

## TRANSCENDENCE AND IMMANENCE AS THEOLOGICAL CATEGORIES

Transcendence is the religious category *par excellence*. It refers to that particular quality by which the source and terminus of the religious relation surpasses absolutely the mind's and all other reality. It introduces separation into the most intimate union, negation into the most affirmative assertion. It provides the dynamic tension without which the religious act would grow slack and eventually collapse in its own immanence. Transcendence marks religious practice before it becomes a principle of reflection. Both in an individual and in a culture it requires time and religious attentiveness to attain its full potential. At the same time it provides the initial impulse to a movement that, from the very beginning dissatisfied with "things as they are," continues to increase the distance between the given reality and man's ultimate aspirations. The principle of transcendence directs his spiritual life long before it appears as a theological category.

Prodding constantly to abandon the acquired and to sacrifice sufficiency the dynamics of transcendence incite man to his highest achievements. It drives men and women rich in worldly promise to choose utter solitude or the company of the insane, the helpless and the dying; it inspires artists to unseen visions of reality; it converts morality from self-realization to self-denial. Yet if not allowed to come to rest in a new immanence, the obsession with transcendence turns into an all-consuming fire, destructive of the very culture which ignited it. Intolerance, persecution, iconoclasm, religious warfare and racial discrimination all have followed in the trail of the unrestrained negation of the immanent.

However, our problem today is hardly an excessive awareness of transcendence, but much rather its total decline. It is unnecessary to restate the well-known symptoms. Instead of discussing the demise of the transcendent principle I prefer to focus attention on a particular concept of it, a concept which has gradually imposed itself upon Christian practice as well as upon theological reflection, and which, if I am not mistaken, is greatly responsible for the present crisis of the religious consciousness.

If transcendence is in jeopardy today, it is certainly not for recent lack of emphasis on it. The theological air still resounds with the echoes of such phrases as "ganz Andere," "trotzdem," "tangential presence." The absolute quality of the distinction

between the sacred and the profane which until recently ruled omnipotent in religious studies directly results from an unmitigated separation between divine and earthly reality. I have attempted to show elsewhere that this distinction cannot support the universal claims which have been made for it. It has proven to be wholly inadequate to explain the nature of religion in primitive society and it is of doubtful value for understanding the contemporary religious scene. But the absolute character of the distinction is all the more instructive about our conception of transcendence: one in which the sacred and the profane are mutually exclusive and share the same plane of reality. In the light of this view such unorthodox phenomena as the secular theology and the horizontal theology of hope come to look more and more like the final stations along the same road where, not too long ago, we encountered the impressive structures of neo-orthodoxy. If God and the world are absolutely different then, indeed, the final conclusion must be to leave that world to its own devices and not to confuse issues by what belongs to another, ultimately unknowable order. Secularism and immanentism must be questioned. But not in the name of the neo-orthodox assertions and pronouncements which provided the immediate occasion for their emergence.

In this paper I shall attempt to show how the concept of transcendence has gradually been corrupted to the point where its demise can no longer be arrested by strong affirmations. Not a new affirmation is needed to stay the encroaching secularism, but a fundamental overhaul of the category itself. If I read the signs correctly, Christian practice has already initiated what theology must still begin to conceptualize.

Elsewhere I have attempted to show how the objectivist attitude, prepared by previous ages but predominant only in the modern epoch, has now subjugated all human activity—theoretical as well as practical—to the desire to control, to grasp, to dominate.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, an exclusively functional attitude leaves no room for genuine transcendence. Yet here I shall restrict my discussion to those theoretical developments which directly affect the theological category of transcendence.

