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Culture and Transcendence

A Typology

Wessel Stoker

Introduction

Religion is undergoing a transformation in current Western society. In addition to organized religions, there is a notable movement towards spirituality that is not associated with any institutions. Viewed broadly, religion and spirituality may be defined as the experience of or reference to the absolute or the unconditional in different cultural areas, such as philosophy, theology, art, and politics. Religion and spirituality encompass a specific relationship between heaven and earth, between "here" and "beyond." Temporal metaphors may also be used to describe these terms: the present as opposed to a mythical, primal past or the present contrasting with the future as a time of salvation. In their art, abstract expressionists such as Pollock, Newman, and Rothko sought a spiritual solution to the spiritual crisis in the US in the 1940s and 1950s, incorporating the old myths with their references to a legendary past. Judaism, Christianity and Marxism are characterized by a Messianic desire, in which transcendence was regarded primarily a matter of the future.

Transcendence can be described as God, the absolute, Mystery, the Other, the other as other or as alterity, depending on one's worldview. But how can one indicate shifts in the views of transcendence and the transcendent in different areas of culture such as philosophy, theology, art, and politics? A four-fold, heuristic model will be proposed for purposes of carrying out this research.

Since the Romantic period, four different types of transcendence can be identified in Western culture. These are basic forms that have been given content in different ways by writers or artists on the basis of their worldview or artistic background. This model of four types will be used as a search instrument to point to the different ways of relating "here" and

“beyond,” “present” and “primal past”/“future” in the different areas of culture. It will become apparent from the discussion of the typology whether or not this heuristic model should be fine-tuned or supplemented.

A short description of the four types of transcendence is followed by a discussion of the importance of the term “transcendence” as an indicator of the religious or spiritual dimension in contemporary culture. Examples, drawn from the work of prominent writers, illustrate the ways in which the types or forms of transcendence receive certain content. It becomes clear that two types have developed out of the Christian religion, the religion that has traditionally stamped Western culture. The other two are situated more or less on the margins of or outside organized religion or have given a humanist-spiritual content to transcendence.

Four Types of Transcendence

According to the first view, God (or the absolute) and the human being are directly connected. Despite their alienation from the absolute, people have an immediate awareness of that absolute. In conquering this alienation, the human being discovers something that is identical to him- or herself, even though it transcends that person infinitely. It is something from which the human being is alienated, but from which he/she can never be separated. This relationship between God and human beings may be called “immanent transcendence”: both realities are viewed as being closely involved with each other—the absolute is experienced in and through mundane reality. Variants of this type can be found in, for example, Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Tillich.

The other view sees the relationship of the human being with God as a relationship with something that is unknown. In contrast to the first view, here God and human beings are seen as radically different. Any encounter of the human being with God is an encounter with a stranger. Theologically, the first type lays the emphasis more on human openness to a revelation from God, whereas the second type takes the movement of God or the absolute towards the human being as its starting point. This relationship between God and the human being may be called “radical transcendence”: the absolute is the wholly other

and thus sharply distinguished from mundane reality. Variants of this type can be found in Kierkegaard, Barth, and Marion.

What has been described as two types of transcendence can be identified in philosophy as metaphysical identity thinking (there is an identity between logos and reality, between thinking and being) and the critique of metaphysical identity thinking in difference thinking. In the latter, being does not coincide with beings; neither does being coincide with thinking (as expounded by Heidegger and his followers).

Transcendence is shifting in contemporary culture. H. Kunneman (2005) speaks of a shift from “vertical” to “horizontal transcendence.” The latter often has to do with ethical values in which respect for the other is central. This can be found in Irigaray and Luc Ferry. Kunneman sees the shift from vertical to horizontal transcendence in contemporary theology as well. Instead of vertical transcendence with its authoritarian concept of God, “the name of God [is] connected with caring, morally involved, loving relationships both between people mutually and on the level of person” (Kunneman 2005: 67). The distinction between vertical and horizontal transcendence can also indicate the opposition between this world and another world outside this one. One could think here of vertical transcendence such as Plato described it in the allegory of the cave—the way of liberation is upward, away from the shadows of the cave to the light of truth and ideas (Plato 1956: 514a-520a)—or the vision Augustine had in the harbour of Ostia in which he also ascended to God (Augustine 1983: IX.10). In modern times, some 18th-century deists viewed transcendence as isolated: God is viewed as a retired engineer who no longer has any connection with the world.

Describing the shift in the view of transcendence as being from vertical to horizontal might be regarded as too general. Moreover, this does not do any justice to the two types of transcendence mentioned. Each would then be viewed as vertical, which would be incorrect because immanent transcendence bridges the opposition between horizontal and vertical in that both elements are in balance with each other. Radical transcendence has just as little to do with transcendence if the latter refers to something that is purely outside this world. Transcendence is conceived precisely as either involvement with hu-

mankind and the world (Judaism and Islam) or in relation with the incarnation (Christianity). In the light of the shift regarding the view of transcendence, it is appropriate to point to at least two types of transcendence.

