Interpreting and Explaining Transcendence

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Interpreting and Explaining Transcendence

Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Beyond

Edited by
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Robert A. Yelle, with Jenny Ponzo

Introduction: How to talk about transcendence

1 Rationale for this volume

Why another volume on Transcendence?[1] Hasn't the term been abused and, potentially, rendered useless for a study of religion that aspires to be anthropocentric and properly scientific? Indeed, a volume such as this one bears a special responsibility to give an account of itself, at a time when the study of religion appears to many close to reaching its aim of becoming empirical, or at least critical. Neither those approaches based on the natural and social sciences, nor those that may be grouped loosely under the rubric of "critical theory," would appear to have much use for the category of Transcendence, which smacks of antiquated, crypto-theological God talk. More than a century after Nietzsche declared the "death of God," and demonstrated (again) the all-too-human origins of that which we call religion, it would appear indeed untimely (although not in a good sense) to return to speak again in such terms—would it not?

The gamble taken by this volume is that such skepticism regarding the category of Transcendence is mistaken. It is not only possible but necessary to recuperate this category for a properly anthropocentric study of religion and culture. Indeed, without some such category as Transcendence, we declare that it would be impossible to account for the dimensions of human experience, expression, and behavior that are commonly labeled as religious. Far from being an antiquated and suspect category, Transcendence is arguably an enduring as well as urgent aspect of culture.

To be sure, the vast majority of discussions of Transcendence in the scholarly (as well as popular) literature do appear to restate the emic or confessional perspectives of particular theological systems. These generally do not attempt even to justify the use of the category with reference to any empirically observable phenomenon. Transcendence—paired with its standard complement, Immanence—is taken for granted as a descriptor for whatever is lofty, spiritual, or divine; as such, it is practically used as a synonym for the Christian (or at least

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[1] Explanatory note: we use the word 'Transcendence' capitalized to designate the abstract concept of transcendence in general; in other cases, 'transcendence' is used to designate the 'transcendence of' something in particular and is followed by an object.

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biblical) God. This locates Transcendence as a near-synonym of the Holy or Sacred, which names what lies beyond and must be kept apart from the Profane, as in Rudolf Otto's (1959 [1917]: 40) concept of the numinous as "wholly other" (see also De Nys 2009: 17). The great historian of religion of the last generation, Mircea Eliade (1959: 11–12), argued that Transcendence was a human constant or at least a perennial possibility, as evidenced through the experience of a *hierophany*—a 'showing of the sacred'—that ruptures profane existence. Hence his naming of our species as *Homo religiosus*. As much as we would like to think of ourselves as fully secular or profane, we are, according to this view, never more than a few steps removed from an encounter with Transcendence. Eliade spoke frequently of peak experiences in religious traditions: e.g., of Hindu yoga as the quest for "immortality and freedom" (1969), meaning a transcendence of the ordinary limits of the human condition, especially of our limited lifespan. Eliade (1969: 326–30) viewed such experiences as parallels of shamanic techniques of 'ecstasy'—a term that means literally 'standing outside' one's self—as represented by magical flight. Going above or beyond—as in the case of the otherworldly journeys commonly reported by shamans and similar figures—is an obvious metaphor for (self-)transcendence.

An entire generation (or more) has passed since Eliade's day, and scholars of religion have grown increasingly skeptical of the idea that there may be any universals such as Transcendence that define a common human religious experience. Such approaches as Eliade's have been dismissed as phenomenological, crypto-theological, or at any rate insufficiently critical, and have largely been abandoned by more forward-looking theorists. And indeed, we offer a skeptical appraisal of such approaches below. However, after all the critiques have been addressed, we do not think that that the category of Transcendence vanishes into nothingness. Like the smoke from the altar upon which a burnt offering (*'olah*) has been consumed, it rises into the air, marking a passage between the Here-and-Now and the Beyond (or Above). Something remains. The metaphor, which is based in the concrete world of materiality, points beyond itself to Something (or Somewhere) Else, and thereby figures a relation to something conceived or imagined as Transcendent. This remains true whether or not there is any God in heaven to receive such an offering. One of the shared convictions of the contributors to this volume—as different as their respective positions might be—is that Transcendence is above all a category of relation, rather than a thing-in-itself. There is no going back to the claim that Transcendence (or the Sacred, or God) is *sui generis*, utterly unique and incomparable. The very definition of Transcendence in relational terms, as for example the opposite of the Immanent, underscores this interdependence. Transcendence is always figurative, never realized or actual. Its full realization would even be a disappointment, since part of what Charles Taylor calls the “fullness” of Transcendence (see below) is the tang or sting of its absence in the Here-and-Now.

The God of monotheism has been identified as the paragon of the most radical form of Transcendence. This is the God of miracles, and of divine commands, who may be approached only on a mountaintop, and only by Moses, under pain of death. Iconoclasm, or the prohibition against the representation of the divine, may be partly a corollary of God’s Transcendence. Even speaking His proper name became taboo. However, this happened gradually, given the traces of anthropomorphism that remain in the Bible. Furthermore, the ban on representation, or at least on relation, cannot be total. Otherwise God would be purely a *deus absconditus* or ‘hidden god,’ and there would be no further story to tell. Even when Transcendence is defined in purely negative terms—as in the Upaniṣadic refrain concerning Brahman, which is described as “neither this nor that” (*neti, neti*)—it retains some relation to the world. The same is true of the Buddhist equivalent, *nirvāṇa* (see Hick 2010: 164–66). We are in the domain of apophatic mysticism, as in the case of Pseudo-Dionysius (discussed briefly by Gustavo Benavides in his contribution), as well as, potentially, of the Hebrew Bible when describing the same God much earlier.

