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God, Moses and Levinas: On being the other and relating to the other. A perspective on transcendence from religious experience

ABSTRACT

Within the context of religious experience, understood as testimony to transcendence (Stoker), this article focus on a specific constitutive element thereof, namely intentionality. It is discussed as concept in relation to three other concepts, namely religious experience, experience and transcendence. To elaborate on the importance of the qualification of the concept of intentionality, three conversation partners are engaged. The French Jewish philosopher and Talmudic commentator Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) since his viewpoint on “The (O)ther” makes the concept of “transcendence” problematic in a very insightful manner. The Dutch philosopher of religion Wessel Stoker and his proposal for “trans-intentionality” as a constitutive element of religious experience, and the experience of Moses with God as narrated in Ex 3. The contributions on transcendence by Levinas and Stoker are finally critically evaluated in relation to the Moses experience.

And God said to Moses: “I will be who I will be” (Ex 3:14)

For if God is God, then it is impossible for God to be given in any intuition or phenomenal experience, to be contained by any concept governed by any principal. But it is this very impossibility – this infinity and incomprehensibility – that makes God “possible” as God. God alone lets God self be defined by indefinable impossibility, for God begins where human possibility ends. What is impossible for us is precisely God’s characteristic possibility, for with God nothing is impossible (Jean-Luc Marion)

Divinity is not transcendent (“wholly other”), but incarnate; and the incarnation, the event “inaugurating the dissolution of divine transcendence” (Gianni Vattimo).

INTRODUCTION

At the conference “Religion and Postmodernism 4: Transcendence and Beyond” in 2003 at the Villanova University, Philadelphia, USA, John Caputo¹ and Michael Scanlon² posed the question: “Do we need to transcend transcendence?” It is a question in contemporary theological debates that in my opinion should be taken very seriously for various reasons, the most important being that it fundamentally determines and permeates the integrity of all God-talk. Put differently: it is a question that touches the very heart of reflection on religious experience, and could simply be rephrased as follow: how do we understand the concept of Transcendence?

The main line contemporary debate is thrusting in two distinct directions, namely “hyper-

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transcendence” and “post-transcendence”. The former could be formulated as the thrusting question whether we need a transcendence that is ever more beyond, a still-more transcendent transcendence (eg Levinas, Marion, Kearney). The latter could be formulated as the question whether we should put transcendence behind us (Vattimo, Caputo, Schrag). Does the concept go far enough or does it go too far? An exciting line of reflection within the “post-transcendence” trajectory is panentheism (eg Moltmann, McFague, Clayton). Caputo and Scanlon (2006:2) rightly state and ask:

After all, for all its authority and prestige, the word “transcendent” is a relative term: It depends on what is being transcended, and there is a long list of candidates – the subject, the self, the sensible world, beings, even Beings itself – and so there is nothing to stop us from wondering whether itself is to be added to the list as still one more thing to be transcended.

David Wood (2007:170) captures the core of the “wondering” of Caputo and Scanlon well in the two basic questions that he poses regarding reflection on transcendence:

- Is our thinking of transcendence any more than an unconscious way of being caught up in certain hard-to-shake spatializing and / or representational schemas?
- How far can we interpret / translate the various phenomena of transcendence in terms of modal transformations of the quality of our response to the world and to others, setting aside any and all onto-theological constructions referring to a beyond?

It is not possible in this paper to engage with the entire broad scope of this debate. Nor is it my intention to suggest and justify a better direction of the two, or to formulate final answers to Wood’s questions. I choose to focus on a specific constitutive element within the context of religious experience – understood as testimony to transcendence (Stoker) – namely “intentionality”, and to discuss the importance of its qualification. My choice makes the French Jewish philosopher and Talmudic commentator Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) an obvious conversation partner, since his viewpoint on “The (O)ther” makes the concept of “transcendence” problematic in a very insightful manner. My other two conversation partners will be the Dutch philosopher of religion Wessel Stoker and his proposal for “trans-intentionality” and the experience of Moses with God as narrated in Ex 3. Firstly I will describe the terms transcendence, religious experience, intentionality and their connectedness to each other. Secondly the viewpoints of Levinas and Stoker will be briefly discussed with the Moses-experience as textual interlocutor in the concluding discussion and evaluation of reflection on Transcendence.