That “here” and “beyond” can be so closely associated that the one pole, that of transcendence, becomes neutralized and only immanence seems to be left. This third type may be referred to as “radical immanence”: the absolute is no longer sought outside mundane reality; both realities converge, with the absolute emptying itself in mundane reality (kenosis). Prominent proponents of radical immanence include the “God is dead” theologians such as Thomas Altizer and Mark Taylor (during a particular phase), following Hegel and Nietzsche. The philosopher Vattimo also falls into this group, especially in his reflections on Nietzsche and Heidegger.

The fourth type builds on radical transcendence, but emphasizes the inexpressibility of the Other in a different way. It is distinguished from radical transcendence in that it rejects the opposition between transcendence and immanence. This type may be referred to as “transcendence as alterity.” The relationship between transcendence and immanence is no longer viewed as an opposition. Rather, one has learned to think beyond the opposition, whereby the wholly other can appear in every other. This type can be found in Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, De Dijn and Taylor (during a specific period). This type has an open character and can be given religious or non-religious content.¹ There are, of course, instances that lie on

¹ In a somewhat different way, transcendence as alterity can also be found in the works of the Dutch philosopher, Otto Duintjer. In his view, traditional metaphysics does not do enough justice to alterity insofar as it grounds beings in a supreme being. Duintjer resumes the transcendental question of metaphysics by querying the conditions for the possibility of normative frameworks or practices in which life is lived. He formulates spiritual transcendence in a post-metaphysical way as the Inexhaustible, as an all-encompassing dimension that no longer functions as a world above ours, a first cause or foundation. Rather, it is an unlimited space that can appear in many articulations (Duintjer 1988, 2002; Stoker 1990; Visser 2002).

the boundary between radical transcendence and transcendence as alterity. For example, could Barth and Marion be classified more adequately under the latter category than under the former?

The Importance of the Types

It is important to distinguish each of the four fundamental types of transcendence for at least two reasons. First of all, views of transcendence are normative in character and determine one's orientation in life. A few examples of this are outlined below.

The life of faith Dostoyevsky sketches in *The Idiot* is informed by immanent transcendence. Prince Myshkin does not live with a distant God; rather, for him, the transcendent God is immanent in the world, lovingly present in the form of Jesus Christ whose goodness Myshkin himself radiates. In his novel *Knielen op een bed violen (Kneeling on a bed of violins)*, the Dutch writer Jan Siebelink narrates a life of faith that is dominated by a radically transcendent God. In an impressive way, he sketches Hans Sievez's life of faith, describing a man who lives with a radically transcendent God and is thus at loggerheads with his family and work. Philosopher and literary theorist George Steiner argues that there is a crisis in philosophy, art, and literature because the contract between word and world has been broken. This crisis is said to have resulted from the loss of transcendence in contemporary culture. He himself argues for a reinstatement of transcendence (Stoker 2008a). Islam's view of radical transcendence determines its view of art. Because figurative representations are forbidden in Islamic religious art, other elements, such as characters, ornaments, and arabesques, become important. The political philosopher Eric Voegelin shows how totalitarian ideology in politics can be seen as an immanent substitute for religious symbols oriented to transcendence (Buijs 1998).

Second, distinguishing each of the four basic forms of transcendence is also important because certain forms of transcendence have a critical function with respect to culture. Those who advocate radical transcendence or transcendence as alterity are usually critical of culture, whereas those who work with immanent transcendence look for a mediation between religion

and culture. Those who advocate radical immanence will be less critical of culture, as may be seen below in Altizer.

There are studies that deal with transcendence in the fields of philosophy, theology, and literature (Schwartz 2004) or politics (Sanders 2005) or art (De la Motte-Haber 2003, Schmied and Schilling 1990). With the exception of Taylor (1992)—whose analysis has been used critically for the model proposed above—the concept of transcendence is usually left unspecified. The philosophical study *Transcendence and Beyond* (Caputo and Scanlon 2007) also takes account of shifting transcendence in postmodern philosophy. If the concept of transcendence is differentiated, then differences and overlapping with respect to shifts in the area of religion and spirituality in the different cultural areas can be more easily detected.

Types of Transcendence as Form or Open Concept

Is it not lacking in nuance simply to include various, quite different philosophers, theologians, and artists under one type of transcendence? Barth and Marion, both of whom advocate radical transcendence, differ quite widely in their ideas, as do Altizer and Vattimo, who both argue for radical immanence. In art, there are differences between artists like Caspar David Friedrich and Anselm Kiefer, but the works of both exemplify immanent transcendence. In order to do justice to the unique aspects of a work of a thinker or an artist, the types should be viewed as “forms” or “open concepts.” They are given further “content” or “specification” by researching the author or artist more closely.