Even at a time when theology dominated the sciences, Christian thinkers experienced considerable difficulty in establishing

<sup>1</sup>Cf. "The Religious Crisis of Our Culture" in *The Yale Review* 65 (Winter, 1976), 203-17. "Secularism and the Crisis of Our Culture" in the Fall issue of *Thought* 1976.

the relation between the transcendent Being of God and the derived one of the creature. God's Being was usually described in a way that first and foremost opposed it to that of the creature. More radical attempts to emphasize God's immanence invariably ended up being condemned. Such a fate befell Amaury de Bène's thesis that God is the creature's act of existing, William of Auvergne's claim that God is in all things as the soul is in the body, and Eckhart's obscure theory that God is the essential Being of every creature. One of the amazing facets of St. Thomas' position on the issue is that it prevailed without ever having reached full clarification. The concept of participation by which he links the creature to God is certainly promising enough for establishing God's immanence. In some texts its description attains an almost mystical quality, as in the following one taken from the *Summa Theologiae*:

Being is innermost in each thing and most fundamentally present within all things, since it is formal in respect of everything found in a thing. . . . Hence it must be that God is in all things, and innermost.<sup>2</sup>

Yet when it comes to defining the nature of this divine immanence, Thomas concludes, in the end, that it consists in a relation of causal dependency. Now causality is a typical category of juxtaposition.<sup>3</sup> If God's immanence is restricted to causality, then in the final analysis his presence to the creature is reduced to the impact of one being upon another. Though St. Thomas makes it quite clear that God is not simply *a* supreme being, but that he is the very essence of Being—its primary instance, so to speak,<sup>4</sup> from which all beings are derived, nevertheless causality admits of no more intimate union than the one between one being and another. Thus with one stroke Aquinas has lowered *both* the immanence *and* the transcendence which he had raised so highly in principle. In addition, as we shall have occasion to see, causal determinations are particularly inappropriate for describing the intrinsic dependency of a free agent.

<sup>2</sup>*Summa Theologiae* I, 8, 1.

<sup>3</sup>This appears, among other things, in the way in which it originates—through the awareness of constant and identical succession. One need not agree with Hume's restrictive analysis to accept this. Kant considered Hume's description wholly inadequate, yet considered the concept of succession indispensable for building up the category. See the pertinent passages in the *Critique of Pure Reason* on the principles of judgment and the schemata of the imagination.

<sup>4</sup>I find the descriptive expression "primary instance" in Joseph Owens, *An Elementary Christian Metaphysics* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963), p. 117.

If we detect a great deal of ambiguity in the scholastic position on transcendence, there is hardly any in modern philosophy. But to appreciate its precise impact we must first dispel the frequent assumption that God ceased to play an important role in philosophy after the Renaissance. One knowledgeable scholar of the period puts the matter in the right perspective:

At no time before or since has God occupied such an important position in philosophy. This does not mean that the rationalist systems were religious or theocentric in structure. Quite the contrary. God was made to serve the purposes of the system itself. He became a major cog, but still a cog, in the overall program of answering skepticism, incorporating the scientific spirit, and building a rational explanation of the real.<sup>5</sup>

To Descartes and his followers God is very much present, but primarily as *l'auteur de la nature* who provides the indispensable impulse that starts the system rolling—both the system of nature and that of Cartesian philosophy. A supreme cause connects the two separate realms of being: the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. This straightforward causal account of God's "immanence" discards the remnants of ambiguity inherent to the medieval theories. Instead it proposes a clear, tripartite structure of reality in which God has a well-defined place and function of his own. The most surprising thing about Descartes' presentation is that Christian theologians and philosophers, after a period of hesitation, almost universally adopted it, including such deeply spiritual thinkers as de Bérulle and Malebranche. Pascal appears to have been one of the few to experience major qualms about the God of the *première chiquenaude*.

Locke's *Essay* may have originated out of a concern to refute Descartes' rationalism. But on the issue of divine transcendence he takes exactly the same position. God is introduced to secure a solid base to the universe as well as an adequate sanction to morality. Locke's most original contribution, as far as I can see, consisted in adding to the worldly functions of *l'auteur de la nature* the moral ones of *le dieu gendarme*.