Etymology is far from dispositive. However, in this case it can help to reinforce the point. ‘Transcendence’ is a word with a long history, which is used today in many contexts and with many meanings. Originally from a Latin root, *trans-* + *scandare*, meaning ‘to climb above or beyond,’ the word has been applied far beyond its original etymological context and usages (see Ugo Volli’s essay in this volume). O’Rourke (2010: 2) notes that “The dictionary translates the Latin verb *transcendo* with a variety of related terms such as ‘to climb,’ ‘pass,’ ‘cross,’ ‘step over,’ ‘overstep,’ ‘surmount,’ ‘excel,’ ‘exceed,’ ‘surpass.’ Basic to its meaning are the notions of ‘crossing over’ or ‘going beyond’[…].” ‘Transcendence’ is used in many ways, and with many shades of meaning, in the present volume. As a first attempt at definition, however, we may note here that what most of these meanings share is the gesture or movement of ‘going beyond’ some limitation, definite border, or condition of finitude. In this most general and abstract sense, Transcendence plays a structural role in many systems, as figuring what exceeds such limit, border, or finite condition (and which therefore may be limitless or infinite). The gesture of stepping beyond or outside characterizes prophetic critique, holy ground, or the desert that the Israelites crossed during the Exodus. Although many of its meanings are hardly religious, Transcendence appears to be bound closely with certain characteristically ‘religious’ ideas: the idea of the Infinite, of a High God (or *deus absconditus*), of immortality, of the ineffable: the list goes on and on. Indeed, without such a category, it would be difficult if not impossible to imagine religion at all.

As one of us pleaded earlier, it is high time we scholars of religion reckoned again with Transcendence, including the irruptive or antinomian aspects of religion:

> [T]he data of religious studies is replete with an almost infinite set of exceptional occurrences, ruptures, outbursts, and deviations. Religion includes not only the institutions that are part of and reinforce the broader social order, but also individual and collective acts that protest, dissent from, or attack that order. […] Indeed, the history of religions could be written in terms of such acts of transgression: the starving Buddha, crucified Christ, paralyzed Socrates (possessed by his *daimon*); Tantric libertines, orgiastic rites, Bacchantes, the self-mutilated devotees of Cybele, the bloody sacrifice of the taurobolium; various movements of iconoclasm (Egyptian [*Akhenaten*], Jewish, Islamic, Byzantine, Protestant); a host of millennial and apocalyptic movements; festivals such as Carnival, etc. (Yelle 2010: 193 – 19; see also Yelle 2019: 13)

The foregoing observations suggest the need to take seriously the category of Transcendence as a rubric for cross-cultural analysis, not only of religion but of society more broadly. Recognizing this need, the contributors to this volume have engaged in an interdisciplinary and exploratory approach to Transcendence and applied a variety of sociological, semiotic, historical, anthropological, and philosophical methods. The following is a true experiment in the sense that no claim of final success nor completeness is implied. Rather the idea has been to review some of the numerous notions and phenomena that have been gathered under the rubric of Transcendence with the goal of understanding these a little better. In the course of this effort, various new groupings, some of them perhaps quite unexpected, are tried out, as are different terminological approaches that may, in the future, eventually contribute to a more adequate metalanguage for Transcendence. All of these efforts build from a common acknowledgment that Transcendence is a human phenomenon, and accordingly reject purely confessional and parochial approaches while taking seriously the various claims and behavioral expressions of traditions in which Transcendence may have been understood in theological terms.

2 Review of theories of transcendence

2.1 Theological approaches to transcendence

Unlike the proper name of God, Transcendence appears to have one major advantage: namely, that it may be more useful as a category for cross-cultural analysis, or at least for comparative theology or ecumenical God-talk. For this very reason, Hick (2010: 162) substitutes this and other synonyms for ‘God’: “Terms commonly used are Ultimate Reality, the Ultimate, the Transcendent and, less commonly, the word that I have myself introduced, the Real.” However, Transcendence, at least in its more specific Christian theological formulations, can scarcely be assumed to be a universal feature of the human landscape. This difficulty has not prevented many scholars of religion from attempting to universalize covertly Christian (or biblical) understandings.[2] One need only recall the nineteenth-century debates over whether monotheism (with its concept of one, radically transcendent deity) or polytheism (with its pantheon of gods and goddesses, with whom worshippers could generally establish more intimate and immanent relations through ritual exchange) was the first and therefore most authentic form of religion. Friedrich Max Müller, who participated in these debates, and who generally argued in favor of the priority of monotheism, aimed at an ecumenical account of religion, in which the “experience of the Infinite” grounded the human experience of the divine (Yelle 2013: 50–55). The rest was just metaphors. One of the most common metaphors was the Heavens, or the celestial bodies within them. The subsequent and related debate over whether ‘High Gods’ existed in ‘primitive religions’ such as those in Africa (as affirmed by Father Wilhelm Schmidt’s [1912–1955] theory of *Urmonotheismus*), now appears in retrospect as a belated form of Christian apologetics, a latter-day *praeparatio evangelica*. If parallels for the concept of a High God (or ‘hidden God,’ *deus absconditus*, who in a number of African mythologies had withdrawn into the Sky) could be identified in non-Christian cultures, then perhaps this would demonstrate the logical necessity for something like the idea of a biblical God; and this idea in turn, reinforced by repetition across different cultures, might be as close as one could come to actual evidence for what could not, by definition, be known directly. Science, or at least a kind of anthropology, could be reconciled with Faith, defined as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Hebrews 11:1, RSV).

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[2] See O’Rourke (2019: 1): “Religion in its myriad manifestations throughout history is concerned with the Transcendent, i.e. a being enthroned beyond the realm of finite human experience, invariably called God.”

With some exceptions, such as the sociological debates regarding new forms of religion that emerged during the "Axial Age" (see below), discussion of Transcendence appears to have receded from view for those of us who aim at an anthropocentric study of religion, as a purely human phenomenon. Meanwhile, the spate of works that continue to talk about Transcendence in phenomenological or confessional terms within the fields of theology and theology-adjacent philosophy of religion, continues to grow. Here we find a persistent pairing of Transcendence with Immanence (see, e. g., De Nys 2009: 20; Dalferth, Bühler, and Hunziker 2015: ix–xi; Dalferth 2015; Van Rooyen 2018: 1, 4). Dalferth (2012: 153) states that the mutual implication of these terms is "obvious: 'transcendence' is one term of a pair that always has to be considered together: *transcendence/immanence*. [...] you cannot use the one without implying the other." Another example is Charles Hartshorne's article on "Transcendence and Immanence" for the first edition of the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987), which was reprinted in the second edition with a revised bibliography (Hartshorne 2005).