An example of this may be seen in Friederich’s *Two Men Contemplating the Moon* (1819)—two men are standing on a moonlit slope watching the moon. For Friedrich, nature proclaimed the glory of God’s creation. For Kiefer, immanent transcendence is present in a different way. The landscape is not idyllic but wounded by the violence of war, as his work *Winter Landscape* (1970) shows. In this work, a severed head floats between a sinister heaven and a winter landscape that has been stained red by the bleeding head. For Kiefer, there is a dramatic tension between an absent God after Auschwitz and the quest for this God (Stoker 2010a).

There are thus two elements that must be taken into account in order to establish the religious or spiritual: the *form*: the type of transcendence, the way in which the relation between heaven and earth or “beyond” and “here” is seen; and the *content*, the further specification of the type by an artist or author. The types of transcendence should be viewed as forms or open concepts, like Kant’s a priori concepts of understanding that still have to receive further specification: “Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind” (Kant 1929: 93, A51/B75). A type or form of transcendence is thus like a pattern or template that is filled in by content, by a certain type of spirituality.

As far as this content is concerned, how the other reality is evoked within the form of immanent transcendence depends on the author or artist. Friedrich finds his sources in his Lutheran tradition, whereas Kiefer uses all kinds of religious sources. Thus, Friedrich and Kiefer, on the one hand, share the same view of the relation between heaven and earth (the type or form of transcendence) but, on the other, differ from each other in the way in which they interpret this spiritually.

Radical transcendence can also be offered as an example. Radical transcendence can be detected in both Kierkegaard and in the Rothko Chapel paintings (Stoker 2008b). While the same form of transcendence is being described in both, the difference in the content, the specification, is evident, as is the difference in medium (Kierkegaard, linguistic; Rothko, art). In Kierkegaard, the content is determined by his Lutheran faith and the philosophy that he articulated in his polemics against Hegel. In Rothko, it is determined by his belief in a universal religious experience, unconnected to the world religions.

Examples of the Four Types as Form and Content

The four forms of transcendence have been described in a formal way above. As form, transcendence is often present but concealed, because it still appears with a certain content. Concrete examples of how the four types function on a practical level are offered below, with reference to writers such as Tillich, Kierkegaard, Altizer, and Derrida. These writers are, of course, only examples; other writers or artists stamp the type of transcendence they are defining with their own content.

Immanent Transcendence (Paul Tillich)

a) Form

Both realities are viewed as closely involved with each other—the absolute is experienced in and through mundane reality. Variants of this type can be found in Schleiermacher, Hegel, and Tillich.

b) Form and Content in Tillich

As opposed to an isolated transcendence of God as a perfect being far away and highly exalted in heaven, Tillich attempts to examine transcendence and immanence together. The starting point is the experience that people have of the Ultimate. Religious experience is as broad as human experience itself. Tillich can say this because he assumes that the human being has an immediate awareness of the Ultimate.

A brief insight into the functioning of immanent transcendence follows. I will first show how, according to Tillich, immanent transcendence functions in the experience of everyone and then (according to Tillich) what the situation is in organized religion in this respect.

c) The General Experience of Immanent Transcendence

Everyone needs courage to be. He or she needs to survive in the face of the constant threat of non-being. Because a finite power can have no power over non-being, Tillich assumes that this is an experience of infinite power, the power of being, of Being-itself (Tillich 1980). This power infused people with the courage to be and is therefore immanent but at the same time is transcendent. Tillich emphasizes the transcendent aspect first:

As the power of being, God transcends every being and also the totality of beings—the world. Being-itself is beyond finitude and infinity, otherwise it would be conditioned by something other than itself... There is no proportion or gradation between the finite and the infinite. (Tillich 1953: 263)

God is not the supreme being, but Being-itself. Ultimately, God is inexpressible; hence, one can only speak symbolically of God. That people experience Being-itself in the courage to be points to the fact that, however transcendent Being-itself may be, it is also immanent. God is not a stranger to the human

being: we participate in the God who transcends us because we experience him as a power in our existence. Tillich continues thus, "On the other hand, everything finite participates in being-itself and in its infinity. Otherwise it would not have the power of being. It would be swallowed by non-being ..." (Tillich 1953: 263).