1. TERMINOLOGICAL CLARIFICATION

In classical theism, *transcendence* is understood as a condition or state of being that surpasses physical existence and in one form is also independent of it. It can be attributed to the divine not only in its being, but also in its knowledge. Thus, God transcends the universe, but also transcends knowledge (is beyond the grasp of the human mind). Although transcendence is defined as the opposite of immanence, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive (cf Flew 1979:328; Van Huyssteen 2008:1099; Wikipedia). The unavoidable question then is: Can humans experience and know a transcendent God?

The term *religious experience* is highly problematic and questionable. It brings about “double trouble” since both concepts “religious” and “experience” (and subsequently even more as conjugation) defies any easy or comfortable terminological pinpointing. The concept “religion / religious” is met with an overwhelming and inexhaustible spectrum of definitions (cf Leuba),

whereas the term “experience” resist any attempt in all directions of being capture is any definition whatsoever. And that is not even making work of the seemingly self-validating presumptiveness of “experience”! An even worse scenario meets the enthusiastic researcher in trying to establish a common understanding for the origin of and accounting for (Christian) religious experience (eg transcendental-anthropological such as Tillich; analytical-epistemological such as Alston; hermeneutical-phenomenological such as Stoker). For the (workable!) sake of this paper, and within the framework of Christian religious experience, it could be dealt with as “testimony to transcendence” that is: witnessing to the experience of God’s involvement with creation and creature. The daunting question then is: How is such a testimony possible at all, and if, how is it to be understood?

Experience is characterized by transcendence (generally in a non-religious sense) and intentionality. Transcendence as transcendence of oneself to that which is other than oneself is characteristic of human existence as being in the world (Heidegger). It makes intentionality, directed at human beings and things in the world, possible (Stoker 2006:94). Experience is never simply something internal but always has two poles: the human being and her world(s). Experience implies intentionality, the transcendence of oneself. Intentionality is the power of minds to be about, to represent, or to stand for, things, properties and states of affairs. The puzzles of intentionality lie at the interface between the philosophy of mind and the philosophy of language. Franz Brentano towards the end of the nineteenth century rehabilitated the word itself, which is of medieval Scholastic origin. ‘Intentionality’ is a philosopher’s word. It derives from the Latin word *intentio*, which in turn derives from the verb *intendere*, which means being directed towards some goal or thing (Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy). The spontaneous question that subsequently arises is: How is the human being, to whom this-worldly transcendence belongs, open to the infinite, to religious Transcendence?

Do these terminological descriptions – taken together in their connectedness - not lead us straight into an existential space of self-contradiction? If experience implies intentionality, can God be an object of religious experience that one direct herself to if God is not a worldly object to whom we can direct ourselves? Does not the manifestation of God – such as in the Moses-experience (Ex 3) – present itself without any intention on the part of Moses? It is the very question on the possibility of the experience of transcendence that Levinas addresses. I therefore turn to his exposition of “The (O)ther”.

2. BEING TRAPPED: LEVINAS ON THE (O)ther

“It is like answering a call we have never heard” (Levinas)

Levinas provides a salient example of “hyper-transcendence”. His work is a critique of Heidegger and Husserl (thus of Western philosophy) in the service of ethics. He is concerned that it has been pre-occupied with Being, the totality, at the expense of what is otherwise than Being, what lies outside the totality of Being as transcendent, exterior, infinite, alterior, the Other.

Working with the concept of the “wholly (O)ther” (“*tout autre*”) in his “*Totalite et Infini*” (Totality and Infinity), he addresses the classical idea of transcendence as a movement which is trapped within being. Trapped within a sphere of “ontological” immanence, even if and especially when it asserts an ontology of supersensible being. The trap that transcendence springs for him, is to confine all travel within the borders of being – either in the classical movement from a lower mode of being to a higher one; from finite (sensible) being) to infinite (supersensible) being. What is truly called for is “escape” from this trap, that is, a movement beyond beings and Being, whose term is not transcendent being but being transcended; not a higher being but otherwise

than being (cf Caputo & Scanlon 2006:3). Taking the word “being” as an “idol”, - a trap or screen or mirror in which we envisage ourselves, not God – and who has sought accordingly and in manifold ways to think God “without being”, calls for a “liberation” from ontological idolatry! How are we to escape from this trap?

In his “*Enigme et phenomene*”, Levinas (1974a:211) writes:

The ‘great experiences’ of our lives are actually never lived. Do the religions come to us from a past that has never been a pure ‘now’? They owe their greatness to the excess that transcends the capacity of the phenomenon, the present and the memory. To the voice that calls from the Burning Bush Moses answers: ‘Here I am’, but he does not dare look up. The glory-filled theophany that makes so much humility possible fails through the same humility that forces the eyes downwards.

