals. We will not deal with this particular instinct, but note that it can express itself in a great variety of ways. Indeed, the editors of a recent volume on sexuality distinguish between sex, which is a natural fact and lies outside history and culture, and sexuality, which "refers to the cultural interpretation of the human body's erogenous zones and sexual capacities" (Halperin et al., 1989: 3). It is also important to observe that this perhaps most essential of human instincts does not inevitably lead to sexual activity; the celibacy of the ascetics studied in this article proves that an important number of people tried and try to resist its urges, no doubt with varying degrees of success. Here as elsewhere it is important not to identify human predispositions with "fixed programmes" which — as Boyer (1998: 91) rightly points out — would be maladaptive.

It will not be of much use to compare the universal which we suspect may be linked to aspects of religious and ascetic behaviour and thought with sexuality (or sex). Religious and ascetic behaviour, unlike sexuality, are confined to human beings, without clear parallels in other animal species. Moreover, though many manifestations of what is commonly called religion are heavily infused with emotion, the aspects that have attracted our attention in the preceding sections are not.[60] Both asceticism (of the kind here under consideration) and the views about the nature of the self appear to be essentially dissociated from emotion, or even ways to conquer it. The emotions to be conquered include, of course, sexual emotion. It does not make sense to see in these practices and beliefs the expression

[60] Jaina authors, for example, have always been adamant that the voluntary death chosen by their ascetics is not suicide, precisely because the latter involves the passions (Dundas, 1992: 155).

of a universal, an "instinct", that has much in common with sexuality, its "enemy". In order to make a useful comparison with the propensity that interests us we need another universal that is confined to human beings and devoid of strong emotional dimensions. One such universal — confined to human beings and devoid of a strong emotional dimension — is particularly important and has received a fair amount of attention in recent years, viz. language.

The idea that language has an innate component has gained many adherents since Noam Chomsky published his review of J.F. Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* in 1959. The expression "language instinct" is sometimes used, as in the title of Steven Pinker's recent book (1994); he traces this usage back to Darwin. One of Chomsky's arguments *against* the behaviourist Skinner, and therefore *for* the "language instinct" (Chomsky does not use this expression), is that many sentences uttered by language users have never been uttered before, which excludes the idea of a limited number of learnt responses, as Skinner thought. That is to say, the innate component of language is invoked to explain the fact that linguistic behaviour is not limited, not confined to the constant repetition of a finite number of learnt expressions.

Much has been written about the precise nature of this "language instinct". Some believe that the "language instinct" is responsible for the Universal Grammar that is supposed to underlie all human languages. Others maintain that the innate component of language does not rigidly determine the limits of the possible in human languages, but embodies preferences — preferred ways of using language. This is the position of Derek Bickerton (1981), who has tried to show that "new" languages, primarily Creoles, always share certain syntactic features which are not necessarily present in already existing languages. In other words, children are pre-programmed to learn languages that obey certain syntactic rules, but can adjust to, and therefore learn, languages that do not correspond to their inborn expectations.

In spite of the almost general agreement about the innate nature of the ability to use language, there is no agreement that this ability has been acquired as a result of Darwinian selection. Surprisingly, even prominent linguists such as Noam Chomsky and evolutionary thinkers such as Stephen Jay Gould have suggested otherwise.[61] This position has come under attack in recent years (e.g. Pinker and Bloom, 1990; Pinker, 1994; Dennett, 1995: 384-393), even though critics find it difficult to specify how exactly Darwinian evolution could have given rise to language.

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[61] Piattelli-Palmarini, 1989.

Perhaps the most convincing solution to this problem suggested to date comes from Terrence Deacon in his book *The Symbolic Species* (1997). A characteristic feature of human language is that words do not merely refer to "their" objects; words also represent other words. They are incorporated into individual relationships to all other words of the language. This explains that we can learn the meaning of a word merely from other words, say when using a dictionary, sometimes without having direct acquaintance with the denoted object: we all know the meaning of "angel", but few of us have ever met one. This referential relationship between words is what Deacon calls "symbolic reference"; it forms a system of higher-order relationships that is to be distinguished from the indexical relationship between a word and "its" object. Language acquisition cannot take place without symbol learning. The part of the brain primarily linked to symbol construction, Deacon argues at length, is the prefrontal cortex. It is the prefrontal cortex that is relatively much bigger in human beings than in other animals, including our nearest relatives, the apes. The conclusion seems inevitable that there has been co-evolutionary interaction between brain and language evolution. Symbol learning, once in use in whatever primitive and undeveloped form in our early ancestors, put a premium on brain developments in the prefrontal region that would facilitate and enrich this practice. Since the capacity for symbol learning, though limited, is feebly present in chimpanzees and bonobos, it is not necessary to assume that the brain had to grow before the earliest manifestation of speech (or other form of symbol learning) could take place. It is rather the use of speech (in whatever form, but based on symbolic reference) that explains the subsequent growth in evolution of the relevant parts of the brain.