He does not, therefore, emphasize transcendence at the expense of immanence, given that the finite already participates in Being-itself. Nor does he emphasize immanence at the expense of transcendence, for transcendence goes beyond the finite being. Therefore, one cannot speak here of a "cosmic monism." God and the world are not finally one, as they are in Hegel (Tillich GW 12: 234; 5: 157).

d) The Biblical Experience of Immanent Transcendence

Tillich maintained that the coherence of both elements of transcendence and immanence were best illustrated in the biblical God, in the incarnation—something that is unique. In the Word's becoming flesh, the universal, ultimate, and the concrete personal elements are united. The Word, the *Logos*, the universal principle of God's self-manifestation in nature and history, appears in something concrete, in the person of Jesus Christ (Stoker 1985).

This type of transcendence is open to culture and searches for a mediation between religion and culture. Religion is the substance of culture, and culture is the form of religion in Tillich. For example, he pays separate attention to art outside the church. He considers art that reveals a depth dimension of reality to be religious art.

In the 1920s, Tillich spoke of a theonomic unified culture but since then emphasized more the alienation between God and human beings. The ascription of meaning became more of a quest for meaning. In his *Systematic Theology*, he searches for answers to questions on the affirmation of life, salvation, and hope.

The salvation that has become visible in Christ has had its effect on history. The history of salvation is closely connected with profane history but, because of evil, alienation, and sin, does not converge with it. God enters history in human acts of freedom and love and leads it to completion. Unlike Hegel, Tillich regards the victory over the ambiguities within history

as only temporarily possible. The ambiguities are constantly overcome in fragmentary form where the Kingdom of God is manifested (Tillich 1964: 387).

Radical Transcendence (Søren Kierkegaard)

a) Form

The absolute is the wholly other and thus may be sharply distinguished from mundane reality. Variants of this type can be found in Kierkegaard, Barth, and Marion.

b) Form and Content in Kierkegaard

Kierkegaard regards the self of the human being as a synthesis in which the oppositions between eternity and temporality, finitude and infinity, necessity and freedom are held together and concretized. The human being develops this human structure in an ethical or religious way. While human beings determine themselves in the ethical sphere, they discover that they do not have the truth in themselves in the religious sphere. The relationship with God is thus entirely different in both spheres of life. In the ethical sphere God is equated with the moral order (Kierkegaard 1983): there is no qualitative difference here between God and human beings, as is the case in the religious sphere.

The qualitative difference between God and human beings is not intended as an isolated transcendence, as in Kant and deism. In Kierkegaard, God is a personal God, who is love. With the religious person in general, which Kierkegaard calls religion A, there is the distinction between the human as creature and God as creator, resulting in the human being's radical dependence on God. In the Christian faith—called religion B—the qualitative difference between God and human beings is that the human being is a sinner and God is holy. Below is a brief exploration of how radical transcendence informs the relationship between God and human beings in religion in general and in the Christian faith in particular.

c) Radical Transcendence in *Fear and Trembling*

An example of religion A is given in the persona of Abraham in *Fear and Trembling*, published in 1843 (Kierkegaard, 1983). For the believer, God's radical transcendence means that he (the believer) lives paradoxically in the tension between the irrecon-

cilability of the finite and the infinite. The model for this is the story of Abraham's approach to Isaac. Abraham shows how the believer functions by isolating himself from others and by his obedience to God. Abraham says nothing to Sarah, Eliezer, or Isaac about his having been instructed to sacrifice his son and goes on his way in loneliness, separated from his own community.

This story shows that faith has two movements. The first involves distancing oneself from finitude (Abraham's willingness to sacrifice the son he loves). That is infinite resignation, the suffering of the believer in the tension between the finite and the infinite. That tension emerges precisely from the fact that the finite continues to remain very important for the believer and is not discarded in favour of infinity. "Yet Abraham had faith, and had faith for this life" (Kierkegaard 1983: 20). The second movement is believing by reason of the absurd, the belief that Abraham would get his son Isaac back. Faith is faith in the impossible, faith that for God everything is possible. Abraham shows that the individual is related absolutely to the absolute. The individual's duty to God suspends the ethical duty (to man in general). The individual is higher than the general.

These two movements hold true not only for the faith of Abraham but also for that of every believer. The movement of breaking with finite existence while the finite cannot be given up and that of opening oneself up for grace (Kierkegaard 1983: 38). Religion is incommensurable with mundane existence, something that is particularly evident in the Christian faith.

d) Radical Transcendence in the Christian Faith

Christians are pilgrims, strangers in the world. The transcendent God challenges human existence by calling the human being from a safe present into an uncertain future. According to the Christian faith, eternal truth comes into time (Kierkegaard 1992: 209). The incarnation is an indication of radical transcendence and cannot be made comprehensible. It is the absolute paradox. That is why Kierkegaard, writing both under his own name and under his pseudonyms, makes use of "indirect communication." He communicates indirectly when it is a matter of a communication regarding existence. Unique to Christian-religious communication is that, because of its revelatory character, it primarily involves a direct (doctrinal) communica-

tion, such as the communication that the human being is sinful. When this revelatory fact is known, direct communication changes into indirect communication (Kierkegaard 1967-1978: 1, 288-89).

