

# SELF-MAINTENANCE AS A RELIGIOUS CONCERN

by Ward H. Goodenough

*Abstract.* Human concern with problems of being and becoming promotes conceptions of ideal states of being, exemplified by paragons and heroes and projected as utopias or visions of salvation; it leads to regimens for cultivating and maintaining individual ability to meet social expectations; and it produces fantasies, as in myth and popular literature, that rehearse the problems and that offer escape from them and roles to emulate in dealing with them. Many of these regimens and fantasies appear in the rituals and teachings of organized religion. Many also figure in private devotions apart from established religions. The many forms they take constitute much of the religious life of ordinary people. From this viewpoint, there is much to examine in American life.

*Keywords:* American life; religion; ritual; self-maintenance.

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## RELIGION IN SCIENTIFIC PERSPECTIVE

Almost forty years ago the historian of religion Erwin R. Goodenough wrote a paper entitled "Needed, Scientific Study of Religion" (1948). In this and later writings (Goodenough 1959; 1967) he maintained that it was not useful for scientific purposes to look at the subject matter of religion as necessarily involving a belief in God, or gods, or supernatural beings. It was more useful, he said, to see it as pertaining to certain universal human concerns. These concerns are, to be sure, manifested in what in the Western cultural tradition we have perceived as organized religions, but they are evident in many other human activities as well. Not the content of a body of beliefs and practices but the kind of use to which people put the beliefs and practices, he said, must serve for science as the defining focus of religion as a human phenomenon. Science itself, he argued, served as an arena of religious

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life for at least some scientists. For him, as summarized by Robert Eccles:

Religion arises from the universal human experience that human beings live in the midst of a vast external universe in the face of which they find themselves essentially helpless. At the same time, they are involved in social forces over which they have little control. Finally, they know little about themselves as individuals or about the meaning and purpose of life. This concatenation of overwhelming mysteries and forces Goodenough calls the "tremendum" . . . . He finds the essence of religion in the ways that human beings have sought to help themselves live over against this great unknown (Eccles 1985, 111).

In this he was giving attention both to intellectual or cognitive concerns and to emotional ones. Cognitively, there is the human need to understand and to have explanations for what existence is all about; emotionally, there is the need people have to feel comfortable or even good about themselves, to be free of feelings of fear, guilt, shame, failure, and loneliness. People need to know what life is about, where they stand and where they are supposed to be going in relation to it, and what they can do to protect or correct their standing and further their desired progress. Much human happiness and unhappiness derives from these concerns with the problems of being and becoming that comprise the subject matter of religion; and these concerns, after those relating to physical well-being, preoccupy humans perhaps more than any other.

People give expression to these concerns in myth and story, personifying virtues to be sought and evils to be shunned. They project them onto their parents, political leaders, teachers, heroes, and imaginary beings, whom they hope to see as saviors or guiding paragons. They rehearse the management of being and becoming in games, pastimes, and sports (Robert & Sutton-Smith 1962; Sutton-Smith, Roberts & Kozelka 1963) and play out their problems in fantasy—in imaginary love affairs, imaginary exploits, and vicarious experiences derived from theater, movies, television, novels, and histories (Caughey 1984). As we well know, people express these same concerns of being and becoming in the kinds of ritual acts to which students of religion have given their attention. From this point of view, as Goodenough (1967) observed, religion may be manifested in a wide variety of ways in any or all of the activities in which humans engage. Its scientific study cannot confine itself to organized bodies of belief and ritual involving the supernatural (in itself a peculiarly Western cultural concept) but must look at all human activity to see how it relates to the concerns that delimit religion as a panhuman phenomenon.

Problems of being and becoming, while universally part of human existence, do not take identical form from individual to individual even in the same society. The problems of an adolescent are not the same as

those of an adult. Those of a woman differ from those of a man, and those of a parent from those of a childless person. In complex societies, being and becoming are clearly not the same thing for a hereditary noble, a commoner, and a slave, or for a bank president, a truck driver, and a chronically unemployed denizen of an urban ghetto. Cutting across these differences are the variety of experiences that comprise the formation of human personality; such things, for example, as the nature and severity of early life traumas and the ways children are groomed to remain dependent on or become independent of their parents. Clearly no particular set of beliefs and ritual practices can have the same appeal for everyone.

Within a given human group, however, problems of being and becoming tend to cluster around certain focal concerns. Some focal concerns are shared by humans everywhere such as those posed by death. From society to society and from group to group within complex societies, differences in pattern of life, form of family and social organization, and ideology affect the ways people experience themselves and interpret those experiences. Focal concerns around which the problems of being and becoming cluster differ accordingly as do the institutional forms that people develop to help them express and manage these problems.