Against such approaches, Johannes Zachhuber (2018) has argued that the ubiquity of the binary 'Transcendence vs. Immanence' is of recent origin, being traceable to nineteenth-century German theological and philosophical discourses following Immanuel Kant, whose own usage connected *Transzendenz* with mysticism, enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*), and what was inaccessible to cognition.[3] Later German scholars often identified Transcendence with religion *tout court*. Zachhuber concludes:

> Today, the binary of transcendence and immanence has become one of the most widely used and most evocative markers of philosophical and religious belief systems. Religious believers and theologians criticize each other for their lack of a proper acknowledgment of transcendence; secularists cite their sole reliance on the immanence of natural laws as proof for the superiority of their worldview; scholars take for granted that these two terms can be historically applied to individual and communal belief systems of the past. (Zachhuber 2018: 180)

Zachhuber offers important historical contextualization of the Transcendence-Immanence binary. However, the absence of a word does not necessarily imply the absence of the concept; and as we shall see, many scholars, including not only theologians and philosophers but also sociologists and semioticians, have found this binary useful for describing aspects of the human condition.

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[3] On Kant's use of "transcendental," see O'Rourke (2019: 7–8). This term, which had a subsequent history in specialized philosophical traditions, will not be discussed further here.

An influential example is Charles Taylor, who uses this binary quite freely (see also Dalferth 2015: 10). Taylor conflates Transcendence with religion in general[4], but more specifically with "the transcendent God" (Taylor 2007: 20), in opposition to the "Immanent Frame" that characterizes our Secular Age. Characterizing the distinction between Transcendence and Immanence as a complementarity, a duality that remained in balance so long as traditional Christianity was hegemonic (see Taylor 2007: 145)—as in the case of the second person of the Holy Trinity, who incarnated the divine Word, thereby making Transcendence immanent—Taylor also refers to this as one of "certain distinctions we make today" (2007: 13). So the polarity is always there; it is just a question of whether we can recognize it and maintain the appropriate equipoise between the two poles.

Taylor's strong claim that the experience of Transcendence is our default mode as humans emerges clearly toward the end of the book: "If I am right that our sense of fullness is a reflection of transcendent reality (which for me is the God of Abraham), and that all people have a sense of fullness, then there is no absolute point zero" (2007: 769).[5] Then how is it that the Immanent Frame arose to begin with? Taylor describes this as a "self-sufficient immanent order that [...] can be envisaged without reference to God [... and] can thus slough off the transcendent [...]" (2007: 543). Here Taylor identifies the Immanent Frame with the post-nominalist or deist conception of the world as a lawful order, which foreclosed interventions from outside such as the miracle. The Christian idea of a creation *ex nihilo*, which depended on divine fiat—on an express command, 'Let there be light!'—meant to some that God preexisted the world, which he brought into being through his own power, in the form of a speech act. Such episodes contributed to the systematic elaboration of the idea of God as a sovereign who rules through divine command, and who exists beyond the capacity of human beings to influence or motivate. As Taylor notes, it is this God, who works by miracles and other ruptures in the natural and moral order, who had to vanish in order for the Immanent Frame to be born: "The mechanical outlook which splits nature from supernature voids all this mystery. [...] For the materialist, [...] anything transcendent is excluded by 'science'" (2007: 547). A certain kind of mechanistic philosophy, combined perhaps with a mistaken idea regarding what miracles truly represent—as an openness to wonder or what Taylor here calls "fullness"—conspired to shut the doors to our perception of the Beyond.[6] Nominalism gave way to deism, and eventually to secularism.

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[4] See Taylor (2007: 20): "So 'religion' for our purposes can be defined in terms of 'transcendence' [...]."

[5] Such claims appear to vindicate Jonathan Sheehan's (2010) argument that Christianity, or rather a specific version of Roman Catholicism, remains the implicit reference point and normative ideal for Taylor's account of secularism, such that the latter can never be evaluated on its own terms. This is why Sheehan labels Taylor's account a form of theological "apologetics."

Taylor's evident point of reference is a certain understanding of pre-Reformation Roman Catholicism. As Max Weber argued already, it is undoubtedly the case in simple historical terms that post-Reformation Christianity, and the more radical Enlightenment that followed, aimed to "disenchant" the world by foreclosing miraculous ruptures and whatever else could not be explained in terms of reason or natural law (Yelle 2020). Josef Bengtson (2015: 1) states: "Central to the story of how the Western world became modern has been a certain narrative of how we got rid of transcendence and religion, and became both rational and secular in the process." Among such prohibited and irruptive events was the "divine command," a form of law promulgated through revelation or fiat and apparently incompatible with utilitarian calculations of well-being (Yelle 2019: 10–11, 38–44). Taylor adverts to this background when he swears allegiance to the "God of Abraham"—who by commanding the sacrifice of Isaac perpetrated one of the most (in)famous such commands[7]—and when he defines Transcendence in ethical terms, as a devotion to ends that go beyond mere human flourishing (Taylor 2007: 20; see also De Nys 2009: 27). Although such an ethic may sound benevolent, even praiseworthy, we should recall that these ends included the sacrifice of others, as well as of one's self: murder as well as martyrdom. It was, indeed, for such reasons that, during the Wars of Religion, leading the vanguard of the radical Enlightenment, Thomas Hobbes (1994 [1651]: chap. 32, §9 and chap. 37) ridiculed and outlawed prophecy and (most) miracles. Such phenomena contributed to the dangerous and seditious phenomenon of 'enthusiasm,' or what Germans called *Schwärmerei*. This was the immediate context for both deism and disenchantment. Hobbes also attacked the Catholic idea of transubstantiation (1994: chap. 8, §27), which is still cited by many theologians as a case of transformation and Transcendence (e.g., Otto 1959: 85). In all of this, Hobbes followed (and extended) major tendencies of Reformation theology. Knowing this history does not suggest that we should wish automatically to repeat it. However, it does suggest that Transcendence may remain a problem for us, in the dual sense of marking a loss, a sense of absence and nostalgia, as well as signaling a danger, should we wish to return such emptiness to "fullness," in Taylor's usage.

