

The Touch of Transcendence

Presentation at Pacific School of Religion, 2006

A hundred years ago a protestant missionary arrived in Puerto Rico as part of an effort to spread good news in the newly acquired territory. To his fellow missionaries, he offered the following advice: “To *know the mind of God* is the first requisite of the missionary, but next to that he must come to *knowledge of the mind of the people* over whom he shall be placed by the Holy Spirit.”ⁱ In the colonial context in which this statement was uttered, ‘knowledge’ hardly disguises its links to the aims of power and control. Knowledge here is an attempt to grasp, to comprehend, to gain control over people—a fact that Edward Said has taught us to recognize. But this is what makes this statement especially interesting for me: it makes surprisingly clear that there is a close relationship between objectifying God and objectifying other people. The claim “to know the mind of God” is considered the foundation of the claim to know (and rule over) the subjected Other. A lot has changed since 1898 and Protestantism has become an important part of the puertorrican landscape. About knowing the mind of the puertorrican people—well... who knows? Maybe some are still trying. But the idea of possessing a certain kind knowledge of God that leads us to assert control over other peoples has all but disappeared—both in its well intentioned and plainly malicious versions. Our newspapers are filled with such claims.

My reflections today are motivated by a concern for respecting human difference and divine otherness—which I consider to be deeply interrelated. Indeed at some points in my talk it will be difficult to tell whether the Other that I am referring to is God or the

Other human. But that is part of the point I am trying to make: we need to think about this two Others together.

In theology the otherness of God is associated with the term transcendence. Most theologians agree that God is transcendent. But what do we mean by that? At first sight, the answer seems rather obvious. The Oxford dictionary unambiguously states that ‘transcendent’ signifies that which is beyond normal physical experience, apart, above, unlimited by materiality.ⁱⁱ In popular culture the meaning is less clear. For instance, transcendence is used as the name for a rock group whose most recent album is “Nothing is coherent” [so postmodern!], of a video game subtitled “Beyond Mortal Power” and of a very professional website called Digital transcendence.net. There a more ambitious website that sells “vestments of transcendence”, including belts, boots, leggings, and my favorite: the halo of transcendence. You can actually buy it. The name of the website is telling: World War Craft.ⁱⁱⁱ

In theological circles, “divine transcendence” is associated to God’s separation, independence, and immateriality. And it is because of these associations that the term transcendence has acquired the bad reputation of being a tool of patriarchal and imperialistic power. For decades, progressive theologians have been concerned about how allusions to transcendence tend to orient religious life away from the pursuit of social transformation, promoting instead the individualistic aspiration to attain a positive otherworldly existence. When claimed as the basis of unquestionable knowledge, divine transcendence has served to legitimize decidedly ungodly actions. Feminist theologians have further challenged the image of the transcendent God for its collusion with the subordination of women and the devastation of the creation. The main characteristics of

this God mirror the ideals of a masculinist culture that envisions the human becoming as overcoming the constraints of materiality and the body as well as the demands of relationships with the community. Rosemary Radford Ruether says it best: “the disembodied nature of the ...divine...has served as a linchpin of the Western masculinist symbolic.”^{iv} It is for this reason that feminist theologies have emphasized the ‘immanence’ of God. While most theologies do not reject divine transcendence, the numerous suspicions about the term have not been dispelled.

These widespread critiques should not be ignored. Yet I find myself drawn to an ancient intuition that seems to be hidden under layers and layers of hierarchical imagination. I want to find ways of asserting that God is irreducibly Other, always *beyond* our grasp. But not beyond our touch.

Although this is a very simple statement, it has iconoclastic potentials that liberation and feminist theologies have long recognized. Admitting that God exceeds all of our representations implies that God cannot be reduced to any theological or socio-political systems. The Empire is not God.

For Latin American liberation theologian Ignacio Ellacuría the notion of historical transcendence was crucial for liberation. Ellacuría attributed to “pernicious philosophical influences” the fact that transcendence has been identified with *separateness*, leading to the assumption that “historical transcendence is separate from history.”^v In contrast, he argued that transcendence “calls attention to a contextual structural difference without implying a duality” or opposition. It “enables us to speak of an intrinsic unity without implying a strict identity.”^{vi} Ellacuría’s cosmology affirmed the “dual unity of God in humanity and humanity in God.”^{vii} And he described history as the “place of

transcendence,” where both God and human beings intervene.^{viii} Ellacuría invited his readers “to see transcendence as something that transcends *in* and not as something that transcends *away* from; as something that physically impels to more but not by taking out of; as something that *pushes* forward, but at the same time *retains*.^{ix} The very life of the planet and its evolution, are signs of divine transcendence.

