

1989 STAR ISLAND CONFERENCE

Being Religious: Working at Self-Maintenance and Self-Transformation

29 July - 5 August 1989

What difference does it make for people to go to confession, to take communion? To hold a Seder, to keep a kosher house? To salute the flag, to get out and vote? What difference to be "born again"? To join Alcoholics Anonymous? To have a conversion experience? What do people do for themselves as devotees of an ideology, a rock star, a sport? Or as workers for social reform or a clean environment?

Religious behavior is often characterized by what people are working at in relation to the things, persons, practices, and ideas that have special importance for them. A scientific examination reveals people working to maintain themselves in ways they value, to restore impairments to the self, to safeguard against threats to the self, to have vicarious experiences of self they want but cannot otherwise have, or to escape from selves with which they are unhappy by finding new selves.

Concern with what we are and what we are to become follows out of the changing ways we experience ourselves as social beings in the course of our lives. It leads us to create social and moral orders as vehicles of our self-hood. The work of self-maintenance and self-renewal is to be found not only in connection with institutionalized religions but also widely outside of them. It leads to regimens for safeguarding or restoring desired states of being, as in ritual. Myths and stories rehearse our problems of being and offer us roles to emulate in dealing with them. Even music, sports, hobbies, and private fantasies play a role. Concern with achieving new selves promotes conceptions of ideal states of being exemplified by heroes, paragons, and gods; of ideal conditions for achieving such states, exemplified by Utopias and Edens; and of saviors who will show the way to attain such conditions. Acquiring insights necessary to self-transformation can be the profoundest kind of human experience.

The conference sponsored by IRAS for Star Island in 1989 will explore how the above approach to understanding religious behavior can help us get inside ourselves and others as religious beings. Speakers will represent such disciplines as anthropology, psychology, religious studies, and sociology.

The conference will be co-chaired by Ward Goodenough, Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, and Barbara Whittaker-Johns, Unitarian Minister of Amherst, Mass. Both will also be speakers. Other speakers are: Peter Black, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at George Mason University; John Caughey, Assistant Professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland; Rachel Cowan, Rabbi in New York City; Eugene D'Aquili, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Pennsylvania; John E. Fryer, Professor of Psychiatry at Temple University; Daphney Hampson, Lecturer in Divinity at St Andrews University in Scotland; Anna Meigs, Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Macalester College; Archie Smith, Jr, Professor of Pastoral Psychology and Counseling at Pacific School of Religion; and Robert Sorensen, Psychologist and President of Sorensen Marketing and Managing Corporation, New York City. Nan Peete, Rector at All Saints Episcopal Church in Indianapolis, will be Chaplain. Conference coordinator is Edward Rutledge, Box 543, Henniker, NH 03242.

CONFERENCE FEES: Husband and Wife, \$165; Individual (over 18), \$90; Children 12 to 17, \$60; Children 5 to 11, \$50; Children under 5, Free. Conference fees (less 20%) are refundable if the request for cancellation is received before 1 June 1989.

REGISTRATION: Please fill out the form included with this newsletter and mail it with the appropriate conference fee - payable to IRAS - to: Mrs Bonnie Falla, Registrar, 810 1/2 North 9th St. Allentown, PA 18102. Tel. (215) 432-8711. Confirmations will be sent on or after 1 April 1989. Additional registration forms are available from the Registrar, or legible copies of the enclosed form can be used.