This is no doubt an attractive explanation for the evolutionary development of general language ability, yet it says very little about how a specific language instinct, or a Universal Grammar, might have come about. In this connection Deacon reminds us that languages, far from being unchanging, evolve over time at a rate thousands of times faster than genetic evolution in human beings. If therefore linguists are surprised by the capacity of children to learn to speak, and postulate that those same children must already, in the form of Universal Grammar, have an innate capacity since otherwise they would not be able to distil the rules of grammar out of the sentences they get to hear, they overlook a crucial fact. In the course of the hundreds of thousands, perhaps millions, of years that humans have used some form of language, language has adjusted to its speakers, generation after each new generation. The Universal Grammar that linguists speak about is therefore situated, not in the child, but in the language it is learning. It is due to the evolution of language, and much less to that of human beings, that the fit between language structure

and the expectation of the children who learn it is close. Deacon observes: "Once we recognize this evolutionary process as the primary source behind the universality of linguistic features, and abandon the assumption that to be universal a feature must be hard-wired into the brain, it becomes evident that we may have vastly underestimated the range and variety of language universals, or near universals." And again: "I think ... we should not be surprised by the extent to which even high-level conceptual patterns of linguistic representation and discourse share near-universal features in most languages, simply because we are all members of the same species, sharing many common perceptual, behavioral, and emotional biases." (p. 121) "Language universals," Deacon points out on the same page, "are, in this interpretation, only statistical universals, but supported by the astronomical statistics of millions of speakers over tens of thousands of years. They are, despite their almost epiphenomenal origin, for practical purposes categorically universal."

We will have occasion to return to Deacon's ideas when discussing asceticism and religion in a later section. Here it is important to point out that Deacon presents a way of thinking about universals which does not postulate that they have to be hard-wired into the brain. Indeed, he argues that "although our brains and sensorimotor abilities exhibit many adaptations for language that together might be called an instinct, grammatical knowledge cannot be one of them." (p. 328). Deacon says many extremely interesting things about the way the use of language may have had an effect on the evolution of the human brain, but little about why there are certain universals of grammar and not others. His following statement may come closest to an answer: "the co-evolution of languages with respect to human neurological biases may not just be a plausible source for emergent universals of grammar, it may be the only plausible source." (p. 340). He pleads against what he calls "monolithic innatism" and speaks instead of "an extensive array of perceptual, motor, learning, and even emotional predispositions, each of which in some slight way decreases the probability of failing at the language game" (p. 350).

None of the authors that we have so far considered objects against the idea that there is such a thing as a "language instinct" in human beings, but what they say about it is progressively less distinct. All agree, as they should, that the existence of a "language instinct" does not conflict in any way with the presence of many different languages. The particular language any child is going to speak is not determined by its genetic constitution, not by its "language instinct," but by the community in which its grows up. Children born to Chinese parents but brought up in Britain among English speakers will speak English, and vice-versa. This in itself shows that the "language instinct" is not the same kind of thing as the instinct by which birds make their nests, or bees perform the dances that inform their

co-workers where to find honey. No, the "language instinct" leaves an enormous amount undetermined, to begin with the language that a particular child is going to speak. The question is to what extent it determines anything at all. As we have seen, some maintain that there is such a thing as a Universal Grammar hard-wired in each child, so that no human language can deviate from it. Others, among them Bickerton, think of the inborn part of language as expressing itself as a preference which will invariably find expression in newly created human languages, especially in Creoles, but not necessarily in all existing human languages. And finally there is the argument, supported by detailed considerations of the way evolution works, that Universal Grammar is not the kind of thing that gets anchored in the human mind by genetic assimilation. There may yet be shared features in human languages, universals of a kind, but they are statistical universals, determined by the fact that languages, in the course of *their* evolution, adapt to the human beings, i.e. the children, that learn them generation after generation.

What we can learn from this brief discussion of another human universal, viz. language, is the following. The existence of a universal in no way implies that rigidly identical behaviours will necessarily be observed in all human individuals or even in all human societies. That is to say, the absence of identical behaviours or of identical ideas by no means implies that no universal can be involved. Just as, in order to find the shared features of all or most human languages one needs to abstract from often immense surface differences (Chinese is very different from English), one may have to abstract from surface differences (primarily determined by cultural and social context, we may assume) in order to find the universal we are looking for (supposing it exists). And even when these surface differences have been peeled away, it is far from certain that something very specific will be uncovered. Linguists have long postulated the existence of a Universal Grammar, but we have seen that this Universal Grammar, if it exists at all, may be more fluid than has often been thought. It seems safer to speak of a set of predispositions or, with Deacon, of statistical universals.

All this implies that, in order to strengthen the idea that the complexes of asceticism and thought dealt with in §§ 1 and 2 are manifestations of a shared predisposition, it is possible to look whether sufficiently similar phenomena are current in other cultural areas of the world. The absence of such phenomena in one or more regions will not constitute proof that no shared predisposition, no human universal of the kind looked for, exists. Nor will it be necessary to find in other regions more or less exact replicas of what we came across in the Indian subcontinent and the classical Mediterranean world. This may at first

sight look rather wishy-washy, and the risk of unrestrained subjectivity in the selection of "evidence" is a real one. Yet we have already formulated our universal in a rather precise manner as "the disinclination to identify with body and mind"; we can give this formulation a more positive twist, by speaking of "the attitude of being different from body and mind". Either way we have a sufficiently precise formulation to allow us to test whether material corresponding to it occurs in altogether different cultures. The next section will take up this task by considering religious and related phenomena that occur in a great number of tribal societies.

§ 4: A human universal confirmed

The notion that the self is different from body and mind — including both thought and volition — is abundantly attested in a number of so-called primitive societies. Different kinds of "souls" are often distinguished. One of these, called ‘free-soul’ by researchers, though thought to reside in the body, plays no role in the latter's activities. Nor does it play a role in ordinary thought-processes. It is free to leave the body (and is therefore sometimes designated ‘external soul’), and does this when its owner is asleep or in trance. The adventures of this ‘free-soul’ may be remembered as dreams. Religious specialists, such as shamans, are often considered capable of sending out this soul on errands such as finding back someone else's lost soul. It is essential for a person that their ‘free-soul’ does not stay away for too long from their body; if it does the persons concerned are likely to lose their senses or even their life.