The scientific study of religion must take account of all these differences at individual and societal levels. Problems of being and becoming are rooted in all the ways humans may experience themselves, individually and collectively, for it is through those experiences that they acquire the content of their being.

Insofar as people are happy with that content, with who and what they are, their aim is to maintain it. They avoid experiences that will impair it and cultivate experiences that will reinforce or enhance it. Such is the work of self-maintenance. If people are unhappy with what they perceive and feel themselves to be, they will work to change their identity in order to experience themselves in more gratifying ways. In this their concern is with self-transformation.

Strict adherence to the Law by an orthodox Jew is an example of religious behavior aimed at self-maintenance. So, too, is a Hindu Brahman's careful avoidance of foods, acts, and persons that he considers polluting. On a humbler scale are the wearing of amulets and charms or a St. Christopher's medallion, keeping an image of the Virgin Mary on the dashboard of one's car, or even, with the very young, going to bed with a security blanket. Confessing one's sins and receiving absolution on a regular basis is also, obviously, an act of self-maintenance.

On the other hand, the rites of confirmation and ordination are examples of acts aimed at self-transformation. So, obviously, is conver-

sion to a new doctrine of salvation preached by a prophet. Being "born again" has transparent reference to self-transformation. Yet we should note, that there are many people for whom a state lottery offers the possibility of such transformation as well. Each week the devotee buys his or her lottery tickets and is sustained anew by the hope that the next drawing will bring release from the treadmill of frustration and unfulfillment. As this example suggests, working to achieve a transformation of self can serve in the interim as a technique of self-maintenance. In any event, individual religious behavior and what is proffered in the religious market place are aimed at both kinds of concern.

As already mentioned, the many individual differences in how religious concerns are manifested make it impossible for any particular ritual act or message of salvation to have universal appeal. The more specifically focused it is as to problem and the more individually oriented it is as to the symbolism expressive of that problem, the narrower must be its appeal however more compelling it may be to some individuals. To be widely attractive, rites and messages must use material and verbal symbols that are capable of being understood in a variety of ways (Goodenough 1953-68, 2:159).<sup>1</sup> Cults tend to be relatively narrow in their appeal. Their doctrines and rites, so appealing to their adherents, are without interest or are even repellent to others. More catholic religions, by contrast, provide a broad spectrum of possibilities that can serve a wide variety of specific concerns; and to remain catholic in their appeal, they must avoid taking dogmatic positions on matters about which people are likely to be sharply divided.

For these reasons, no one organized religion has been able to appeal to everyone, and in most human societies religious concerns are met by a variety of activities. Many of these activities are independent of one another and independent of the established churches or their equivalent. It follows that we must look outside of the churches to find many of the ways that Americans handle self-maintenance and self-transformation—especially in regard to self-maintenance, the less dramatic kind of religious concern.

Since the various Christian religions have resulted from messages of salvation through which transformations of self might be achieved, Western cultural bias has tended to recognize human activities as "religious" if they seem to aim at such transformations. That same bias has tended to dismiss as "magic" activities that are aimed at self-maintenance, unless they occur in contexts associated with the rituals of what are accepted as "proper" religions. As Goodenough observed in his classic work on Hellenistic Judaism (Goodenough 1953-68, 2:155-161), such bias ill serves the needs of a science of religious behavior. The concerns that magic addresses are to a large degree the same as those

that prayers and offerings to gods also address. The American army general who goes to church on the evening before battle and who also makes sure to eat a particular food for breakfast, to wear a particular shirt, and to carry a special rabbit's foot does all these things for the same reason: worry about the impending engagement and the role to be played. These acts are all equally devotions of self-maintenance. The general might even consider the loss of the rabbit's foot a greater calamity than the inability to go to church.

As this example suggests, some devotions of self-maintenance are private little rites, such as wearing a particular shirt, while others are more public and may be participated in jointly with other people, such as saying grace at table. Some private rites, moreover, may be done furtively because they are publicly disapproved or inconsistent with the public image a person wishes to project. The fact of public disapproval, however, does not contravene the religious function a private rite has for its practitioner. The same consideration holds cross-culturally. The act of eating human flesh has been a religious act for some peoples regardless of what other peoples may have thought of it.<sup>2</sup>