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[6] My allusion to Aldous Huxley (1954) is deliberate; one strain of contemporary theory about Transcendence focuses on the analogy between drug use and religious experience. See Partridge (2018).

[7] See also Seligman (2000: 10): "transcendence is the most radical form of heteronomy, with heteronomy understood as [being] subject to the authority of another, to an external law." His formulation connects the decline of Transcendence with the triumph of autonomy, in Kant's sense. Seligman (2000: 55–56) mentions the Binding of Isaac as an example of Transcendence.

2.2 Sociological approaches to transcendence

Taylor's account connects the decline if not disappearance of Transcendence with the historical processes of secularization and the "disenchantment of the world," as described earlier by the German sociologist Max Weber (Yelle 2020; Yelle and Trein 2020). Weber associated the "routinization of charisma" and the rise of calculability with modernization. European civilization supposedly had embraced more rational forms of social organization and cultural expression, from the economy to the arts:

> Only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize to-day as valid. [...] A structure like the canon law is known only in the West. A similar statement is true of art. Polyphonic music of various kinds has been widely distributed over the earth. [...] But rational harmonious music, both counterpoint and harmony, formation of the tone material on the basis of three triads with the harmonic third; our chromatics and enharmonics, not interpreted in terms of space, but, since the Renaissance, of harmony; our orchestra [...]; our system of notation, which has made possible the composition and production of modern musical works [...] all these things are known only in the Occident [...]. In architecture, pointed arches have been used elsewhere as a means of decoration [...]. But the rational use of the Gothic vault as a means of distributing pressure and of roofing spaces of all forms, and above all as the constructive principles of great monumental buildings and the foundation of a style extending to sculpture and painting, such as that created by our Middle Ages, does not occur elsewhere. (Weber 1958: 13 – 15)

Leaving aside the strongly ethnocentric nature of such claims, what is interesting about them is that some of the phenomena that Weber adduced as examples of rationalization might be better interpreted as illustrations of Transcendence. This could be argued of such musical moments as the shift to a higher key, or the resolution that occurs with the return to the tonic at the end of a piece, as well as of the idea of a greater harmony, especially between human and divine, that has often been attributed to religious music in Christian traditions (see Wuidar 2019). The case of the Gothic cathedral is even clearer in this regard, as the innovation of the flying buttress was not for its own sake, but instead is what enabled the builders to raise the nave and vault higher and higher, in a gesture of approach to God. Indeed, what enabled first "disenchantment" and then "rationalization" was supposedly the idea of a radically transcendent deity who exceeded all attempts at magical manipulation, an idea first developed in ancient Israelite monotheism (Weber 1958: 105). Later scholars have emphasized the paradox that such a nominalist idea of God eventually evacuated the world of miracles and mystery, clearing the path for science (Yelle 2019: 66–67).

Indeed, some of the earliest expressions of the idea of Transcendence in religion were based on the logic of height, or the notion that God is distant—perhaps on a mountain, such as Sinai, or on the "high places" (*bamoth*) that served as sites for worship in ancient Israelite religion before being rejected as idolatrous and replaced by the centralization of worship in Jerusalem, at the Temple Mount. The Egyptian pyramids and similarly-shaped Mayan temples appear to have participated in the same logic, which was more recently reprised in Romantic notions of the sublime as experienced through the encounter with mountains, cataracts, and vast distances, as Gustavo Benavides notes in his chapter for this volume. Such symbols earlier reinforced the idea of God as "wholly other" and potentially terrifying, as articulated in Rudolf Otto's phenomenology (1959: 81–86). It is striking, then, to find Weber presenting the Gothic cathedral as characteristic of the progressive development of "Western" rationality. Even the (vanished) Twin Towers of the World Trade Center possessed a more than merely functional value, as their destroyers also understood. This juxtaposition suggests that our modern, "disenchanted" society may also have its forms of Transcendence, even if these have been displaced or relocated. Taylor may be right after all.

While most common in theological approaches, the category of Transcendence never fully disappeared in the social sciences. After Weber, two theorists in the German sociological tradition, Thomas Luckmann (1967) and Niklas Luhmann (1996; 2002; 2013), drew upon the category in elaborating their respective accounts of society. Luckmann argued that the "great transcendences" of earlier salvation religions have indeed declined with secularization. This entailed the loss of a hegemonic, shared worldview based on traditional Christianity and the differentiation as well as privatization of religion. However, the "little" and "intermediate" transcendences represented by our individual consciousness of continuity and by our collective experience of society remain. Katharina Wilkens's chapter in this volume applies such ideas in relation to *kibuki* possession rituals in Madagascar. Like Luckmann (1967: 128), Luhmann also invoked the structural opposition between Transcendence and Immanence. For Luhmann, the very idea of an ending, such as death, involves the necessary contradiction of imagining something that lies beyond this border (2002: 51): "For the description of the two values of the specifically religious code, the distinction between immanence and transcendence is most often suitable. One can then also say that a communication is religious when it regards the immanent from the standpoint of the transcendent" (2002: 77, trans. RY). Luhmann's systems-theoretical or semiotic approach is developed further in this volume by Martin Lehnert in relation to the Mahāyāna Buddhist treatment of the distinction between *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra*; and by Volkhard Krech, who adopts Luhmann's thesis that the Transcendence-Immanence distinction is characteristic of the religious code.