Hans Fischer (1965) designates the most wide-spread form of ‘soul’ in Oceania *dream-ego* (‘Traumego’) (p. 243 f.). The dream-ego leaves the body during sleep and thus explains dream experiences. It does however more than this. States of unconsciousness and fainting are connected with its departure from the body. This soul is only observed when the person concerned is not able to do anything (p. 247). It is clear that this ‘dream-ego’ is what we just called, following Hultkrantz, ‘free-soul’. Fischer is of the opinion that the ‘dream-ego’ is the principle of life and of consciousness, and as such *precondition* for thought, feeling and will. It does not by itself think, feel or will (p. 321, 324). In much of Melanesia and Micronesia the word for ‘dream-ego’ also denotes the shadow or reflection. In Polynesia, on the other hand, different words are generally used. Fischer arrives on this basis at the conclusion that in the whole of Oceania the concept of a ‘spiritual double’ exists beside that of the ‘dream-ego’ (p. 255 f., 262 f.). They are respectively the ‘outer’ and the

'inner' aspects of the same being, for which Fischer deems the designation 'free soul' appropriate (p. 273).

This same type of 'free-soul' is found among the Batak, where it is called *tondi* or *tendi*. Beside this an 'external double' is known, which, among the Karo Batak, is closely related to the *tendi*, yet not identical with it. The same concept, but not the 'external double', is found on Nias, the Batu Islands and the Mentawei Islands.[62]

Many of the peoples of northern Eurasia know a 'free-soul', the aspect of man which manifests itself outside the body. It can leave the body during sleep and thus explain dreams, or during trance in order to communicate with other souls or supernatural beings. This soul represents the personal individuality of its owner, and as such can be called his or her 'self'. Yet the question what role this soul plays while its owner is awake is as a rule not even asked. It is however assigned different seats in the body by different peoples: the (whole) body by the Cheremis and the Votyak; the skull by the Zyryan; the body or the head by the Ostyak and the Vogul; etc. The 'free-soul' in this area manifests itself outside the body in the shape of its owner in reduced size; this is especially the case in eastern Siberia. It is small with the Yeniseian, the Goldi, the Buryat, the Yakut, the Yukagir, and others. Other manifestations include whirlwinds (Finns of the Baltic, Cheremis), light or fire (Zyryan, Koryak), big animals such as bear and reindeer (Eastern Lapps, Yurak Samoyed), small winged animals (Mordvin, Cheremis, Votyak, Zyryan, etc.). Most important in the present context is that the 'free-soul' in northern Eurasia does not take part in the activities of the body. This is visibly the case where the activities of the soul take place only when the body is motionless, i.e., asleep, unconscious, or in trance, which is most common. The close connection of the 'free-soul' with the person as a whole is never in doubt, and is emphasised by the use of the reflexive pronoun ('self') for its designation among the western Ostyak. It also happens that a soul acts to some extent independently of the body even while the body is engaged otherwise. In this case it is appropriate to speak of a 'double'. In Finnish popular belief the 'free-soul' can become a double when its owner is struck by a particular illness characterised by giddiness, despondency, weakness and the like. The illness is cured when the double is returned to its owner by the appropriate method. Another double acts as messenger of death, among the Finns as well as among the northern Ostyak, the Tremyugan, eastern Ostyak and Vogul. Among the Mordvin it may happen that the 'free-soul' of an absent husband (or wife) undertakes activities of its own by returning to the wife (husband) and troubling her. These independent activities of the 'free-

[62] Leertouwer, 1977: 205 ff.

soul' may become clearer in the light of the belief of the Teleut that the 'free-soul' can leave the body, after which the owner can still live up to seven or ten years, all the time being ill and weak. Absence of 'free-soul' is here, as often, associated with illness and eventual death. Indeed, shamans are not infrequently called in in order to return a lost soul.[63]

In North America, too, the 'free-soul' is commonly inactive while in the body, although it is sometimes said to keep watch. A Kwakiutl woman declared that "the soul never goes to sleep at night, nor in the day. In the day it stays together with us, and keeps watch over us. But when night comes, and we go to sleep, then our soul immediately leaves us ...". This soul is usually conceived as having the appearance of its owner; so among the Eyak, the Kwakiutl, the Koskimo, the Nootka and the Huron. It is often, but not always, represented as a shadow (Coyukon, Carrier, Tlingit, Algonquin, etc.). It may appear as light or fire (Eskimo, Quinault, Chinook, Naskapi, etc.). The 'free-soul' may be very small in size, which may be due to shamanic healing procedures. It is small enough to fit in the moccasin of the Athapascan Indian, or in a gourd or a tube at the Northwest Coast and among the Central Algonquin. The diminutive 'free-soul' occasionally takes many shapes. Among the Kwakiutl it sometimes is a bird, or 'a small bloody ball', or the exact image of a person but only as big as a fly. The Gosiute think the soul has the size of a pea. It is not very common in North America for the 'free-soul' to show itself as a winged being such as a bird or a flying insect, yet some, such as the Southern Paiute, conceive of it as a butterfly. It reminds the White Knife Shoshoni of a bird. The Huichol identify it as a little white bird, the Luiseño as a dove; etc.[64]