According to Levinas, experiences of actual transcendence are not experiences in the strict sense of the word. They remain alien to us, although they influence us deeply. Why do they remain alien? Because of the difference between God and human beings. A divine revelation means a disruption of our order. And since experience entails intentionality, such a grasp of the object by the subject is excluded in the relationship with God. There it concerns a “riddle”, an “intervention of a meaning that disturbs the phenomenon” in distinction from the phenomenon that belongs to our reality (cf Stoker 2006:92). It concerns a truth that cannot be converted into a phenomenon, and as such no presence can be recognized. Levinas therefore speaks of a “relationless relation” with the Infinite. It is a relationship without intentionality, a thinking no longer characterized by an aim, by a relationship that displays no will or intention. It is a non-intentional consciousness, an indirect consciousness, “immediate, but without an intentional aim; implicit and purely of accompaniment”, that is, pure passivity! It is formulated by Levinas in ethical categories as “bad conscience”: without intentions, without aims, without the protective mask of the character contemplating him/herself in the mirror of the world, self-assured and affirming him/herself. Because of this non-intentional consciousness, this more than subjective ability, the person can be related to God. However not in an I-Thou relationship. Neither as an object nor as conversation partner. God reveals Godself only through our neighbour in an ethical sense, calling into question of the “Same”, calling us to responsibility. The dimension from which they speak to me – beyond being – is that of the third person, who always remains a “He”. The other is found in the tracks of this Absent One who has passed by us in an undiscoverable way – as he did with Moses – who only saw God’s back (cf Stoker 2006:95-6).

Not only does Levinas refute the possibility of the experience of Transcendence, he also speaks of the erasing of the subject. Our awareness of being subjects arises in such a manner that we cannot appropriate the beginning or the origin of being subjects. It is to answer a call, which we have not heard. In his “*Dieu et la philosophie*” (Levinas 1982:110) he states: Being touched by Transcendence is an “implanting without reception, which like consuming fire scorches the place where it is to grow”. Levinas thus distances himself radically from every philosophy that starts with the human being as subject. There is no consciousness or conscience that precedes the testimony. The I is thus constituted by the address of the other. Ethics precedes ontology. This simply means: the human being is not a true human being until (s)he is thus constituted by the radical (O)other. Every presence is impossible, if it concerns the revelation of the wholly (O) other. In his own words:

Does not what we call the word of God come to me in the demand that challenges me and claim me, and before any invitation to dialogue, does it not break through the form of generality under which the individual who resembles me appears to me and only shows himself, and become the face of the other person? ... Does not the challenge make me enter into a non-intentional thought of the ungraspable? (Levinas, 1988:131)

It is precisely then to re-think Levinas formulation of the challenge of entering into a “non-intentional thought of the ungraspable”. From his “escape from ontological idolatry” to the primacy of ethics in the encounter of the (O)other, I subsequently turn to Stoker’s understanding of “intentionality” within religious experience as testimony of Transcendence.

3. BEING TOUCHED: STOKER ON TRANSCENDENCE

For Stoker (2006:88ff), the Christian faith can be traced back to experiences with God that the first witnesses in the Old and New Testament had. It goes back to narrated events with a history-like character. Root experiences (Fackenheim) are eg the exodus from Egypt, the life and work, death and resurrection of Christ. These acts of Transcendence are celebrated in the liturgy as thanksgiving to God whose acts are experienced as a gift (Brueggemann). These root experiences of transcendence are the starting point and norm for the experiences that Christians can have with God. This gives the hermeneutical (interpretative) character of religious experience a double meaning: the testimony requires explanation but the witness itself is to be explained by the testimony through which the experience of the witness becomes religious (Stoker 2006:88).

For the sake of this paper, I would like to focus on one of the crucial aspects, which Stoker (2006:89ff; 99ff;109ff) describes as one of the three aspects of religious experience (that is, the involvement of the whole human being with Transcendence), namely trans-intentional (that is, being touched by God through which an experience becomes a religious experience). The other two aspects are namely narrative (that is, the object-pole, the content of faith) and affective-cognitive (that is, the subject-pole, being grasped by the content). For Stoker the fundamental question is: In how far can a manifestation or proclamation from God be experienced? The answer lies in a closer explication of the term “intentionality”.