In the Christian faith the human being as sinner stands in contrast to God (Kierkegaard 1992: 583-84), which constitutes the qualitative distinction between God and human beings. As Climacus writes in *Philosophical Fragments*:

But then my soul is also gripped with new amazement—indeed it is filled with adoration, for it certainly would have been odd if it had been a human poem. Presumably it could occur to a human being to poetize himself in the likeness of the god or the god in the likeness of himself, but not to poetize that the god poetized himself in the likeness of a human being. (Kierkegaard 1985: 36)

Here also the two movements of faith can be detected. With faith, one grounds oneself in God and must break with one's immediate existence (the first movement of faith). Man is a sinner and should become a different person: "a person of a different quality ... a new person" (Kierkegaard 1985: 18). A transformation is necessary. In an attitude of humility, he opens himself up to the grace of forgiveness. This is the second movement of faith.

This type of radical transformation sees religion A and primarily the Christian faith (religion B) as incommensurable with culture. Sacred history is qualitatively different from profane history. Kierkegaard does not deny that there many forms of religion (in the ethical and religious spheres) but acknowledges the clear boundary indicating the qualitative difference between God and human beings. The believer should try to endure the tension of the irreconcilability of the finite and infinite (Kierkegaard 1992: 484). That the finite is not denied is apparent from the place that art occupies in the Christian faith. If Tillich sought for the religious in art outside the church as a revelation of God as well, it is different with Kierkegaard. Art is important for him as well but should, from a Christian point of view, only have the function of promoting faith. Art outside the church is merely a mirror of the aesthetic and ethical spheres (Stoker 2010b).

Radical Immanence (Thomas Altizer)

a) Form

The absolute is no longer sought outside mundane reality; both realities converge. This type can be found in, among others, Altizer, Taylor (during a specific phase), and Vattimo.

b) Form and Content in Altizer

With Nietzsche, Altizer holds that the Christian transcendent God, who is opposed to life, is dead. Altizer criticizes the extra-worldly God of deism who, in his view, is the same as the God of Barth (Altizer 1966: 91).

It is God himself who is the transcendent enemy of the fullness and the passion of man's life in the world, and only through God's death can humanity be liberated from that repression, which is the real ruler of history. (Altizer 1966: 22)

Altizer continued to speak about God after the death of the transcendent God. As a Hegelian theologian, Altizer views God as a dialectical process that ends in the merging of God, world and the human self. Kenosis, incarnation, the new humanity, and the Kingdom of God are developments in this process.

c) Kenosis and Incarnation

Using Hegel as a reference, Altizer sketches the dialectical development of the God or the Spirit. When the Spirit exists in its kenotic form, he can no longer be seen as he originally was but only as the opposite of himself or as the Being-other of the Spirit. The Spirit is the emptying process of negativity and thus constitutes the actual reality of the world. Altizer sees God or the Spirit as a dialectical process reflected in the kenotic reality of the Word become flesh. In no case does he want to speak of God's existence. God has denied and transcended himself in the incarnation and has thus completely and definitively ceased to exist in his original form. God no longer exists as a transcendent spirit or sovereign lord (Altizer 1966: 62-69).

This is a radical Christology. The death of the Father is the birth of the Son. God *is* Jesus, by which Altizer means that the incarnation is a total act through which God denied himself and ceased to exist as the transcendent God.

The truth that is revealed in Christ is universal, instead of particular. The incarnation includes not only the individual historical figure Jesus but is also an all-encompassing kenotic process via which the infinite empties itself into the finite. The incarnation and the cross are thus not seen as individual events but as an eschatological process of redemption that goes on, a process that consists in a progressive transfer of the Spirit into the flesh, the transfer from transcendence to immanence.

d) God, History, and Universal Humanity

Thus, the death of God is not a denial of the divine. The disappearance of the transcendent God entails the appearance of the completely immanent divine in history. This means that the opposition between God and the world has disappeared. History is thus the incarnation of God.

Altizer confirms that he is not a difference thinker in the sense of Kierkegaard but, like Hegel, views difference as merely relative and dialectical. He writes:

But [God's] death is a self-negation or self-annihilation: consequently, by freely willing the dissolution of His transcendent "Selfhood", the Godhead reverses the life and movement of the transcendent realm, transforming transcendence into immanence, thereby *abolishing of every alien other*. (Altizer 1966: 113; italics mine).