It would be unfair, I think, to attribute this decline of both divine immanence and transcendence to secularizing tendencies. There is no reason to question the genuine and even pious temperament of Descartes' faith. Locke and Leibnitz may have been of a

<sup>5</sup>James Collins, *God in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1959), p. 56.



somewhat more mundane disposition, but they were staunch believers all the same in the "deity" which they so abstractly yet so confidently conceived. As for Spinoza I have no doubts that he fully deserves the characterization of a man intoxicated with God. Yet, as Bruno Bauer accurately perceived long ago, he nevertheless provided a major link in the development toward modern atheism.<sup>6</sup>

Then what stands at the origin of the devaluation of the concept of transcendence? I believe it is, above all, the ever increasing "objectivism" (Husserl called it "naturalism") of our culture. But this concept itself requires some explanation. Objectivity has been pursued since antiquity. The Greeks discovered it and our civilization owes it its distinctive and most remarkable achievements.<sup>7</sup> Yet the general outlook of our culture was not "objectivist," that is, exclusively object-oriented, until the beginning of the modern age. Especially during the patristic period and the high Middle Ages its characteristic worldliness was balanced by an intensive inward trend and the search for an enduring, innermost presence beyond the changing appearances.

From the sixteenth century on, however, reality became rapidly reduced to its objective, if not its physico-mathematical qualities. The onesidedness of the new approach seriously impaired the mind's self-understanding and, for the same reason, its ability to conceive a genuine transcendence. It even reduced our view of nature. What Heidegger writes about Descartes goes also for his successors: the world turned into a presence-at-hand (*Vorhanden*), that is, an exclusive object of manipulation, closed to contemplation.<sup>8</sup> Galileo's dream of overcoming the subjective, secondary qualities and bestowing upon the universe the all-encompassing unity of being accessible through a single method has never come true. But it has affected almost all our processes of reflection. Its influence was particularly noteworthy in Spinoza whose case is uniquely revealing. His fundamental intuition, I suspect, was religious and a mystical awareness of God's immanence lies at the root of his so-called pantheistic monism.<sup>9</sup> Yet

<sup>6</sup>Quoted by Marx in *Die Heilige Familie, Marx Engels Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt, 1927), I<sup>3</sup>, p. 303.

<sup>7</sup>I develop this in the two articles to which I referred earlier.

<sup>8</sup>*Being and Time*, tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 129.

<sup>9</sup>Dilthey reduces that monism to philosophical sources, such as Telesio, Bruno and, ultimately, the naturalism of Lucretius, the Stoa and the Presocratics. Cf.

Spinoza chose to express this one divine reality through the objective category *par excellence*—the substance—thus taking the objectivist principle to its most extreme application. Out of this one objective entity all modes proceed, including the mind, and it is through objective methods of understanding, not through mystical experience, that the mind rejoins its own substance. Believers commonly attack Spinoza's total immanentism as being incompatible with a religious idea of God. But it was his objectivist approach to the Absolute, rather than the intensity of the divine immanence, which jeopardizes the religious purity of his vision. Mystics have never been afraid of bold formulas to describe the closeness of God, but they maintain his transcendence by refusing to reduce the divine presence to the enclosures of objective being.

Thus far I have considered the intrinsic inadequacy of the causal model of transcendence from a purely theoretical point of view. But what is at stake is far more than an imperfect representation of the relation between God and man, with no real impact upon the believer's religious life. The objectivist view of transcendence has, in fact, had a devastating effect upon the religious character of our entire culture. The slowly emerging awareness that a causal dependence is incompatible with genuine freedom led directly to the atheism of our time. Again it was Kant who in both *Critiques* exposed the mutual exclusiveness of freedom and causality, even though he himself continued to accept their coexistence in the relation between the Creator and the free creature. In the antinomies of pure reason Kant opposed freedom to causality, but then resolved the conflict by assigning to each a separate realm. Even if this aesthetic solution had sufficed to justify the presence of free will and causal necessity in the same universe, it failed to prove how a causal relation could be at the origin of this freedom. The theory of autonomy in the *Critique of Practical Reason* made an open conflict even more inevitable. If any heteronomous interference with self-determination could be fatal to freedom itself, it would follow logically that freedom could not have its origin in a causal process. Yet Kant never drew that conclusion. Later he even claimed that it was possible to regard all moral duties as divine commands and that this was, in fact, the very essence of religion.<sup>10</sup>