Mention of furtive rites raises the question of how we are to distinguish rites from compulsive behavior. Clearly, what I have been talking about can be looked at as both, as Sigmund Freud long ago observed. Rites develop because people feel a pressing need, a compulsion, to do something.<sup>3</sup> As long as performing the rite brings emotional relief or helps people manage their concerns, it will be compulsively performed whenever the feeling of need reaches a crucial level. Once a publicly shared rite is established, the occasions for its performance are likely to become routinized. Routinization does not in itself reduce the feeling of need compelling a rite's performance, but it may mask the element of compulsion underlying it. Once established as customary, moreover, a rite may be performed for reasons other than a feeling of the need that led to its establishment in the first place. It may be done perfunctorily as a part of some larger sequence of things people do to celebrate an occasion, for example. Yet once a rite's performance becomes perfunctory, once it ceases to serve the needs of self-maintenance, it stops having a religious function, at least for those who perform it perfunctorily. They may continue to perform it for political or economic reasons, because its performance is religiously meaningful for a clientele. (Compare what a funeral means for a mortician and his staff with what it means for the family of the deceased.) Thus we are reminded, again, that what has religious meaning for one person may have economic or political utility for someone else. We are reminded, also, that by the terms *rite* and *ritual* we do not have reference to routinized behaviors that have lost meaning. Ritual in our usage here is not something that is, by definition, dead.

My point is that compulsive behavior is behavior we feel it necessary to perform, regardless of whether or not it is approved by others. If others do not share the same sense of need, they refer to it disparagingly as a compulsion. If, on the other hand, they share the feeling of need, they take part themselves and do not disparage it. If a compulsive act is to be defined as one whose nonperformance results in anxiety and unease, then rituals whose nonperformance has such results are compulsive acts. I assume that the nonperformance of acts aimed at self-maintenance inevitably results in anxiety and unease. Thus, there is inevitably an element of compulsion in what I am considering to be religious behavior. Indeed, I suspect that it is precisely this element of compulsion that leads us popularly to say that a person is "making a religion" out of his or her business or out of health foods, sports, or whatever. Horace Miner clearly recognized this element as underlying the huge investment Americans make in body care in his famous paper "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema" (Miner 1956).<sup>4</sup>

#### RITUALS OF SELF-MAINTENANCE IN NORTH AMERICAN LIFE

With these considerations in mind let us imagine ourselves to be visitors from outer space investigating the manners and customs of North Americans. We are ignorant of their history. Our task is to prepare a series of monographs on contemporary American institutions, how they work, and what they mean to Americans. We have certain broad functional categories with which we work. One has to do with how Americans maintain themselves physically and how they produce, distribute, and consume commodities they value. Another involves the ways Americans have organized themselves socially into groups and networks in order to carry out their various activities and make and enforce decisions relating to their conduct as members of groups. Finally, we have a functional category pertaining to how Americans maintain themselves as persons, psychologically and emotionally, within the contextual framework of their lives provided by the preceding two categories. This last is our particular assignment. What a rich array of materials and activities confronts us!

We begin with the many organized groups whose activities are aimed at sustaining and enhancing the selves of their members. In addition to the churches and synagogues there are the less formal groups of spiritualists and devotees of such things as extraterrestrial visitations and extrasensory perception.<sup>5</sup> Far more numerous in their participants are more secular organizations such as the various fraternal orders, the Free Masons, the veterans' organizations, the businessmen's clubs, and the professional associations. All have their rituals, and all aim, among other things, to help maintain significant aspects of their members'

identities.<sup>6</sup> Included in this group are the various fraternities and sororities in the colleges and universities. For some young people, to belong to a good fraternity or sorority is to validate things about the self to which they aspire and which they wish to maintain. Initiation rites require debasements of self by way of emphasizing the elevation of self that membership will now confer. For adults, membership in clubs accomplishes the same thing (Baltzell 1958, 335-65; Gregor 1982). Every time members enter the precincts of their club, they experience a reassuring feeling about who they are. They belong! It may have been a bad day in the office, but here they are reassured as to their worth, at least in the social league to which their club happens to belong. The member who goes to a club every day for lunch and sits either at a table that is especially reserved or with other members in accordance with the club's seating rules is performing a ritual, not a casual act.

Major changes in social identity in the course of one's life cycle are accompanied by transition rites (Van Gennep 1960). There are showers for women about to get married or have their first baby. Funerals and memorial services not only serve to convey the deceased into the afterlife; more importantly they serve publicly to define the new identities of the bereaved survivors. These rites also help the bereaved to deal with the trauma to themselves that the death has caused and to get started on their way to the reconstitution of self that their changed identity now requires. Also celebrated ritually are successful achievements of identity goals and progress toward achieving them. There are graduation and retirement ceremonies, for example, and there are birthday and wedding anniversary parties.