This vision of divine transcendence grounds Ellacuría’s image of humans and all creatures. Whereas many theologies define the value of creatures only in reference to an external God, Ellacuría insists upon the innate worth of every creature. “[E]ach thing, within its own limits, is a limited way of being God.”^x It is not “simply that God is in all things, as essence, presence, and potential,” but that God’s life is “*intrinsic* to all things.”^{xi} Creatures are intrinsically divine. To seek transcendence is thus to turn *toward* creation, rather than *away* from them, to encounter our others—ethically.

The values that orient our lives emerge from the multiple relationships that constitute the cosmos. It is through our encounters with one another, that our lives come in contact with God’s more. As US Hispanic theologian, Roberto Goizueta states it, “In an era dominated...by capitalist economic monopolies [and imperialistic visions, I must add]...the defense of human *and* divine transcendence is no longer a mere option; it is the principal and most urgent imperative. And that global defense can be articulated theologically only in the form of...theologies which proclaim the irreducibility of both God and the person to any system....”^{xii} Divine *and* human transcendence, the irreducibility of both God *and* the person—respect for God’s otherness becomes inextricable from our respect of other creatures.

In postmodern philosophy reclaiming the transcendence of the human Other as grounds for ethics is associated with the name Emmanuel Levinas. The Jewish philosopher confronted by the horrors of Nazism, he sensed the alluring and deadly force of totalitarianism in the very structures of the Western philosophical tradition. Totalities reduce persons to their categories, assigning them meaning, and leaving no place for otherness. In this mindset, people tend to view others as objects for their own use. How do we move away from these tendencies? Turning from totalities “the gleam of... transcendence in the face of the Other”—Levinas says.^{xiii} The Other that Levinas has in mind is the excluded person, whom he names using biblical language as the widow, the foreigner, the orphan.

But Levinas’ Other is clearly male. Indeed, his descriptions of the feminine are highly problematic, for it seems to exclude the feminine from ethical relations. This is related to a broader problem in the way Levinas imagines the Other. Despite Levinas’ emphasis on the face of the Other as the site where we encounter transcendence, his depictions of transcendence rely on metaphors of distance and separation. The Other is always distant. His assumption seems to be that physical intimacy destroys transcendence. This troubling view of love is rather common—as we can see in the multiple Valentines day products’ that beg you: ‘be mine’. You consume the chocolate and the lover consumes you!

Against this image of relation as consumption—all too close to consummation—french feminist Luce Irigaray proposes an ethics of sexual difference grounded on the recognition of transcendence. As she defines it, “Transcendence is no longer ecstasy, going out of the self toward the inaccessible, extra-sensible, extra-earthly entirely-other.

It is respect for the other whom I will never be, who is transcendent to me and to whom I am transcendent.” And this includes those whom touch. Irigaray focuses on transcendence across sexual difference. Touch, rather than separation, describes the delicate balance that respects the otherness of another human being in the intimacy of sexual relations. For touch must always abide by the contours of the other. Never grasping, never attempting to consume the Other. Touch reminds us of our own beginning in the flesh, in the womb, and invites us to new embodied beginnings. To incarnate transcendence.

Transcendence is thus seen as both the otherness that can never be fully grasped by knowledge or contained within a system, as well as the transformation that is made possible only in the encounter with the Other.

But we need to look closely at how the transcendence of an Other is defined. As we have seen, for Levinas the Other’s transcendence is his condition of being excluded from the system; for Irigaray it is sexual difference. However, it would be a mistake to imagine these differences in abstraction from the history and social relations in which they emerge—which both Levinas and Irigaray tend to do. This error leads to what Fumitaka Matsuoka calls: “the illusion of precision about race categories,” for instance. Irigaray might be suffering from an illusion of precision about sexual categories when she speaks of sexual encounters only as between man and woman. Postcolonial theory reminds us that all categories are produced within systems of power and relations. In other words, none of us is *intrinsically* a stranger. Whereas I might be seen as a stranger in this context, in Puerto Rico I am not. So it is in relation to the dominant system that I some are named Other. And indeed “It is the very kind of colonized-anthropologized

difference the master has always happily granted his subordinates,” as Trinh Min Ha observes. We shall never take for granted the naming process.

Although the system puts us into categories and those categories do affect who we might become, we are reducible to them. No name or category can possibly describe all a person is. Not because we are absolutely separate from the system or from one another, but because of the complex and infinite relationality of creatures—who, as Ellacuría says, are themselves divine. The transcendence of the person is that which exceeds all systems. It is neither abstract nor otherworldly, but openness at the heart of relation.