As the quotation above indicates, the core of the content Altizer gives to this type of transcendence, radical immanence, is the destruction of every "alien other." The difference or "alien other" is to be viewed as merely relative and dialectical, and ultimately leads to the same outcome. Altizer does not recognize the non-dialectical difference, the wholly other encountered in Kierkegaard and which emerges again in Derrida as transcendence as alterity. Altizer rejects all forms of transcendence insofar as they point to something outside this world, to some alien other. He writes:

With the death of God, a primordial Being existing in-itself as its own creation or ground has been shattered, and with its dissolution every alien other loses its intrinsic ground. Now a new humanity arises that can give itself to the immediate actuality of the present (Altizer 1966: 72)

The English poet William Blake called this new humanity the body of Jesus because it is the incarnated body of that God who died eternally for human beings. Altizer thus observed that Jesus is the Christian name for the totality of experience and the new reality created through the destruction of the original being whose death ushers in a new humanity, freed from all transcendent norms and meaning (Altizer 1966: 73). Altizer defends a form of pantheism, the view that God is all and all is God. His view of God as a dialectical process admits a minimal presence of transcendence.

e) Kingdom of God

“Extrawordly” transcendence has been rejected, which means an end to the “no” to this world. God is Jesus and humanity is the body of Jesus. Thus, there is reconciliation and a “yes” to life and mundane reality. Altizer sees reconciliation as a negative process through which each alien other is turned around, a process through which all negations are denied (Altizer 1966: 114). Through this kenotic process, every power that limits life is destroyed. The dialectical divine process finds its eschatology in the Kingdom of God that is completely present now.

For the content of this, Altizer refers to Nietzsche’s doctrine of eternal return as a saying “yes” to this world (Altizer 1977). This eternal return should not be viewed as a return to an “eternity” at the beginning of time, as in the archaic myths. Eternity exists in the present: the Kingdom of God is completely present (Altizer 1980: 46). Altizer continues to use the biblical term “Kingdom of God” to refer to the presence of God as immanent universal Spirit. It has to do with the presence of God “only through the absence of the God of pure transcendence” (Altizer 1980: 50).

Each type of transcendence has—when it is given content—its own language for articulating that transcendence. Tillich found that in the symbol: one can speak of God only symbolically. Kierkegaard pointed to the language of direct-indirect communication. Altizer chose the language of the parable, the language Jesus used. In this language, that which is said is immediately present—the parable says what it says directly, as distinct from metaphor and allegory (Altizer 1980: 8). That is why the language of the parable is used to speak about the present Kingdom of God: “... parable sounds or speaks an im-

mediate presence. True, that presence is the presence of world, and the presence of that world which is immediately and commonly at hand" (Altizer 1980: 6).

This type of radical immanence removes the opposition between sacred and profane. Indeed, it illustrates the way in which God is a dialectical process that ends in the Kingdom of God as the total presence. As a result, eternity exists in the now of the affirmation of life. The sacred changes into the profane (Altizer 1966: 51). Altizer sees a parallel here between religion and art in that neither the contemporary world nor modern art refers to transcendence (Altizer 1980). Just as the sacred becomes the profane, so art becomes non-art and vice versa, which leads to an aesthetization of the world.

Transcendence as Alterity (Jacques Derrida)

a) Form

The relationship between transcendence and immanence is no longer viewed as an opposition. Rather, one has learned to think beyond the opposition, whereby the wholly other can appear in every other. This type of transcendence can be found in Levinas, Derrida, Irigaray, De Dijn, and Taylor (during a particular phase).

b) Form and Content in Derrida

As a difference thinker, difference is central to Derrida, but unlike Kierkegaard, in Derrida's case, it has to do with the question of language and meaning (Derrida 1997). He views language broadly, not as consisting only of words, sentences and texts; rather, he views the whole of reality textually.

Within linguistics, De Saussure argued that the connection between *signifiant* (signifier) and *signifié* (signified) was arbitrary. Signifier and signified do not have any content in themselves but come into being within a series of mutual distinctions and differences. Derrida radicalizes De Saussure's notion of difference into *différance* and speaks of an ongoing and groundless "trace." Here he has in mind the becoming character of signs and texts that, like footprints in the sand, shows the becoming of the constant movement. The trace does not refer back to an authentic beginning, to a "true meaning," a search for a first origin, as had been done in metaphysical theology, ontotheology.

c) The Death of the God of Ontotheology and the Postponement of Definitive Meaning