The Netsilik and Iglulik Eskimos of North America knew a 'free-soul' which was thought to be a miniature image of its owner. It could leave the body in trance, dreams and sickness; in the case of sickness it had to be restored to the body. Under specific circumstances it could permanently reside outside the body; its owner was then considered invulnerable. Similar ideas prevailed in other Inuit groups. The 'free-soul' was usually thought to reside in an internal organ, such as a kidney or the liver, when not outside the body during dreams etc.[65]

The Mundas in India recognise a soul called *roa*, which is the true self; it leaves the body to experience dreams. People are no longer directly conscious of their *roa* as they were

[63] All the cases mentioned in this paragraph are discussed in Paulson, 1958.
[64] The cases in this paragraph have been taken from Hultkrantz, 1953.
[65] Oosten, 1976.

in primordial time. The *roa* is not inactive, but the immediate effects of its activity belong to the invisible world. It plays no role in the explanation of trance.[66]

Finally, the Germanic peoples knew a soul — called *hugr* or *hamr* — which could leave the body and be active during inactive periods of the body.[67]

All these numerous examples from different continents share one important feature. They all talk about some kind of entity, a "soul" in the terminology of the scholars who have written about it, which is not involved in the activity of body and conscious mind even though inseparable from the person.

Situations in which people accept to undergo, or even bring about in themselves, painful experiences while trying to remain unaffected, are numerous. I will once again present some examples from tribal societies; it will be clear that we enter here a realm of phenomena not dissimilar in certain respects to asceticism. As in the case of early Christian asceticism, and for the reasons specified above, no attempt will be made to interpret these phenomena in their cultural contexts. They are, on the contrary, purposefully extracted from them.

The following examples are taken from what are commonly known as initiations. This is not the place to define this term.[68] It is rather my aim to single out some features which frequently occur and which are relevant in the present discussion. We shall first concentrate on puberty initiations.

Proofs of endurance often characterise these initiations. Prohibitions against sleeping, drinking and eating are common, as are silence, darkness, and suppression of sight. These are obvious attempts to ignore, or overcome, the needs of the body. Not infrequently endurance of physical pain is part of the initiation, as when wounds are inflicted upon the candidate: circumcision is particularly wide-spread, but cutting off of a finger, removing incisors, and other bodily afflictions also occur. Often, even if not invariably, these sufferings have to be undergone — and are undergone — with great equanimity. Some few examples must suffice to illustrate these well-known facts.

A particularly useful source of information about initiations in Australia is A.W. Howitt's *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia* (1904: 509-677). Some parts of the descriptions it provides are especially relevant for the theme we are investigating. We read, for example, how at one stage of an initiation ceremony of the Yuin tribe, the boys to be

[66] van Exem, 1982.
[67] Hasenfratz, 1986: 20 f., 23 f.
[68] For an attempt, see J.A.M. Snoek (1987).

initiated are exposed to a fire "fit to roast the boys". They are not, however, allowed to move on any account. "The fire is built up only twelve or fourteen paces from the boys, and they are kept before it for ten or twelve minutes, or even longer, if they can bear the heat. Even if the wind blows it towards them, they must not move of themselves ..." (p. 526). It is the duty of certain others present to move the boys away in case and before any harm can happen to them. Among the instructions imparted to the boys, "[o]ne of the earliest, if not the first, instruction is that the boy must not under any possible circumstances show any surprise or fear, and no matter what is said or done to him, he is not by word or deed to show that he is conscious of what is going on ..." (p. 531). This in spite of the fact that "[t]he ceremonies are intended to impress and terrify the boy in such a manner that the lesson may be indelible, and may govern the whole of his future life" (p. 532). The violent removal of the left upper incisor constitutes a particularly painful episode, yet Howitt is surprised by the stoical indifference shown by one of the boys: "he could not have shown less feeling had he been a block of wood" (p. 542). After these and other ordeals, the novices had "to go and live by themselves in the bush, on such food as they could catch, and which it might be lawful for them to eat" (p. 559). The restrictions imposed are such that "the young man during his probation is placed in an artificial state of scarcity of food, although perhaps surrounded by plenty" (p. 560).

At another initiation ceremony witnessed by Howitt, of the Kurnai, the boys were admonished to lye down next to a large fire that was being lit. "They were neither to move nor to speak. If one of them wanted anything, he was to signify this ... by chirping like an Emu-wren" (p. 623). In case a boy chirped in this manner, an attendant "had first to stoop down and ask the boys in the neighbourhood whence the chirp came, ‘Is it you? Is it you?’ until he questioned the right one, when an affirmative chirp replied. Then he had to find out what the boy wanted, which he could only do by a series of questions, the boys not being allowed to speak. Several times he was completely posed; and, after a number of ineffectual queries, such as ‘Are you too hot?’ ‘Is there a stick sticking into you?’ ‘Do you want to be moved?’ ‘Do you want to drink?’ he had to wait, and scratch his head, in the hope of thinking of the right question." (p. 624).

The question could be raised whether initiatory trials can really be considered to be related to asceticism. Asceticism, as commonly understood, cannot be dissociated from religion. Is this to the same extent true of tribal initiations?

It must here be recalled that we have abandoned the categories "religion" and "asceticism" earlier on in this article, so that we are not interested in the question whether something is "really" religious or otherwise. Cases are here presented which exhibit the

features we are looking for on the basis of the universal whose existence we have provisionally postulated. It is of no particular interest to know whether these features characterise phenomena that are commonly called religion or asceticism.