Experience implies intentionality, that is, the intention of a person to direct him/herself at something. It is not only something internal but always has two poles: the human being and his/her world(s). It subsequently implies the transcendence of oneself (Stoker 2006:94). As Heidegger puts it: Transcendence as transcendence of oneself to that which is other than oneself is characteristic of human existence as being in the world. However, this notion seems to conflict with that which is proper to the manifestation of God who presents Godself without any intention on the part of the human being. Indeed, there is a radical difference, an asymmetric relationship between God and the human being. How then is the human being, to whom this-worldly transcendence belongs, open to the infinite, to religious Transcendence? Or to put the problem differently: we can expand our intentions infinitely, but quantitative infinity does not lead to qualitative infinity. Formulated in terms of intentionality, is the human consciousness exclusively an intentional consciousness, a consciousness directed at the world and objects, an object-consciousness? Then God is surely not an object in the sense in which we deal with objects in everyday life, and therefore our relationship with God does not lend itself to being expressed in terms of intentionality. How are we then to proceed?

Stoker (2006:102ff) argues for an understanding of religious experience that does not become an experience of intentionality, but an experience, which is related to it and at the very same time transcends it by being a religious disclosure. He calls it a “trans-intentional” relationship, that is, a relationship that transcends our intentions, our involvement with people and things in this world. By making use of Schleiermacher’s notion of the feeling of absolute dependence and the distinction between intentionality for life and a theoretical intentionality, Stoker proposes how an experience of Transcendence is possible. I start with the latter distinction.

Stoker (2006:98ff) distinguishes between intentionality for life and a theoretical intentionality.

The latter belongs to the distancing attitude of a researcher towards an object. It is to set a human subject over against an object that is to be investigated. The former has to do with everyday life and points to a non-theoretical involvement of the human being with the world, persons and things. It concerns a direct relationship with these instead of an objectifying placing of oneself over against them. The simple enjoyment – and not the study! – of the colour, smell and beauty of a flower is an example of an intentionality of life. And this holds – according to Stoker – for theology in its relationship to the daily religious experience of the believer. Someone's religious experience occurs in his/her life world with its intentionality for life, from which theology, as scientific reflection, is derived. Stoker (2006:99) states:

Our life world is a reservoir of meanings, on which academic disciplines like theology reflect in objectifying and theoretical ways to explain.

What then constitutes that which is unique about religious experience, which occurs in the life world with its intentionality for life? Since intentionality for life has to do with relationships in the world, and religious experience implies involvement with Transcendence, Stoker (2006:99ff) employs Schleiermacher's notion of the feeling of absolute dependence as description for the relationship to God, to connect the two in an original and creative manner³. He argues that the heart of the human being is immediate consciousness, is the original (pre-reflective) consciousness (indicated by the word feeling) and that it precedes knowledge and action. It is however connected to the intentional consciousness with its emotions, actions and knowledge. The passive, pre-reflective consciousness is the hinge, the transition between knowledge and action: it mediates the transition between moments in which knowledge or action is dominant. It constitutes the unity of knowledge and action and is their common ground (cf Stoker 2006:100). For Schleiermacher, Stoker continues, that first moment of religious feeling (that is, being touched in the pre-reflective consciousness) can continue as a mood, a state of mind: the durability of the religious feeling is the mood. It guides all our activities, our thoughts, actions and emotions. However, on the pre-reflective level there is not even any identification yet of a feeling of absolute dependence. That occurs only with the identification of this immediate experience of the human being as a feeling of absolute dependence. Put in another way: It is the immediate self-awareness that becomes an awareness of God. There is thus a development because of the moment of identification. An immediate awareness of dependence of a particular nature is called the feeling of absolute dependence. The "whence" of this feeling of absolute dependence is identified as God (Stoker 2006:101). The immediate relationship to God does not exist in isolation but receives its concrete content in the intentionality for life, in the intentional consciousness. In this sense religious experience does not become an experience of intentionality but is related to it and transcends it by being a religious disclosure.

To conclude: For Stoker, the "religious disclosure" can be understood in the Christian context as "revelation", that is, the manifestation and proclamation of Transcendence which comes to us through experience. But then, in the words of Jean-Luc Marion, as saturated phenomenon, that is, a phenomenon that is saturated with intention. For Stoker, this is not enough (cf Stoker 2006:123). It only covers the trans-intentional aspect of religious experience. It has to be supplemented with a narrative explanation of the story, and specifically, life as a story in the making.