In Derrida, the death of God has a somewhat different meaning from the way the phrase is used in Altizer and Hegel. The God of ontotheology, God as origin, as true "Meaning," is dead. Derrida deconstructs the metaphysical ideal of the permanent presence of a fixed order of things to which the signs of language allegedly refer. Beings can only exist in a context with other beings. This includes the signifier and the signified function within a field of traces and references, as well as the entities themselves as signs within contexts with their references. Derrida views reality textually. There are no linguistic signs that take up a transcendent or transcendental position with respect to a context; none that arrange relationships of meaning. If there were, meaning would have the status of evident presence, of a being or an inner light. Instead of viewing concepts as "transcendentally signified," Derrida views the linguistic sign as a trace that does not stand alone but refers to something and leads to something. A linguistic sign exists in an infinitely widening network of internal references. For this, Derrida uses the term *différance*, in addition to the term trace. Literally, this term means both "to differ" and "to postpone." The movement of *différance* is the movement of difference and postponement. *Différance* means that incomprehensible differences are active in every experience and articulation of meaning, which entails the postponement of definitive meaning (Derrida 1982).

d) Deconstruction of the Opposition between Transcendence and Immanence

Derrida's philosophy deconstructs, dissects, hierarchical oppositions that are said to represent an order in reality. This is not only a dismantling. Deconstruction also has a positive effect. The undermining of fixed patterns brings about an openness for new meanings. In that sense, Derrida is justified in calling deconstruction an "invention de l'autre," allowing an irreducible singular entity to arise (Evink 2002: 77, 88). The deconstruction of the opposition between transcendence and immanence serves as an example here.

Derrida has a great deal of sympathy for difference in Kierkegaard, as can be seen from his reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* below, but Derrida works it out differently. If one

examines the positions of radical transcendence (Kierkegaard) and radical immanence (Altizer) discussed above from the perspective of Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction, then the one pole continually exists in a hierarchical relation to the other. Radical transcendence does not do justice to immanence, and, conversely, radical immanence does not do justice to transcendence. Deconstruction dismantles such hierarchical positions. Derrida rejects Kierkegaard's God:

[W]e should stop thinking about God as someone, over there, way up there, transcendent, and, what is more—into the bargain, precisely—capable, more than any satellite orbiting in space, of seeing into the most secret of the most interior places. (Derrida 1992: 108)

The reference to God who sees "into the most secret of the most interior places" is a reference to Matthew 6:4.

Deconstruction does not simply involve a reversal: if it did, the hierarchical order would remain in place and only an exchange of roles would occur. Radical immanence (Altizer) would take the place of radical transcendence, with the suppression of the wholly other as a result. Moreover, Altizer's making presence central shows unmistakable signs of the onto-theology that Derrida had criticized. Derrida searches for the intangible wholly other. That happens in what I, as distinct from the preceding positions, call "transcendence as alterity." Derrida interprets this position by viewing the biblical God, who sees what is secret (Matthew 6:4), as absolute alterity, as alterity in myself, an alterity that is more internal to me than I myself. "God is the name of the possibility I have of keeping a secret that is visible from the interior but not from the exterior" (Derrida 1992: 108). My existence is determined by an appeal that makes itself known in the conscience.

I will explore transcendence as alterity more deeply and describe it via *Donner la Mort* supplemented by Derrida's explanation of negative theology.

Transcendence as Alterity in *Donner la Mort* (The Gift of Death)
In *Donner la mort*, Derrida gives his deconstructive reading of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*. He deconstructs the theistic concept of God as

X who on the one hand would already exist, and who, on the other hand, what is more, would be endowed with attributes such as paternity and the power to penetrate secrets, to see the invisible, to see in me better than I
(Derrida 1992: 108)

As can be seen below, Derrida intends the wholly other to encompass a much broader meaning than simply indicating the biblical God.

Derrida acknowledges the relationship with an absolute alterity from which a call goes out but generalizes it and connects it not with religious faith, as Kierkegaard does, but with ethics. He generalizes the absolute responsibility to God as a matter of absolute responsibility that everyone has. This shift from faith to ethics arises because he generalizes the wholly other. Transcendence concerns not only God as the wholly other but every other is wholly other.

If God is completely other, the figure or name of the wholly other, then every other (one) *is* every (bit) other. *Tout autre est tout autre*. This formula disturbs Kierkegaard's discourse on one level while at the same time reinforcing its most extreme ramifications. It implies that God, as the wholly other, is to be found everywhere there is something of the wholly other. And since each of us, everyone else, each other is infinitely other in its absolute singularity, inaccessible, solitary, transcendent ... then what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to *every other (one) as every (bit) other* [*tout autre comme tout autre*], in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh. Every other (in the sense of each other) is every bit other (absolutely other). (Derrida 1992: 78)