It is yet striking to note that these initiations are often the occasion at which the initiand acquires secret knowledge about gods and spirits. What is more, the novice becomes part of the spiritual realm himself. During the initiation ceremony of the Kurnai, just described, secrets are revealed that concern a great Being, called *Mungan-ngaua*, who, having lived initially on earth, left the earth, and ascended to the sky, where he still remains (p. 630). Howitt moreover points out, after describing the puberty rites of the Yuin tribe (see above), that during these initiatory ceremonies the boys are told about the divine being called *Daramulun*, being warned at the same time never to mention these things to women and children. Clay figures of this god are shown during these ceremonies, only to be destroyed subsequently. After loosing their incisor, the boys "were led ... to the tree on which the figure of *Daramulun* was cut, and were told of him and his powers, and that he lived beyond the sky and watched what the Murring did. When a man died he met him and took care of him".

Both in India and in Gnostic Christianity we came across the notion that the inner essence of the human being is identical with the highest godhead. This notion, too, is not confined to these two cultures. It is true that the ethnographic evidence is not always clear enough to come to very definite pronouncements. Often the, or a, soul is said to return to God after death, but this does not necessarily imply that the two are identical. It is possible that statements concerning the identity of God and soul require a level of sophistication which is not normally present in the societies under consideration. Some of the following examples may therefore be less clear than others.

The soul called *yiegh* of the Nuer leaves the body at death and returns to God, from where it came originally.[69] Among the Fuegians of South America, the Supreme Being of the Alacaluf is called Xolas. He is the one who makes a soul enter the body of each new-born child. At the moment of death the soul rejoins Xolas in heaven. Xolas is therefore the source and creator of the human souls.[70]

The examples from North America collected by Hultkrantz concern most commonly the ‘breath-soul’.[71] An Abnaki Indian from Canada made this statement: "In our old religion

[69] Evans-Pritchard, 1956: 154.
[70] Eliade, 1969: 341.
[71] Hultkrantz, 1953: 189 f.; 1994.

we believed that the Great Spirit who made all things is in everything, and that with every breath of air we drew in the life of the Great Spirit." This statement identifies man's breath with the 'Great Spirit', and it does more: it tells us that the Great Spirit is 'in everything' and therefore omnipresent. A different position finds expression in the belief recorded among the Lenape, that some of them believe their souls to be in the sun, and only their bodies here. The soul is in this case in the creating deity, the sun, and not therefore in the body. Yet also beliefs of a highest divinity which contained the whole world within itself have been recorded regarding this people. According to the Creek and the Chikasaw, the souls of good Indians went after death to a supreme divinity called 'Master of Breath' (or 'Breath maker'). An ancient myth of the Winnebago concerning the origin of death proclaims: "Into your bodies Earth-Maker has placed part of himself. That will return to him if you do the proper things." In Oglala shamanistic speculation Wakan Tanka, i.e. 'the Great Mystery', 'the Great God', reveals himself in gods, spirits and demons; he is manifoldness and yet unity. All man's souls are *wakan*; they are included in the Great Mystery. "The word *Wakan Tanka* means all of the *wakan* beings because they are all as if one."

The Ashanti peoples of West Africa know several souls, one of them, the *kra*, being "'the small bit of the Creator that lives in every person's body.' It returns to the Creator when the person dies. It is the Supreme Being that directly gives to a man this spirit or life when he is about to be born, and with it the man's destiny."[72] The return of the *kra* to God after death is confirmed by other investigators.[73] One of the souls of the Yoruba is called *emi* 'spirit'. "This is regarded as the seat of life. It is the part of man which is closely related to the gods. Olorun the Supreme Deity is known as Elemi 'Owner of spirits'. A man's spirit is thus traced to Olorun, and is therefore regarded as the divine element in him."[74] Maupoil speaks of one of the souls accepted by the peoples of Dahomey, called *se*. The individual *se*, he observes, is nothing but a small part of the great *Se* (Mawu), into which it is reabsorbed at death.[75] The *tondi* of the Toba-Batak is identical with the High God according to P.L. Tobing. A.B. Sinaga (1981: 105) disagrees with this thesis, but admits that "tondi 'represents' God in man who shares it according to the extent of his possibility and finitude".

[72] Busia, 1954: 197; cited in Hochegger, 1965: 288.
[73] Danquah, 1944: 113; Meyerowitz, 1951: 24; Ringwald, 1952: 60.
[74] Lucas, 1948: 248.
[75] Maupoil, 1943: 388; cf. Hochegger, 1965: 293.

These and similar examples make it plausible that notions of god(s) and notions of soul(s) are often related to each other. Since a number of cultures tend to depict the soul, or a soul, as not being involved in the activities of the body, we may ask whether such a notion of gods, and in particular of the supreme being, as inactive is equally common.

It is. The remote and inactive nature of the supreme being in a large number of societies has been noticed by scholars of religion, and documented in a number of publications.[76] The only activity that is often assigned to him is the creation of the world, or of the living beings. The following examples will, once again, be presented without any attempt to understand them in context, precisely because we are looking for manifestations of a universal which, in and by itself, is prior to its manifestations in context.

