



KHK Working Paper Series

VII. Transcendence/Immanence

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ABSTRACT Our goal for *Entangled Religions* is to inform readers about occasions, themes, modes, conditions, and consequences of contacts between religious groups and the way religious thought and practice developed in and through such contact phenomena, eventually creating both the larger and smaller religious traditions of today and the religious field as a social entity distinct from other fields such as politics, economics, and art. *Entangled Religions* publishes case studies on the issues outlined above. The engagement with explicit analytical concepts is of specific importance, as those concepts shall serve as *tertia comparationis*, which allow comparability of individual case studies. We invite authors to consider engaging their material with analytical concepts, categories and approaches that have been discussed in the Käte Hamburger Kolleg (KHK) “Dynamics in the History of Religions between Asia and Europe” (2008–2022), or to introduce other concepts and theories to the discussion. The KHK Working Paper Series informs readers about some major aspects of the KHK’s thinking about these concepts. We are looking forward to your contributions to this ongoing conversation!

Despite the **Western origin of the notions of “transcendence” and “immanence”**, there is good reason in assuming the interrelation expressed in the immanence-transcendence distinction to be the guiding feature of a religious sphere as such. Though the difference between “God” and “the world” as a specific (Western protestant) form of transcendence does not necessarily and in any case have to be found in any religion, some forms of the immanence-transcendence distinction and processes of transcending play a role in every religious tradition.¹ [1]

The dynamic transcendence/immanence-distinction can be operationalized for comparative research, i.e. the distinction can be established as a *tertium comparationis* in religious studies. We propose a three level model of transcending processes, starting from a *basic* transcendence expressed in simple deictic actions such as pointing at (and, thereby establishing an interrelation of “here”, “there” and a common “world”). Basic transcendence (under the [2]

1 This working paper was written in 2017 and updated in 2023. For further reading, see Brown and Franke (2016), Campany (2002), Hasselhoff and Stünkel (2015), Luhmann (1982), Roetz (1994), Schwartz (1975), and Tallis (2010).

influence of contact) might develop into *formal* transcendence signifying the self-reflective process of “stepping back and looking beyond” (Schwartz 1975), i.e. the distinction of here, there and the world is self-reflectedly formalized (perhaps in order to differentiate between one’s reflective powers and everyday conduct of life). The distinction might be specified into *religious* (specific) transcendence, such as the well-known difference between the divine and the worldly sphere. Basic and formal transcendence in this sense might be identified in any religious tradition.

When religions actually do encounter one another in history, the question how to shape the prevailing form of the transcendence/immanence-distinction semantically gains urgency. That is to say that **interreligious encounter produces a semantic space of “controversial commonality”**, in which the transcendence/immanence-relation may become more distinctive. Situations of religious contact can be an inducement for a specific religion at a specific time to embrace a concept of specific transcendence (for example introducing the “real” God vs. worldly pagan “Demons”). Perhaps the processes involved in a religious contact situation themselves might be described with regard to the transcendence/immanence distinction. [3]

Situations of religious contact might be the trigger of an experience of contingency within one religious tradition. All of sudden, the traditional conduct of life is put to question by the presence of the other. On the one hand, the experience of contingency demands an answer to that challenge that reestablishes certainties by (“spatially”) removing them to another, i.e. a transcendent sphere. On the other hand, the experience of the Other at the same time claims for integrating the criticizing other into a semantic field that can be controlled conceptually (for example: introduction of orthodox-heterodox-distinction in order to integrate the other, introduction of a generic notion of religion in medieval religious dialogue: Nicolas of Cusa). Religious contact, thus, might induce a double movement (more immanence/more transcendence) that causes intensification of both. Accordingly, the very **process of demarcation might be interpreted as an expression of the transcendence/immanence-distinction** (introducing notions of “we” and “they” and their interrelation). The emergence of general notions (such as “religion”) in order to capture, and, accordingly, to transcend the other on a common linguistic level might be interpreted with regard to the transcendence-immanence distinction as well. The other tradition transcends the first, functioning as a manifestation of an external second-order observation. [4]

Perhaps one might argue that the final absolute (unsurpassable) transcendence of the divine (for example in Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite) has to be examined as result of a transcending process, i.e. a result of constant self-reflection and multi-folding of observations to a higher and higher order. This process is triggered by critique (voluntary and involuntary, i.e. by the mere presence of the other or many others). Thus, the process leads to a seemingly paradoxical result: The more critique, the more absolute (and distinct) the transcendent, but also the stronger the relation (inseparability) of the transcendent and the immanent, the “here” and “there”. [5]

Articles relating to the immanence-transcendence distinction elaborate on the comparison of forms of transcendence (i.e. mainly basic and formal) and their development in religious contact situations. [6]

Entangled Religions Articles Connected to the Concept

- Rath, Imke. 2020. "Observing the Transcendent Other: Early Modern Christian Interpretations of a Philippine Religion." *Entangled Religions* 11. <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8691>.
- Jurczyk, Thomas. 2018. "Representation of Transcendence: The Armenian Letter "On the Image-Fighters" from the Seventh Century CE." *Entangled Religions* 5. <https://doi.org/10.13154/er.v5.2018.95-153>.
- Stünkel, Knut Martin. 2020. "Meeting at the Philosopher's Stone: The Encounter of Enlightenment and Indigenous Religion in Maupertuis' Expedition to Lapland (1736–1737)." *Entangled Religions* 11. <https://doi.org/10.46586/er.11.2020.8711>.

References

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- Hasselhoff, Görg K., and Knut Martin Stünkel, eds. 2015. *Transcending Words. The Language of Religious Contact Between Buddhists, Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Premodern Times*. Bochum: Winkler.
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