3 It is important to note that Stoker does not interpret this original moment of Transcendence in human consciousness as a universally valid transcendental-anthropological structure of being human, but as a theological-anthropological given that can clarify the contact with God in religious experience (cf Stoker 2006:101).

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

How are we then to answer the question regarding Transcendence in a postmodern and deeply pluralistic context? Have we succeeded in any manner to move forward with Wood's two basic questions regarding reflection of transcendence, namely: Is our thinking of transcendence any more than an unconscious way of being caught up in certain hard-to-shake spatializing and / or representational schemas? And: How far can we interpret / translate the various phenomena of transcendence in terms of modal transformations of the quality of our response to the world and to others, setting aside any and all onto-theological constructions referring to a beyond? Turning to the focus of this article, we will have to ask: Do Levinas and Stoker guide us in rethinking and re-describing Transcendence in such a context? And with what clues are we presented by taking up a specific OT text – such as Ex 3 – in which an experience of Transcendence is narrated? Or should we ultimately be content only with rumours of Transcendence (Keller 2007) caught between a desire for God and the death of God?

Focusing specifically in this article on “experience and intentionality” within the context of religious experience as testimony to Transcendence, unfortunately does not leave room to answer the above questions comprehensively. However, there are a number of clues and critical questions which I would like to put forward.

In the story of Moses (Ex 3), Transcendence is neither his invention nor his projected intention, but is narrated as a surprising (vertical) call. The self-naming by the Caller – I will be who I will be - does not only confirm the asymmetrical stance (Holy) over against the recipient (Moses covering his face / looking downwards / afraid), but also establishes a (new) relationship, imbedded in an already historically established relationship (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob). It (that is, the Caller in self-naming) also demands acknowledgement and that brings about responsibility with the recipient. The newly established relationship initially takes on an invitational character for Moses as messenger within an ethical context (oppression), but develops in such a manner that the messengers are not only transformed in making work of the call, but are destined to worship the Caller.

In this narration of a testimony to Transcendence the Caller is not reduced to a third person, a “He” (as Levinas argues), but presents himself to Moses in the first person, as an “I”. Nor is the call of the Caller confined to or wrapped in an ethical obligation, although it functions within an ethical context (oppression / deliverance). In this regard I find the critical commentary by Caputo (2007:189) on Levinas appropriate when he states:

“The very meaning of our being turned to God ... is to be deflected or turned by God ...to the neighbour. And nothing more. The name of God boils down without remainder into our being turned to the neighbour, *tout court*. What then is accomplished by ethical trans(a)scendence to the other? In one very definite sense, nothing. Ethics is not for something; it is a non-profit enterprise. Ethics is all the transcendence there is. It does not buy us a ticket somewhere else. There is nowhere else to go”.

I think that Caputo is right to ask whether ethics is all the transcendence there is. Or to put it plainly in a positive statement: Life, meaning and religion are more than morality! Is – for example – love not a more encompassing (relational) concept, and surely more fundamental to the biblical message? Levinas stern warning however still holds good of not turning the Transcendence of God into a one-way genitive – that surely will only harden into ontological idolatry. In this regard I find the aspect of trans-intentionality of experience of Stoker more promising in its focus on consciousness (and specifically on the pre-reflective level), and his distinction between intentionality for life and a theoretical intentionality that (objectively) springs

from it. His emphasis on the qualitative nature of the experience of Transcendence is in my opinion closer to the Moses experience than a quantitative (ethical) obligation that comes from the other. However, Stoker's promising phenomenological-hermeneutical exposition of religious experience as testimony to Transcendence with its aspect of trans-intentionality ultimately runs in the broader religious context – in my opinion - into shallow inter-religious waters. To put it in the words of Wood (2007:182):

There are some ... who think we can discover a pure form of transcendence (the pure gift) as the pinnacle of a series of reductions. Others ... see this as a misuse of phenomenology for theological ends. When we run out of intuitions, what is to stop us simply grafting onto phenomenology the results we would like to see it validate? It would be like dropping fish from the market into the fisherman's nets as they haul them in.

In my opinion Stoker does indeed "drop" a (transcendent) fish into his fisherman's net as he "hauls" the testimony in from inter-religious waters. That however is not to say that his re-working of Schleiermacher's feeling of absolute dependence within an intentionality for life (imbedded in a world-view as anthropological given, and in this framework, the whence is theologically identified as God) as trans-intentional aspect of religious experience, leaves us with a promising insight to pursue.

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