As noted above, another domain of sociological theory where the category of Transcendence has been deployed is in the elaboration of Karl Jaspers's (1953 [1949]) idea of an "Axial Age," in which several major religions of salvation appeared. Jaspers identified the key development as "man's reaching out beyond himself by growing aware of himself within the whole of being" (Jaspers 1953: 4), i.e. as the discovery of Transcendence. Benjamin Schwartz (1975: 3) subsequently defined the Axial Age as characterized by the "strain toward transcendence" (see also Eisenstadt 1982). This tendency supposedly characterized not only biblical but also Asian traditions, including Buddhism (Madsen 2012; Obeyesekere 2012; Collins 1998: 20 – 25; cf. Pollock 2012). Although the idea of an "Axial Age" remains difficult to pin down, and should not be identified too closely with a particular historical moment, it remains generative for cross-cultural accounts of the emergence of complex social orders that incorporated modes of self-critique. Bellah and Joas (2012) offers a good synthesis of such an approach. Recently, Alan Strathern (2019) has drawn on such theories in order to distinguish between the mode of "transcendentalism" that emerged during the Axial Age and the mode of "immanentism" that preceded it. Strathern's immanentism coincides with Jan Assmann's (2010) "cosmotheism," a stage when religion and politics were fused in the figure of the sacred king or Pharaoh. Strathern's "transcendentalism" corresponds to the phase in which religion has separated from such an order sufficiently to critique it in ethical terms; Assmann's chief example is the Exodus from Egypt, which he argues contributed to the first separation between the religious and the political domains. In the present volume, Seth Abrutyn pursues such approaches in order to account for the role of spiritual entrepreneurs such as Jesus or the Buddha in breaking the monopoly on Transcendence that existed under the first imperial formations in the ancient Near East and elsewhere, and in making Transcendence (in the form of axial or salvation religions) available to the people.

Another mode of Transcendence that has received increasing attention in recent years is the definition of sovereignty as radically transcendent of any existing legal order (see Buijs 2012; Yelle 2019). The very quality of "sovereignty" often is defined in opposition to "legality," as exemplified by the traditional prerogatives of the ruler to grant equitable relief; to suspend the laws in a state of emergency; to issue pardons, whether or not these are deserved; and to command violence, even arbitrary killings, at least on exceptional occasions such as wars but also, in many cultures, for no special reason at all. Nearly a century ago, the German jurist Carl Schmitt (1985 [1922]) claimed that the sovereign decides on "the state of exception" (*Ausnahmezustand*, in English, 'state of emergency' or 'martial law') in which the law is suspended. Because such a state of exception cannot be prescribed or declared in advance within any given system of legal rules, it marks sovereignty as exceeding any normative order. Schmitt reprised older definitions of sovereignty in which the king was above the law (*rex supra legem*), or was himself a living law (*lex animata*, *nomos empsychos*). This was part of the theological notion of the divine right of kings, in which the earthly sovereign mirrored the ability of an omnipotent God to break or suspend the laws of nature by performing miracles. The irruptive and transcendent nature of the ruler was long expressed through ritual taboos surrounding the person of the sovereign, by his performance of miracles such as the "Healing Touch" (see Yelle 2020: 135–36), and by his acts of arbitrary violence, which have been documented extensively by both historians and anthropologists. Hence Schmitt's argument that debates over miraculous sovereigns and exceptional states always reflect a particular "political theology" (Schmitt 1985: 36).

A number of scholars have identified an affinity between such states of exception and the category of the "holy" or "sacred" (Agamben 1998; Benavides 2004; Sherwood 2008; Yelle 2010, 2019). Recent attention to the phenomenon of sacred kingship in anthropology and history, particularly as illustrated by the idea of the "stranger king" whose arrival from the Beyond is accompanied by criminal or bizarre behavior, illustrates an ongoing fascination with the transcendent power of sovereignty: "Any […] analysis [of sacred kingship] would have to begin with the notion of transcendence: that in order to become the constituting principle of society, a sovereign has to stand outside it" (Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 74). The old opposition between Transcendence and Immanence seems to be mirrored in such transgressive or antinomian models of sovereign behavior, which gesture at something beyond an existing legal order. Even now some vestiges of this absolute power remain in the executive. Yet with the transition from divine right kingship to democratic republics based on popular sovereignty, much of the sacred and transcendent authority and power of the monarch was transferred to the people.

Within the sociology of religions, perhaps no theorist has done more than Émile Durkheim to contribute to the identification of religion with society as a whole, or with the group, conceived as possessing an almost organic nature. Durkheim (1995: 436–37) argued that society was the source for all of our "collective representations," including especially those totems that were invested with vital force and significance on occasions of collective effervescence, periodic rites during which individuals experienced the group as a living, breathing reality, as something larger than themselves (379). Seth Abrutyn's chapter in this volume follows up on these observations. One model for Durkheim, as well as for many other French intellectuals in the nineteenth century and beyond, was the festivals of the French Revolution, in which boundaries blurred, not only between joy and violence, between the individual and the group, but also between social order and the religious event. On such occasions, the individual gets outside of her- or himself, and becomes merged within a larger whole. Following Durkheim, Roger Caillois (1980: 115–16, 125) described anarchic or antinomian festivals as transgressive forms of the sacred; and Victor Turner (1969) famously labeled such festivals as moments of "anti-structure." Such exuberant festivals appear to converge with the state of emergency or the interregnum in a manner that highlights the transcendent and occasionally dangerous nature of sovereignty (Agamben 2005: 65–73). In popular festivals of transgression, which often converge with revolutionary moments, the antinomianism formerly attributed to the sovereign is matched by the anarchic violence of the crowd.

Despite Pitirim Sorokin's (1928: 463–80) critique of the unscientific nature of the organic metaphor for society used by Durkheim (and many others), the fact remains that our society could scarcely function *without* some such idea of the collective as a whole that exceeds the sum of its parts. Historians have pointed to the continuities in representations of society as a body politic, representations that, in European culture, have antecedents in the idea of the church as a mystical body headed by Christ. As Ernst Kantorowicz (1957) showed, this idea was transferred to the notion that the King (or Queen) served as head of the state, conceived as analogous to the Church as a *corpus mysticum*. This was further related to the idea of the king as "above the law" (Kantorowicz 1957: 143–64), which has been noted already. Such ideas and modes of representation have continued into modernity, where they provide the basis for the legal fiction of a corporation that exists above and beyond its individual members (or shareholders). Kantorowicz, following such earlier scholars as Frederic William Maitland (1936), traced how such legal fictions served the very practical function of allowing a corporation to survive beyond the death of an officeholder. We can see readily how such ideas intersected with Durkheim's model of collective representations, although he did not insist that the people must be represented by a king. All such models of society, which are hardly the product of theoretical imagination alone, imply the capacity of human beings to imagine something larger than themselves, and to plan for the future, extending to a kind of (institutional) immortality. Some form of Transcendence must take on a life of its own in order for complex societies to function at all.