With these rituals we have only begun to scratch the surface of our subject matter. Americans give much attention to objects, activities, or displays that serve as significant symbols of social identity. The subject matter of commercial advertising highlights many of them. Mouthwashes, toothpastes, shampoos, cosmetics, clothing, hair styles are all touted as objects capable, if properly chosen, of ensuring a good impression to others. Suddenly remembering that one forgot to brush one's teeth in the morning can be distressing to many. The paper by Miner to which I have already referred elegantly details the "body rituals" of Americans.

In advertising also we find automobiles of certain types offered to men as guarantors of a desired self. For many Americans, to be sure, autos are simply conveniences serving transportation needs, but for others they are objects around which much ritual behavior manifests itself. One finds it in the weekly wash and polish, for example, and in the adding of special features such as wide wheels and raised or lowered frames. People proclaim things about themselves by the kind of

car they drive, whether it be a Porsche, an MG, a Volvo, a Mercedes, or a white Cadillac. In some corporations the make of car one drives is carefully geared to one's rank in the administrative hierarchy, forming a significant part of a person's corporate uniform.

For many people, devotions of self-maintenance are evident in the way they furnish their homes. The kinds of objects they collect, the things with which they choose to surround themselves, their choice of furniture and decor, all are aimed at providing a milieu within which they feel comfortable with themselves. For some, the home may be no more than the place they hang their hat; but for some others, it is a carefully cultivated stage for the display of self (Goffman 1959). For many, the home serves as a shrine where they can feel at one with themselves and where the psyche finds repair and sustenance. Those whose home has been broken into by burglars almost uniformly report a feeling of having been the victim of a sacrilege. Something sacred to the self has been violated.

In addition to body care, the home and personal possessions are the many different activities to which people find themselves drawn. In their study of games and pastimes, John Roberts and his associates have found that if people have an unresolved emotional problem relating to the social role a particular kind of game expresses, they will tend to be compulsive players of that kind of game (Sutton-Smith, Roberts & Kozelka 1963). Games of pure chance, for example, are linked to responsibility roles. They are particularly alluring to people who are conflicted about having to be responsible while relatively powerless. Thus, in Truk in Micronesia, where projective test materials have shown widespread concern about responsibility (Gladwin & Sarason 1953), divination using a system of random numbers was regularly resorted to before making any serious decision until very recent times. Under American administration after World War II, of the many things in American culture that became available to Truk's people the game of bingo became a runaway favorite. It appears to be no coincidence that bingo has become associated with the churches in the United States and is particularly popular among women, who are socialized for responsibility more heavily than men are, while being kept in relatively powerless dependency positions.

The association of games of physical skill with competition roles, games of strategy with obedience roles, and games of chance with responsibility roles (Roberts & Sutton-Smith 1962) leads us to expect that games of each type have their inveterate devotees. Their devotion may amount to true addiction for some and fall somewhat short of that for many others. In any case, insofar as people find that having to perform in one or another of these role areas is threatening to the



selves they seek to maintain, they are likely to be attracted to activities that symbolize these role areas and through which they can act out fantasies expressive of their concerns.

Cult activity relating to these matters is not hard to find. The casinos of Las Vegas and Atlantic City are temples where devotees of games of chance (roulette, slot machines, dice) and games that mix strategy with chance (black jack, poker) are drawn like bees to honey. The race tracks, too, have steady clienteles with similar concerns. The sports arenas and stadiums, likewise, are temples for those devoted to games of physical skill. They are particularly attractive to people who are emotionally conflicted about competitive roles, for which men are more heavily socialized in America. At tailgate drinking parties before football games, the devotees commune with one another, at the same time vying in the display of expertise about the fine points of the game and disputing the relative merits of their heroes and demerits of their goats.

When we move to entertainment and the media we encounter again a variety of things to which cultist behavior adheres. Soap operas and situation comedies on television, western stories and movies, detective stories, police chase movies, spy thrillers, science fiction, gothic romances, historical romances, horror films, pornographic novels and movies, each in its various subspecies has its devotees. Some of them have given rise to clubs where people regularly congregate and support one another in their devotions. Sherlock Holmes became a highbrow cult figure, for example, maintained as such by The Baker Street Irregulars.