*Anthropologie des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts*, in *Werke* II, p. 463. Also: *Der Entwicklungsgeschichtliche Pantheismus*, in *Werke* II, pp. 315-16.

<sup>10</sup>*Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), pp. 79, 3-10.

Later philosophers of freedom were more consistent: since most of them continued to accept the causal model of transcendence as the only possible one, they became almost without exception atheists. Nietzsche, Hartmann, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, each in his own way, applied the Kantian dilemma to theology. Freedom can tolerate contingency, situatedness and limitation, but not a causal determination of its origin, not even a givenness of its ideals and values. If ideals and values were pre-established and causally conveyed to the free agent, his only choice would consist in either ratifying and realizing them or in refusing to do so. Sartre added that in such a choice freedom can only claim the refusal, that is, evil, as being genuinely its own. Nothing can be given except freedom itself and that, by its very nature, cannot be given causally.

That this problem did not emerge earlier in Western consciousness, we can ascribe only to the small amount of control which man actually exercised over a world that dominated him more than he dominated it. In presenting the creative act as a super-cause, theology may have assisted man in coping with situations and events over which he yielded so little power. It enabled him to believe in order where only chaos appeared and to trust in a loving Providence when an all too indifferent fate crushed him. Thus at one time the causal model of transcendence may have done little harm and a great deal of good to man's religious awareness. But once he became more and more master over his own destiny, the model should have been abandoned. Instead it was boosted into the only possible one by the very sciences which should have disposed of it. The words of an American theologian of dubious orthodoxy come to mind:

Here is the most tragic irony of all: The great religions seeking to save, have developed an ideology peculiarly fitted to the need of man in the days of his weakness. But this very same ideology, now in the days of his power, blocks the way of salvation.<sup>11</sup>

H. N. Wieman criticizes especially Christianity for interpreting the creative event as a transcendent shaper of events which prevents man from assuming full responsibility for his own creativity. A value system which he continues to accept as "given," often long after he has ceased to believe in the "Giver," is unfit to keep pace

<sup>11</sup>H. N. Wieman, *The Source of Human Good* (1946) as anthologized in *Religious Belief and Philosophical Thought* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963), p. 592.

with his own technological and scientific achievements and allows them to turn into chaos. The present crisis must at least in part be traced to a failure of moral responsibility, perpetuated by the idea of a God-given value system.

But the problems created by an objectivist-causal model of transcendence are not restricted to the area of secular autonomy. In fact, they first emerged in a purely theological dispute on salvation. The question *de auxiliis* became a critical one when the causal model of the divine influence came to be accepted as the only valid one. Not surprisingly, all the proposed theses resulted in logical impasses, whether the spokesmen were Calvinists, Jansenists, Banesists or Molinists. The outcome could hardly have been different, given the incompatibility of the ingredients: two agents, one divine and one human, cooperating in the same act in such a way that the former causally determined the freedom of the latter. Whether the divine grace of election was irresistible as the Calvinists taught, or practically irresistible as the Jansenists held, or plain resistible as it was for the Jesuits, in all cases authentic freedom is bound to go by the board. Antony Flew is basically right in regarding the doctrine of predestination not a theological accident, but "an immediate consequence of basic theism."<sup>12</sup> A theism conceived on the basis of a causal concept of transcendence can escape the pitfalls of a rigid predestination theory only by not being consistent. To conceive the intrinsic dependence of grace as dependence upon another cause is to deny the free agent's autonomy. It also is to deny any true immanence of God in the soul. It is no mere coincidence that the disputes on predestination were paralleled by a trend in theology to neglect the tradition of God's uncreated immanence in the justified in favor of the causal effectiveness of his created grace.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly creation signifies absolute dependence and salvation implies, in addition, that man is powerless to achieve his ultimate destiny by mere self-realization. But this does not mean that freedom is "caused" by God's omnipotence, or that value and truth are divinely established. Nor does it follow that God elects

<sup>12</sup> Antony Flew, *God and Philosophy* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1966), p. 45.