The notion of a church, state, or business corporation as a living, breathing entity converges with the question of the "soul," conceived as something separate and apart from the body that contains it. The idea of personal continuity after death is one of the oldest religious ideas; it even served as the basis for E. B. Tylor's (1871) theory that religion begins with animism, or the belief in spirits, who are usually the dead ancestors of the tribe. Such forms of Transcendence are ubiquitous, at least in our imagination; they appear whenever we speak of ourselves in the past or future tense, for example. Yet where is the "Ghost in the Machine," as Gilbert Ryle (1949) termed it? Descartes answered, in the pineal gland; and scientists and philosophers today try to pinpoint through neural experiments where the soul or consciousness might reside. Embracing a mechanistic philosophy in the seventeenth century, Hobbes (1994: chap. 46, §19) already criticized all such ideas of a "separated soul" that exists apart from (i.e. above and beyond) the body. He argued that even terms for supposedly "incorporeal beings" refer in the Bible to material entities: 'spirit' means wind or breath, and 'angel' a messenger (Hobbes 1994: chap. 34). A quarter millennium later, James George Frazer, aiming to debunk the magical thinking that he believed underlay not only primitive religion but also Christianity, recounted many fairy tales of the "external soul" as residing in some object outside of the body, and surviving its demise (Frazer 1951: 773 – 802). According to Frazer, the myths of the resurrection of the god depended on this idea. Without the idea of a soul, indeed, the whole edifice of religion might collapse.

2.3 Semiotic approaches to transcendence

The notion of a corporation, like that of a soul or even of an individual agent beyond its component parts, depends upon some capacity to represent Transcendence. The very ability to signify what is absent—to recall and re-present, as well as to project into the future—is arguably a function uniquely associated with human beings, at least when we consider the special work done by language in this regard. Rather than living, as many other animals do, "in the moment," humans inhabit webs of meaning, imagination, representation, and memory. And this is also true for religious behaviors, which are again arguably unique to humans. The beginnings of symbolic behavior among human beings coincide with the beginnings of religious expression. Prehistoric grave deposits, whether red ochre powder or utilitarian objects, suggest a concept of an afterlife that represents either a transformative rebirth or a continuity of this-worldly existence.

Some semioticians have pursued the ways in which Transcendence is figured in narratives of conversion or defined through or against material objects, such as icons or relics, as possible sites for Transcendence, or conversely of Immanence and sacred presence (Leone 2014; Leone and Parmentier 2014). Indeed, the cultural elaboration of the notion of Transcendence has an evident semiotic character. According to Leone,

> there is no representation of transcendence without semiosis [...]. Transcendence can [...] be intuited [...] as the light that is promised beyond the screen of a material, immanent, actual sign. The paradox is that nothing promises this light to us if not the sign itself. The materiality of the representamen is what both invites us to go beyond it and what prevents us from doing so. (2014a: S49–S50)

Studying expressions of Transcendence means studying signs, figurative representations (including aniconic ones), and narratives: in other words, semiosis. The fact that Transcendence is relational (as “transcendence of” something) links the category to semiotics at a fundamental level. Semiotics has long recognized that signs have value only in relation, and is therefore automatically attuned to the kind of systems-theoretical approach required to grasp something as slippery as Transcendence. Moreover, it is the nature of signs to represent the absent (Eco 1975; see discussion in Volkhard Krech’s chapter below), which applies even to the hidden deity (*deus absconditus*). Signs stand in for referents that are more or less accessible, and in some instances may not even exist. Accordingly, Leone and Parmentier (2014: S2) proposed to analyse

> the semiotic mechanisms and consequences of efforts to represent, in the double sense of *standing in place* of something that is absent and *making present again* that which was previously absent, the ‘beyond’ in some perceptible or imaginable medium while maintaining, at the same time, an ideological (theological or philosophical) stance that these transcendent objects (beings, deities, powers, ideals, universals) by the definition of their very natures cannot be so represented—because they are, on the one hand, beyond knowing and, on the other hand, anchored in an utterly separate realm.

When we turn to consider the various “semiotic ideologies” that have enforced particular normative regimes of representation in a given culture, the approach or attitude of different traditions has often focused precisely on the issue of Transcendence. Thus, Protestant convictions that the deity is transcendent informed various iconoclastic attacks against plastic, pictorial, and even linguistic images, because these cannot contain or limit the deity (Keane 2007; Yelle 2013). Earlier scholarly debates suggested that the Buddha was represented initially through signs of his absence—a wheel, an empty throne, or a footprint—raising the possibility that this tradition, as well, adopted a form of aniconism. As both Gustavo Benavides and Martin Lehnert note in their respective chapters, the Buddha was also called the *Tathāgata*, or 'Thus-Gone One,' a title that emphasized his absence. Such ideas are evidently not limited to biblical traditions.

Given the problematic legacy of discussions of Transcendence in the study of religion and adjacent disciplines, it is no wonder that a younger, more skeptical generation of scholars has chosen to avoid the term entirely, or even attempted to delete it from our theoretical vocabulary. Thus, Kocku von Stuckrad has argued in favor of a "communicative turn" in the study of religion, exemplified by the method of discourse analysis:

> Religious scholars [sic] should no longer scrutinize religions as belief-systems but as systems of communication and shared action. Instead of trying to understand the believers' inner states of mind—which, in fact, fully escape scholarly verification—the only thing religious studies should be interested in is analyzing the *public* appearance of religious propositions. *Consequently, we have to give up normative assumptions about the transcendent.* Those phenomenological approaches that try to gain knowledge about the invisible or the existence of such as the 'superhuman' or the 'holy' from scrutinizing the visible world are, as foundation of our methodology, definitely deceptive. (von Stuckrad 2003: 268; emphasis added)

Von Stuckrad reprises, to some extent, the move of the radical Enlightenment to eliminate metaphysical language referring to inaccessible or non-observable beings or qualities (see Yelle 2013: chap. 2). He indicates that the method of 'bracketing' common in phenomenological approaches, which takes claims of Transcendence at face value—e. g. as first-person reports of religious experiences—is fatally flawed. In fact, all we have is words, all the way down. These words are not merely random, however; they are patterned, social, rule-governed forms of human behavior, that provide insight into how a particular discursive community talks about (imagines, fashions) itself, as a culture. From this perspective, the first answer to the question, "What is God (or Transcendence)?", is that this is a word, like any other, which achieves currency and meaning by being used in particular ways.