These different genres such as soap operas and western stories provide standardized plots that give expression to the problems of being of many American men and women.<sup>7</sup> In like manner the popular stories traditionally told for entertainment in Micronesian Truk revolved around several themes expressive of problems of being that have been common there. The problem of authority and dependency in the relations of siblings of same sex was one such theme. Stories regularly portrayed how clever youngest brother manages successfully where older brothers have failed. This theme is not likely to grab the attention of many Americans except when they are children and not yet independent of domineering older siblings. By contrast, the theme of a world dominated by technology and powerful bureaucracy against which the lone hero manages to prevail touches on one of the problems of being for many Americans. Great literature treats these themes in exceptionally telling and elegant ways; but it cannot serve the daily needs of most people, for whom these themes have to be served up over and over again in more readily produced and hence standardized

form. The media do this for us. If we find ourselves deploring the taste of our fellow Americans in these matters or deploring the low state of the art, we must remember that among the many things offered by the media the popular ones are those that people find most answering to their needs.

We have not yet begun to exhaust the cults of self-maintenance among North Americans. The rituals of health and physical fitness, catered to by industry, fostered by magazines, and collectively practiced in health clubs have many devotees. Popular music in its various forms presents us with another arena of cult. The grave of Elvis Presley is a sacred shrine. Rock festivals resemble ecstatic religious camp meetings. Country and Western music glorifies a life-style and image of self actively cultivated by some Americans and for which many more yearn.

Rituals of rebellion have their devotees as well. Among college students they take several forms. One, expressing itself in hedonistic license, is represented by the annual spring pilgrimage to Fort Lauderdale. Another, intoning the liturgies of ideology, takes the form of campus sit-ins, picketing, burnings in effigy, erecting shanties in the quad, and other behavior calculated to strain the patience of what is supposed to be benign authority cast in the role of parental surrogate.

Since membership in groups is fundamental to identity, threat to a group is a threat to the selves of its members. Self-maintenance requires maintaining the group, and that requires periodic affirmations by its members of their commitment or loyalty to the group and to what it represents. Many organizations have particular songs that their members piously join in singing at meetings. When people's identity as Americans is to be affirmed, they salute and pledge allegiance to the flag and sing the National Anthem. The Jehovah's Witnesses perceive saluting the flag as a religious rite that honors the sanctity of something other than Jehovah. They refuse therefore to engage in it much as the early Christians refused to acknowledge the divinity of the Roman emperor. As observed by the sociologist Lloyd Warner (1953), Memorial Day has become a sacred national holiday as has the Fourth of July. Americans who have made a heavy investment of their lives in the defense of their nation are among those likely to find national ceremony especially meaningful and to accord more than usual sanctity to national symbols.

The family stands out in American society as a group with which people are likely to feel most strongly identified. The high degree of autonomy adults have in managing the tenor of life within the family, moreover, makes it a setting where people are relatively free to act out their self-maintenance needs. Fathers and mothers are inclined to put into practice theories they hold most sacred as to how children should

be raised, for example. The daily enforcement of regimens upon wife and children in some households makes them sacrifices to the self-maintenance of the husband and father.

This last example calls attention to the role of power in self-maintenance. Wherever there is power in relation to others, that power is liable to be exercised in ways that help to maintain the selves of those who wield it. It is commonly used to this end in large organizations whether private or public, religious or secular. The very routines by which an organization's business is conducted can function as rituals of self-maintenance for managers who treat them as sacred.

We could continue, but I think that by now I have given a fair idea of the range of things that an investigation into devotions of self-maintenance in the religious life of Americans must consider. The problems of being that our society poses will change as our society changes, and we can expect corresponding shifts in the popularity of what people turn to in order to manage these problems. However, in a complex society such as we live in today, we can expect devotions of self-maintenance to continue to take a wide variety of forms.

#### NOTES

1. Victor Turner (1975, 165) has similarly noted the polysemy of ritual symbols.
2. See the recent treatment of this subject by Sanday (1986).
3. Sigmund Freud (1959) emphasized the relation between ritual and compulsive or obsessive behavior. Encountering such behavior clinically as it manifested itself in socially unacceptable or counterproductive ways, Freud regarded all of its manifestations as evidence of neuroticism and pathology. A recent corrective to this, seeing ritualized behavior as a natural and often constructive (healthy) means by which humans and even some animals work to maintain themselves, has been presented by Davis (1981).
4. See also the account of magic among baseball players by Gmelch (1971), and for magic among New England fishermen, see Poggie and Gersuny (1972). These along with Miner's paper have been reprinted in the collection edited by Spradley and Rynkiewicz (1975).
5. For self-maintenance work in spiritualism, see Moore (1977).
6. A delightful photographic record of many of these organizations and their rituals has been assembled by Owens (1975).
7. Cultish behavior in relation to popular romantic fiction has been well documented by Radway (1984).

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