The highest being of the Kamba in East Africa, for example, formed the living beings the way one cuts something out of wood with an axe. He lives in heaven infinitely far away. He is friendly but has no, or virtually no cult.[77] This absence of cult is common, and finds also expression in the fact that the highest being is but rarely depicted. The Lunda of Central Africa even fear death in case they try to depict him.[78] The Mayas of Middle America had a god called Hunabku, which literally means 'the only god'. He has created the universe, but lives far away, invisible, with no interest in daily matters.[79] "The Supreme Being [of the Ona (Tierra del Fuego)] is seldom mentioned by his name, Temaukel. ... Temaukel existed forever and is omnipotent. He is bodiless and possesses neither a wife nor children. Living above the stars, he is rather indifferent to worldly affairs and men's doings."[80] The supreme deity of the Munda, called Haṛam or Singbonga, is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. He created the world and humankind. In primordial times he was visible to man, but now he has become invisible to human eyes, though not indifferent to the world and to man.[81] The Yansi of Zaire had a supreme being called Ngwil, who created whatever there is. He did not as a rule interfere in the life of man.[82] Among the peoples of northern Asia the god of heaven is so high and far away that he takes no interest in the actions of individual men. The *buga* ('heaven', 'world') of the Tungus, for example, knows everything, but does not mix in into the affairs of man, nor

[76] For a survey of the attributes of supreme beings, and for a short description of the history of their study, see the entry 'Supreme beings' by Lawrence E. Sullivan in ER 14, 166-181.
[77] Dammann, 1963: 27.
[78] Dammann, 1963: 31.
[79] Anders, 1963: 97.
[80] Eliade, 1969: 345-46.
[81] van Exem, 1982: 22 f.
[82] Thiel, 1984: 199 f.

does he punish. No images are made of this god.[83] The god Puluga of the Andaman islanders withdrew himself when man didn't obey his commandments, and is now without cult.[84] The god Temaukel of the Selknam (Tierra del Fuego) has similarly withdrawn behind the stars, and takes no interest in worldly affairs.[85]

Occasionally the non-active highest god is not even considered creator of the world and its inhabitants. This is true of the god called Altjira of the Aranda in Central-Australia. He is therefore neither loved nor feared by the Aranda. Their only fear is that one day heaven, in which this god lives, might collapse and thus kill them.[86] Similar views exist among the Loritja, also of Central-Australia. The highest god is here called Tukura. Tukura lives in heaven, which has existed from all eternity, and was not therefore created. The High God Watauinewa of the Yahgan (Tierra del Fuego) is not the Creator of the Universe, but only its master. He lives above the heavens, has no body, nor indeed wife or children. He is distinctly and eminently set off against and above all other spirits, and does not enter into tribal folklore and mythology. He does, however, punish by controlling the weather and by causing the deaths of transgressors and of their children.[87] Interestingly, the earliest mention of the name Watauinaiwa / Watauinaiwön, in Thomas Bridges' dictionary of the Yahgan language, explains this term as "the Ancient one, he who does not change."[88] It seems that the Tehuelches of Patagonia had a High God who was a *deus otiosus*, who had no cult and was not regarded as the creator of the universe. He was rather associated with the dead. Regarding the High God in West African religion, O'Connell observes:[89] "Most West African religions have a high-god who is also a sky-god. But he is often a withdrawn high-god, a *deus otiosus*. There is an apparent contradiction between the supremacy of the high-god and his withdrawal from concern with the world. The attributes assigned to him heighten this effect of contradiction. He is said to be at the origin of things, often as a creator; he is all-knowing and all-powerful, he introduces order into the chaos of the universe, he is the final arbiter of right and wrong ... But in spite of these attributes the high-god is not usually directly worshipped, he has no priests and no shrines are dedicated to him; people may make a token offering to him in every sacrifice but hardly ever do they offer a sacrifice exclusively to him."

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[83] Harva, 1938: 151.
[84] Eliade, 1949: 51-52.
[85] Eliade, 1949: 52.
[86] Söderblom, 1926: 99-100.
[87] Eliade, 1969: 341-42. See also Hultkrantz, 1963: 22 f.
[88] "l'Ancien, celui que ne se modifie pas"; Hultkrantz, 1963: 22 n. 2; my italics.
[89] Cited in Long, 1964: 328.

Omniscience is an almost universally attested feature of the highest being.[90] It is not usually understood to mean that the highest being knows literally everything. He knows what man does, even in secret. This kind of 'all-knowing' is of course primarily a characteristic of man's 'soul', also of an 'inactive soul', and it can cause no surprise that it was transferred to the highest being. An obvious extension of the idea of an all-knowing highest being is that of the highest being as a moral agent who may even punish where necessary.

§ 5: On the use of a counterproductive universal

The examples given in the preceding section confirm that there is indeed a shared theme in a large variety of religious practices and beliefs that do not otherwise have much in common. The present section will therefore start from the assumption that there is a universal, a shared predisposition, that makes itself noticeable through these cases and, it may be added, has an important role to play in accounting for at least an important part of ascetic and religious behaviour. For the sake of brevity, and in imitation of the expression "language instinct", which has become current today, I will use the equally unsatisfactory expression "ascetic instinct" (always to be used in inverted commas). The question as to how to account for the presence of such a shared predisposition is inevitable and will be addressed in this section.

The parallelism between the "language instinct" and the "ascetic instinct" goes beyond both having a somewhat inappropriate name. Both are confined to human beings, and both regulate (if that is the word to use) the interaction between individual humans and pre-existing cultural complexes, viz. language and religion respectively. Both individual languages and individual religions evolve, and in doing so will adapt to the predispositions of their users. Both are therefore likely to evolve common features, something like Universal Grammar in the case of language, something like the features described in the preceding sections in the case of religion. In both cases it is to be kept in mind that neither individual languages nor individual religions *have to* conform to the "universal" features identified in a number of them. Both times there is statistical probability that these features make their appearance as a result of a long process of (cultural) evolution in which other factors play a role, too.

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[90] Attestations of this characteristic have been collected by Raffaele Pettazzoni in a number of publications (e.g., 1931, 1956).