As completely transcendent and completely other God is like all others. The infinite alterity of the wholly other belongs to every other, to every man and every woman, even to every living being (Derrida 1992: 83f., 87). That is transcendence as alterity, a transcendence beyond the opposition of transcendence and immanence. God is everywhere that the wholly other is. So, in Derrida's reading, the story of Abraham's sacrifice shows the

structure of everyday: "Through its paradox it speaks of the responsibility required at every moment for every man and every woman" (Derrida 1992: 78). From the moment that I am connected to the call of the other, I know, just like Abraham answering God, that I can answer that only "by sacrificing ethics, that is, by sacrificing whatever obliges me to also respond, in the same way, in the same instant, to all others" (Derrida 1992: 68). By choosing one obligation, I betray all my other obligations to those I know or do not know, all who could die of hunger or disease (Derrida 1992: 69, 70f.).

e) General Apophatics: Messianic Structure and *Khora*

This type of transcendence is found on the margins of or outside organized religions such as Judaism and Christianity. In Derrida, this type has more to do with indicating a structure of alterity rather than a concrete revelation or religion; more about openness (*Offenbarkeit*) than about something revealed. That becomes evident through Derrida's turning Christian apophatics, negative theology, into a general apophatics (Caputo 1997: 41-57).

Derrida's philosophy is undeniably related to negative theology. Negative theology uses apophatic language, in which positive statements about God are negated in a search for that wholly other that cannot be properly articulated in language. Deconstruction and *différance* are not this and not that, not this way and not that way. Truth and justice, to which Derrida's thinking is directed, seem unattainable because of their continuing postponement. The negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Eckhart, and Angelus Silesius emphasizes God's complete alterity. As previously mentioned, Derrida himself rejects, as we said, the radically transcendent God and is therefore not that interested in negative theology because of its orientation to God as supreme being. What interests him is its *use of language* (Derrida 1998: 59). It is a language that attempts to transcend itself, but, despite that, remains a language, one that tests its own limits. It is a language that attempts to erase itself and to discard its contents and is related to a transcendent "place," a mystery outside of or above language. The name of God can only be preserved on condition that this name also constantly erases itself: "'God' 'is' the name of this bot-

tomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language" (Derrida 1998: 59).

A similar shift is evident in Derrida's reading of Christian negative theology to that in his reading of *Fear and Trembling*. As the faith story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac is formalized into an everyday event, so the apophatic movement, the negation with reference to what is transcendent, as well as the negation and affirmation of the God of Christian theology, is formalized and abstracted into a general apophatics. The shift from Christian apophatics to a general apophatics may be illustrated by the following quotation:

Indeed, negative theology is one of the most remarkable manifestations of this differing-from-itself. We thus say: in that of which people *could believe* that it is the core of a history of Christianity ... the apophatic project is also *devoted to making itself independent of revelation*, of every literal speaking about the New Testament eventuality, of the coming of Christ, of the Passion, of the doctrine of the Trinity, etc. An immediate mysticism, but then without a vision, a kind of abstract *kenosis*, liberates it from every authority, every story, every dogma, every belief and ultimately every belief *that can be defined*. (Derrida 1998: 73f.; italics mine)

Derrida is thus searching for an "an-archic origin" (Derrida 2002: 54-59). To that end, he abstracts from the revelations of world religions and conceives of the condition of the possibility of revelation as a structure of openness (*Offenbarkeit*). In Heidegger's terms, the revelation of transcendence is, like a specific event, something that can occur only within the events of being that first make it possible. A revelation presupposes the opening up of being.

Derrida describes this "general structure of openness" in a Jewish way and a Greek way. The Jewish way is the *messianic structure* as the formal structure of openness to an alterity in time that entails both a promise and a command: the promise of a just future and the command to be open to this and to be receptive to the wholly other. The Greek way is *khora*, which is the reception room that precedes space and time, it does not start any time or history and is the always presupposed condition necessary for revelation.

This type of transcendence is given its own language in Derrida as well, that of the deconstruction of the apophatic language of negative theology. With regard to the attitude to culture, this position shows a similarity to that of radical transcendence. It is critical—phenomena in culture should be deconstructed. This type is beyond the opposition of transcendence and immanence in the sense that the wholly other can be indicated via the process of deconstruction in morality, politics, religion, and literature.

In short, transcendence as absolute alterity does not have to do with a transcendent God, but with a “God” who is everywhere that the wholly other is, especially in the ethical (and political) situation. This position appears to be a *via media* between radical transcendence (Kierkegaard), which emphasizes the wholly other *in* mundane reality too little, and radical immanence (Altizer) which accepts the world as it is through denying the wholly other. Derrida searches on the margins of or outside the religions for transcendence as alterity, which gives rise to such terms as messianism without a messiah and religion without religion.

Four examples have been given here that show how a specific philosopher, theologian, writer, or artist gives content to a type or form of transcendence. The essays in part two of this volume offer examples of transcendence (two in each case) that correspond to one of the four types of transcendence in my typology.

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