<sup>13</sup> Significantly the only theologians who did not follow that trend were those who wrote under the direct influence of medieval mystics or of the Greek Fathers, such as Lessius, Petavius, Scheeben and, in our own time, de Régnon and de la Taille. Cf. Peter Fransen, *Divine Grace and Man* (New York: The New American Library, 1965), pp. 122-43.



some and rejects others by granting or withholding the efficacious grace which alone can save them. Such faulty representations all juxtapose two beings of which one depends upon the other in the same order of reality. Such a causal subordination conflicts with the very notion of divine transcendence. A genuine transcendence conceives the relation between creature and creator, between saved and savior as much more intimate than causal terminology can ever express. The causal concept entails a succession of active and passive roles on the part of God and man in which human autonomy and divine omnipotence are alternatively sacrificed. Molinism has erected this contradiction into a science. But it merely articulates in theological terms the common beliefs of most Christians regarding the operation of Providence. A supreme power allows the natural processes of this world to follow their "own" course, until it threatens to collide with God's "own" projects of salvation or damnation—at which point God himself in turn takes hold of the events.

The paradox of divine transcendence is that it can be consistently maintained only as long as God is conceived as fully immanent. As an English divine once wrote: "Immanence is not transcendence, yet it is the transcendent which is immanent," or again, "God is all man is, as well as all he is ever likely to become."<sup>14</sup> Mystics and spiritual men of all ages have known that God becomes more transcendent to us as he becomes more immanent in us. Each step closer to him is followed by two steps backward. Precisely where man is most autonomous, he is most intrinsically dependent. For the only dependence compatible with full autonomy consists in God's immanent presence and that presence grows more intensive as man partakes more directly in God's own autonomy. Not the exercise of freedom limits man's dependence, but the restrictions of his freedom. Only the latter can he call exclusively his own. At the same time, it is through the awareness of those restrictions that he remains conscious of God's transcendence within his immanence.

If pantheism abolishes divine transcendence, pantheism may well be the only way of preserving it. Yet the existing expositions of this theory in Whitehead, Hartshorne and the later Austin Farrer fail to satisfy the religious mind. Is it because theology has not given flesh to those bare bones? When Whitehead calls God the

<sup>14</sup>Maurice Relton, "The Christian Concept of God" in *Studies in Christian Doctrine* (London: Macmillan, 1960), p. 57.

"aboriginal instance of this creativity, and . . . therefore the aboriginal condition which qualifies its action,"<sup>15</sup> we may dispute the theological appropriateness of "aboriginal instance of creativity" as a divine attribute, but this does not dispense us from heeding the message which it conveys. A concept of creation in which the divine creativity precedes the creature's self-creativity is unsatisfactory: all creation is self-creation with God and through God. Without this self-creative act God would not be a creator. Does that entail, as Whitehead claims, that "as primordial so far is he from 'eminent reality' that in this abstraction he is 'deficiently actual'"<sup>16</sup> or that it is as true to say that "in comparison with God, the World is actually eminently"<sup>17</sup>? I do not know. Surely the concept of interdependence between creator and creature has not prevailed in our theological tradition. Yet I do not see how the two can be simultaneously and consistently maintained except by a much more intimate union than the traditional causal one. Nor is such a union unheard of once we acquaint ourselves with those for whom God was most vitally present—the spiritual writers.

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<sup>15</sup>*Process and Reality* (New York: Harper, 1960), p. 344.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 521.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 528.