So far, most of us would probably agree with von Stuckrad. However, the ghost of Transcendence may not be so easy to exorcize, even when we focus our attention on communication rather than on 'the thing in itself.' In this volume are contributions from Volkhard Krech and Massimo Leone, each of whom argues that Transcendence is in some way built into semiosis or communication, at least of the religious variety. Krech argues that "religion is the kind of semiosis that signifies everything on the basis of the distinction between immanence and transcendence while ultimately coping with undetermined contingency" (see also Krech 2016). As noted above, he is drawing partly on Luhmann's description of the religious code, but also on Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of the sign, which allows, through its recursiveness, a form of triangulation on Transcendence. Whereas Krech identifies religion as a special, albeit widespread form of communication, Leone comes closer to arguing that all semiotics, in principle, works by means of processes that imply or depend upon some idea of Transcendence. He announces his ambition to “rearticulat[e] semiotics and communication studies as a ‘science of the beyond.’” The analogy, or potential convergence, between religion and communication depends partly upon the fact that, like the opposition between Transcendence and Immanence, signification works by means of opposition. Structuralist semiotics has argued this point most consistently. Not only must there be a “beyond” in order for there to be a “here,” an Other for there to exist a Self, but the mediation between the two that is achieved through semiosis implies the possibility of access to the Beyond, even if this takes place only figuratively. Moreover, the very condition that requires recourse to the sign—namely, the absence of that object to which it refers—would seem to demonstrate our capacity to envision what lies outside our reach, to remember a past and imagine a future. Leone poses the question: “am I thinking of religion in semiotic terms, or I am thinking of semiotics in religious terms?” The question is posed rhetorically, of course; he means to imply that there is a natural, or at least a cognitive, basis for Transcendence. This is harder to refute than some earlier claims that Transcendence is a part of the human condition. We see that, precisely when it comes to semiotics, communication, or discourse, the ghost of Transcendence may not be as easy to dispel as von Stuckrad believes.[8]

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[8] Indeed, even von Stuckrad appears, in a more recent publication, to invoke something like the idea of Transcendence (though without using the word) when he describes the idea of the ‘Third’ as a category that is capable of mediating between binary opposites: “Discursive approaches are skeptical of […] binary constructions[… and] are themselves discursive materializations of questions that have been raised with reference to binary models of interpretation, such as true and false, insider and outsider, or culture and nature. The twentieth century has seen a fundamental break with these binaries […]. Self-consciously presented as ‘a new paradigm in cultural studies,’ the notion of *the third* has recently gained influence as a new way to think beyond the binaries and to include the ‘in-between’ as [a] significant characteristic of contemporary culture” (von Stuckrad 2014: 19). Von Stuckrad’s ‘Third’ sounds a bit like the Hegelian synthesis. In any case, it lies beyond the limits of binary thinking. Dare we call it a postmodern form of the Transcendent? The contemporary faith in the ability to refashion one’s self so as to escape all such dichotomies, such as e.g. gender binaries, seems to be the reference here. For a critique of this faith as a (possibly misrecognized) form of Transcendence, see the conclusion to Gustavo Benavides’s essay in this volume.

3 This volume

“Going above or beyond” (something, but what, precisely?) is, as noted above, a common denominator of the various uses of Transcendence in this volume. But if we think we know already where this “Great Chain of Being” ends—with the beatific vision of God, as depicted at the end of Dante’s *Commedia*—where, precisely, does it begin? In the longest chapter of this volume, Gustavo Benavides offers a sweeping account of Transcendence that connects this phenomenon to the material and biological bases of human development. Benavides traces the various ways in which Transcendence is anchored in the very physiology of the human condition—from chewing, ruminating, digesting, cooking, and otherwise laboring and waiting, as well as growing, preparing, and processing our food (also internally)—all of which enabled the emergence of biologically modern *Homo sapiens* as opposed to our more ape-like ancestors. Unlike other hominids, whose physiology condemns them to an almost ceaseless quest for sustenance, *Homo sapiens* evolved beyond such need, which is nevertheless always present in the form of a fleshly substratum of eating and excreting. Perfecting a jujitsu move pioneered by Nietzsche in his *Zur Genealogie der Moral* (1887), Benavides illustrates how genealogical connections bind us inexorably to our materiality, which we attempt to surpass and overcome. With tremendous erudition, he narrates a guided tour of the history of religions across time and space, showing in case after case how what we call Transcendence is best understood as an attempt to escape the limits of the human condition, including labor and scarcity; and how, in any society, this role is assigned to or usurped by a particular category of religious specialists who resemble or are even identical with the nobles or socioeconomic elite. The human condition is, then, stratified, as the number of individuals who can raise themselves above the mud to any significant height is always only a fraction of the whole: a fact that leads to *ressentiment*, as well as to emulation and the aspiration to share in such Transcendence. The dialectic between Transcendence and Immanence is an embodied one, as Benavides reveals, extending Marx’s critique of capital and dialectical materialism in a manner that suggests a radically new perspective on religion.

Seth Abrutyn attempts to identify more precisely how Transcendence emerged during the Axial Age. Key to this development were the centralization of power, urbanization, and the rise of entrepreneurship, which enabled a relatively robust institutional differentiation of religion from more embedded and local arrangements, and which contributed ultimately to the birth of several major religions, including ancient Israelite monotheism. As Abrutyn argues, the rise of something like a concept of Transcendence during what has been called the “Axial Age” was dependent on the prior emergence, not only of larger states or imperial formations, but also of a class of spiritual entrepreneurs that arose in direct and critical response to such polities. The prophetic tradition in ancient Israelite religion is a key example for such a sociology of religion. Broadening his analysis to other instances of reaction to the rise of kingdoms and empires, Abrutyn suggests that Transcendence may in some instances be understood as a corollary of the progressively more centralized yet internally complex organization of ancient civilizations.