There is another factor that puts our "ascetic instinct" on a par with the "language instinct" and in a different category from an instinct like sexuality. The features which we have united under the designation "ascetic instinct" — primarily asceticism and the inclination to see the self as not involved in activity by nature — are not accompanied by strong emotions, like language and unlike sexuality. This is not to say that religion cannot be accompanied by strong emotions. Indeed, the central role of fear in the transmission of many if not most forms of religions is well known,[91] as is the role of love and devotion in many of them. However, the features that constitute our "ascetic instinct" are different. The ascetic and the martyr are not driven by fear, they defy and overcome it. "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?," St Paul exclaimed (1 Cor 15: 55), and there can be no doubt that his words have inspired countless martyrs and ascetics. Knowledge about the true (inactive) nature of the self is not accompanied by fear either. It is, on the contrary, the definitive way to separate oneself from fear and other emotions.

Language and religion are not in all respects parallel to each other and there are important differences between them. New religions may suddenly arise, where no such thing normally happens in the case of languages. People may be forced to abandon their religion in favour of another one; comparable replacements of one language by another, imposed by economic or political necessity, may as a rule be less abrupt. It is possible, even likely, that religions interact more strongly than languages with other ambient social and cultural developments. All this does not change the fact that by and large language and religion, being cultural complexes that individuals normally inherit from their elders and that, in doing so, adapt over the generations to the predispositions of their users, behave in roughly parallel fashion.

Since cultural complexes, such as language and religion, are subject to evolution in a way that is not dissimilar to genetic evolution, sometimes the notion of "memes" (corresponding to genes in biological evolution) is used to designate the cultural units that pass on from one generation to the next and may be modified in the process. A religion, being a complex that unites a number of memes, is then a "memeplex". In spite of the enormous differences — a gene can be chemically identified, the very nature of a meme is difficult to determine; memes essentially depend on the presence of human minds, genes don't; etc. — the evolution of memeplexes can be studied in more or less the same way as that of organisms. Religions being memeplexes, they evolve in such a manner that religions containing successful memes have better chances to survive. The most enthusiastic users of

[91] Burkert, 1996: 29 f.; Michaels, 1997; Durking-Meisterernst, 2000.

the notion of memes (e.g. Susan Blackmore, 1999: chapter 15) think that memetic evolution may account for behaviours that are genetically disadvantageous, or even that memes can influence genetic evolution.

Theoretically it may be possible that the presence of certain cultural complexes influences genetic evolution. Indeed, we have seen that Deacon explains the enormous development of the human brain as a consequence of the crossing of the "symbolic threshold" and the resulting use of language. Genetic evolution could in this case be influenced, even determined, by a cultural change, since the new cultural situation (the use of language) came to accompany our ancestors for such a long time that genetic modifications influenced by it became possible. Language could become a permanent feature of early humans because it greatly augments the chances of survival of those who use it. Cultural features that do not have that effect, on the other hand, will not normally stay around for long enough to become hard-wired in the neural system. This is the reason why Deacon argues against the innate nature of Universal Grammar.

Those who look upon religion as a "memeplex" that may have had an effect on genetic evolution will have to make clear in what way and to what extent religion increases the survival chances of those who are religious. They will next have to specify what particular invariant aspect of religion has stayed around long enough to make a transfer into the genetic constitution of human beings not only possible but advantageous. Claims of this nature are for the time being highly implausible or at best totally speculative, so that we will not pursue this path here.

It is more promising to recall that the "memetic" evolution of religion will tend to adapt religion to the inborn predispositions of the humans who inherit the religion concerned, that memes will be "parasitically exploiting proclivities they have ‘discovered’ in the human cognitive-immune system" (Dennett, 1998: 120). That is to say, it is the religion that adjusts itself to the human being, and there is little or no question of human beings genetically adjusting to their religion. If, as is being argued in this article, a significant number of religions share the feature studied and specified in the preceding pages, this is because human beings have a predisposition that corresponds to this feature, and this independently of their particular religions. The "ascetic instinct" has not been created by religion but, on the contrary, has played and still plays a role in the formation and replication of existing religions.

So far the situation is not very different from the one prevailing in language formation. Universal Grammar, Deacon argues, is statistically often present in languages because of the presence of certain predispositions in human beings (the "language instinct")

that favour its appearance. Similarly, asceticism and the other features dealt with in this article often occur in religions on account of the presence in human beings of the "ascetic instinct". There is however one important difference. The predispositions that give rise to Universal Grammar have no discernible effect on the evolutionary fitness of their bearers. The "ascetic instinct", on the other hand, has a clear effect on the evolutionary fitness of its bearers, namely a negative one. The "ascetic instinct", as here understood, predisposes to asceticism and sexual abstinence, among other things. Such an "instinct" should have been weeded out long ago by natural selection. How has it been able to stay with us?

We have spoken at some length of the momentous effect that symbolic thinking and language use have had on the evolution of modern man. Indeed, symbolic thinking and language use are the two features that account for "humanness" more than any other genetic or cultural features. It is with their help that human beings can construct ideas of reality that are beyond immediate evidence which can then be shared with other language users. Shared, but unverifiable, ideas about reality characterise many if not all religions. Supernatural entities could hardly have come to occupy a central position in religious thought without the use of language or at least symbolic reference. Shared ideas about the nature of the self which, as we have seen, recur in a great number of religions, are equally dependent upon these two. It seems evident that the appearance of religion has some connection with the appearance of symbolic thinking. But what kind of connection?