Our next chapters delve into greater detail concerning two Axial traditions: namely, ancient Israelite religion and Buddhism. Before turning to the Hebrew Bible, Ugo Volli surveys the historical development of the usage of ‘Transcendence’ that is common today, tracing this primarily to Plato and the Neo-Platonists, as well as to medieval Christian theologians. Although this usage may not map onto ancient Israelite religion, Volli identifies some analogues in that tradition, for example the progressively developing idea of God’s separateness, which was closely connected with His inapproachability, unnameability, and omnipotence. But the Hebrew God is not the ineffable and abstract One of Plotinus; He engages with His people, who in turn argue with Him. The personal, and relational, aspect of divinity continues into later Judaism. Volli stresses that the radically transcendent God of the Neo-Platonists or of later Christian theologians is *not* the God of the Hebrew Bible, with whom humans, including Abraham, are seen to quarrel, bargain, contract, etc.

Martin Lehnert shows how Buddhist philosophers affirmed the relationality of all thought, the identity-within-difference expressed in the Perfection of Wisdom sūtras and Mādhyamaka philosophy. Lehnert relies on Niklas Luhmann, in whom he finds a key to interpret the distinction between *nirvāṇa* (the Ultimate) and *saṃsāra* (the mundane round of rebirth). This distinction is coeval with the founding of Buddhism, but the Mahāyāna philosophers radicalized it by arguing that *nirvāṇa* and *saṃsāra* were, in fact, one and the same. They relativized absolutely everything, including *nirvāṇa* itself, in the name of bringing liberation down to earth (and thus within reach). The paradoxical formulations of this stage of Buddhist thought illustrate the ultimately recursive nature of all such figurations of Transcendence, which must be depicted, if at all, through and in terms of particular signs, which are necessarily limited, unlike the Ultimate itself.

Katharina Wilkens focuses on the rituals of spirit possession and exorcism in the *kibuki* tradition of Madgascar, an African island that is predominantly Muslim. Borrowing Thomas Luckmann’s idea of “great transcendences” such as ecstatic experiences, she connects these with the sphere of ritual, in which a special place and time is marked, in the case of *kibuki*, by female performers who manifest an entirely different, and divine, personality. As the possessed person learns to channel and control this spirit through the ritual performance, her feat of role-playing illustrates the close connection of religion—of ecstasy and effervescence—with imagination. Transcendence may be just this capacity to live within the liminal, the “as if.”

The next several chapters focus on Transcendence as a semiotic phenomenon. Affirming a fundamental link between Transcendence and semiosis, Massimo Leone strips signification down to its bare bones. Offering, à la Malevich, a “Suprematist” semiotics abstracted from all material considerations and referring only to the processes of semiosis (and abstraction) themselves—namely, to Transcendence, Intransigence, Transparency, Transit, etc., all the way back to Tradition, which serves as the necessary foundation for all efforts at further elaboration, as well as for escape or exit—Leone traces the manner in which religion performs a series of translations between this world and the next, between human and divine.

Volkhard Krech develops Charles S. Peirce’s account of semiosis as a tripartite relationship among an object, a representamen (or sign), and an interpretant.[9] He elaborates Peirce’s notion of ‘thirdness’ in a systematic manner and applies this to the Apostles’ Creed and the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Krech’s argument is built also on the German sociologist Niklas Luhmann’s argument that Transcendence becomes accessible precisely when the distinction between Transcendence and Immanence ‘re-enters’ on the side of Immanence, i. e. on our side of the veil, such that it can be made present through visible forms of signification and institutionalization (on re-entry, see Dalferth 2012: 154). Krech develops several metaphysical implications of Peirce’s own thought while demonstrating the humanity of religious conceptions of divine Transcendence, which illustrate features that are basic to all forms of communication.

Jenny Ponzo focuses on the transformation and translation of older Catholic modes of Transcendence in the wake of the Second Vatican Council, which emphasized the idea of *aggiornamento* as a means of being up-to-date in the transmission of church teachings. Part of the mandate of the modern Roman Catholic Church was to open up to the everyday, to express in vernacular and lay terms what had formerly been veiled by the mysteries of the Latin language. Now Transcendence can be found even in ostensibly ‘secular’ genres of literature, such as Italian novels. In the case of some authors of fictional novels this translated to innovative and even heterodox ways of expressing traditional theological ideas of Transcendence, such as salvation, which were earlier conveyed in hagiographic narratives. Ponzo focuses attention on a novel by Dante Troisi in which three brothers attempt to hasten the apocalypse and Parousia through transgressive actions. The idea of a fulfillment, indeed a redemption of time, is a trope that connects religious with secular narratives.

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[9] See Deuser et al. (2016) for an approach to Transcendence through the American pragmatists, including Peirce and William James.

Our biological nature, which has enabled us to walk upright, and granted us larger brains than our hominid ancestors, has already separated us from our evolutionary past. In cities, beginning with the rise of the great urban centers in the ancient world, we found, perhaps for the first time, the ability to lose ourselves, to become (relatively) anonymous. The first wave of urbanization was perhaps the material condition for religious entrepreneurs and prophets; but also for those who, like the Buddha, chose to depart from the world entirely. When too much togetherness brings us down, we depart to seek isolation and solitude. But this may leave us thirsting again for those moments of communion, or collective effervescence, when we once more lose ourselves, at least temporarily, in the crowd. Even and especially once material needs are satisfied, the products of imagination—literature, art, and (of course) religion—illustrate the desire to exceed our humdrum existence or the limits of the individual lifespan. Human beings may be limited, but they seek to extend or exceed these limits; this indeed may be the function of religion, to deliver inaccessible goods such as salvation, which is often imagined precisely as a form of immortality. To be human means to aspire to be divine: in other words, to wish to be transcendent.

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