Symbolic reference (as explained in § 3) goes beyond iconic and indexical reference by creating a network of connections between the symbols. To quote Deacon: "My imagistic and emotional experience in response to the episodes described in a novel is distinct from that of anyone else, though all readers will share a common symbolic understanding of them. The ‘subjective distance’ from what is represented confers a representational freedom to thought processes that is not afforded by the direct recall or imagining of experiences." (p. 451) Deacon then continues (pp. 451-452):

> "This is crucial for the development of self-consciousness, and for the sort of detachment from immediate arousal and compulsion that allows for self-control. Self-representation, in the context of representations of alternative pasts and futures, could not be attained without a means for symbolic representation. ...
>
> Consciousness of self in this way implicitly includes consciousness of other selves, and other consciousnesses can only be represented through the virtual reference created by symbols. The self that is the source of one's experience of

> intentionality, that self that is judged by itself as well as by others for its moral choices, the self that worries about its impending departure from the world, this self is a symbolic self. It is the final irony that it is the virtual, not actual, reference that symbols provide, which gives rise to this experience of self. This most undeniably real experience is a *virtual* reality.
>
> In a curious way, this recapitulates an unshakeable intuition that has been ubiquitously expressed throughout the ages. This is the belief in a disembodied spirit or immortal 'pilgrim soul' that defines that part of a person that is not 'of the body' and is not reducible to the stuff of the material world."

In other words, the very process — the development of symbolic representation — that gave rise to language (and the accompanying growth of the prefrontal part of the brain), also gave rise to certain "notions", a certain kind of "knowledge" about the world, and in its train (or in its place) to a certain "attitude", which express themselves in the phenomena studied in this paper. A number of these phenomena, especially the tendency to abstain from sexuality, are counterproductive from an evolutionary point of view. At first blush one might therefore expect that the universal behind it should have been selected against in the course of time. But this universal, we now know, does not stand alone. In fact, there is no gene (or collection of genes) that is exclusively responsible for this universal. Rather, this universal is an accompaniment of symbolic representation. There may be no gene for symbolic representation either, but here the situation is somewhat more complicated. Symbolic representation and language, both cultural features, have co-evolved with the human brain, the evolution of the human brain being a genetic development. The "ascetic instinct" is therefore dependent upon symbolic representation, perhaps inseparable from it. From an evolutionary point of view, symbolic representation has increased the chances of survival (and of procreation) of those capable of it through language; language gave its users a decided edge. At the same time, symbolic representation was a handicap, if perhaps a relatively small one, because it saddled those capable of it with certain attitudes, perhaps ideas, which would lead a small minority from among them to renounce sexuality, or to inflict damage to their own bodies.

Since we are talking about natural selection, which is a process that may need numerous generations to become effective, it is appropriate to point out that the number of individual sexual renouncers in pre-historic times may have been very small indeed, if there were any at all. The "ascetic instinct" may not, therefore, have exposed itself to selection pressure on this level until historic times, which is very recent from an evolutionary

perspective. However, in § 4 we have been able to link certain initiatory practices to the "ascetic instinct", some of which involve submitting to, or inflicting, damage to one's body (cutting of a finger, extracting a tooth, circumcision, etc.). There is no reason to doubt that such practices were current already in pre-historic times, and indeed, they may conceivably have been around long enough to become susceptible to selection pressure. However, if the argument presented in this paper is correct, the "ascetic instinct" could not be selected away separately, there being no genetic package involving it and nothing else. The "ascetic instinct" may indeed have slightly reduced the survival chances of its bearers, but this slight reduction was more than offset by the increased survival chances connected to the use of language. As we have seen, there are good reasons to think that "ascetic instinct" and language are inseparably connected, that they may even be two sides of the same coin.

Concluding remarks

It would be wildly optimistic to think that the preceding pages have finally solved "the problem of asceticism". They have, to be sure, brought to light a common theme that manifests itself in many forms of asceticism as well as in other practices, such as initiations, and in certain wide-spread popular as well as philosophical notions about the nature of the soul and of spiritual beings. But many steps separate the predisposition shared by all to consider oneself different from body and mind, from the decision taken by some few determined individuals to actually stop taking care of their body, or to face the most extreme of circumstances (including torture) in indifference. Those steps need to be explored, but that task cannot be undertaken in the present study.

What has been gained, I believe, is the basis for "a comprehensive theoretical framework for the comparative study of asceticism", mentioned as a desideratum at the beginning of this study. It is henceforth possible to determine the extent to which different forms of asceticism belonging to different cultures are expressive of the shared human predisposition here identified. Cultural differences can then be studied against the background of this common predisposition.

Perhaps some insight has also been gained into other aspects of what is commonly called religion. Frequently attested ideas about the nature of the (or a) soul have now lost their status as curiosities and can take their place within a broader understanding of "human nature". We have also come one step nearer an explanation of the wide-spread occurrence of ideas about an inactive highest god. Here, however, tantalising problems remain: For

example, it remains unclear why symbolic representation should give rise to the idea of an inactive highest being. More precisely, it is not clear why the idea of an inactive self should be transferred so as to give rise to that of an inactive highest being. There are, as is well known, numerous examples of religious beliefs that conceive analogously, or even identify, the "essence" of the individual, i.e. the soul, and the "essence" of the universe, i.e. the creator or universal spirit. The transfer of properties from one to the other is not, therefore, surprising. The difficulty is to understand how and why symbolic representation should encourage or even facilitate such a transfer.

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Abbreviations:

ER	The Encyclopedia of Religion, ed. Mircea Eliade, New York: Macmillan; London: Collier Macmillan, 16 vols.
NHL	The Nag Hammadi Library in English, translated by members of the Coptic Gnostic Library Project of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, James M. Robinson, director, second edition, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1984.