How then can we imagine this transcendence? Let us picture ourselves in our relationships. This will complicate the logic of the self-Other dyad that is so common in discourses about difference. Rather than seeing persons as self-contained entities—as little closed boxes of different sizes and colors—let’s change our lenses to see the ways in which we are connected to others, the ties through which one life extends in time as well as in space.

Postcolonial critic Gayatri Spivak’s image of the *deconstructive embrace* is helpful here. Each aspect of a person’s identity develops in relation to realities that transcend her particularity, but which she also transcends—community, country of origin, sexual identity. For instance, the realities of my own community—its past history, its language, the geography in which I feel most at home—all embrace me, not only as a *past* reality, but as something which I continue to relate to, be transformed by, and transform. And yet I never grasp it, just as it never completely defines me. These transcending realities exist only in particular persons. That is, they are never fully present, as such, and never appear in isolation from other aspects of a person’s life. Our

encounter with the Other touches and is touched by realities that transcend us both. In each person different realities meet and transform each other in unique ways. The unique outcome of these multiple relations accounts for each person's 'radical singularity'—to use Spivak's phrase. This radical singularity, this transcendence—is a function of relations rather than separation. It is a relational transcendence.

If we recognize this transcendence in our bodies, and even in the bodies of those who have been marginalized, without losing sight of our embodied historicity, we can also re-envision divine transcendence. Marcella Althaus-Reid finds the seeds for that image of God in her queer reading of the God of liberation theology. She writes: "Latin American liberation theology, which is based on the search for the materiality of transcendence, knows how God is to be found in the presence of the untouchables...[Transcendence] is God touching its own limits in the untouchables." Although her own images are unapologetically indecent, Althaus-Reid's caressing God is not devoid of resonances in the Christian tradition. We can still find traces of a God who delivers creation out of her womb in Proverbs' Sophia-cosmogony. Notably, a third century reader of Proverbs, Origen of Alexandria seemed to be imagining God's touch when he warned "To deny God a boundary is to suggest that he has no understanding of himself or of his creation. It is to say that God does not embrace the dwelling places that he arranged."

Who would deny God an embrace? We may imagine God touching creation and enfolding its dwelling places in a non-confining embrace that abides by the contours of the Other. A touch that reveals the concurrence of transcendence and intimacy. A divine *in vah loup* through which God may caress creation and feel its joy and its suffering. As

in the embrace between self and Other, the communal and the individual, distinctions are not erased. One is wrapped around the other—“each at the boundary of the other.” God is all over, we might say following Irenaeus of Lyons. Not above all, but over all. As skin and blood of the immense organism of which we are all part.

At its boundary the cosmos meets the mystery, the untotalizable excess, of the divine as its limit, which is also the potentiality beyond all conceivable possibilities. Not even all-there-is is actually All. Here lies the significant difference between pantheism and panentheism. The latter remains open to the mystery and unpredictable possibilities. In this intimate openness we find a model for the personal otherness to the human Other and the collective openness of socio-political systems. That is why Ivonne Gebara warns that “[W]e should not build a closed discourse, a discourse in which the unknown, the as-yet-unthought, or even the nonexistent has no chance to be included.”¹ This openness is critical for all theology.

But a theology that grounds the ethical relations between creatures cannot stop at an outer boundary of the universe. To do so would reinforce the image creation as *one* self-enclosed thing in relation to an external God. It may lead us to lose sight of the transcendence of the created Other. Instead, we should remember that “through [our] relation to the Other [we] are in touch with God, to quote Levinas once more. If God is to be found in the Other, in the “presence of the untouchables”, if God links us to the Other and embraces the very otherness of the Other, ethics becomes a central concern for theology. Theology shall help us develop the habits of the mind that will prepare us for

¹ Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation*, 124.

the coming of the Other. It shall call us to transform our bodies so that they become capable of embracing without grasping, to transform our eyes to see and our ears to hear.

In the face of the other, Levinas states, “in its very light, a surplus of signification is signified that could be designated as *glory*.” And Levinas’s choice of glory is an apt one that allows us to locate the notion of transcendence in its scriptural history. While it has often been used as an image of imperialist triumphalism, we may see glory as a sign of the transcendence of the Other.

We have been saying that human beings are always transcendent to us. We do encounter Others: see their faces, we hear their voices, and touch their bodies, and yet in the very encounter we also see, hear, and feel that there is more. The missionary’s project of knowing the mind of the puertorrican as an object failed to recognize this excess. The gleam of transcendence in the flesh of the Other is an “elusive mystery” that envelops each person. The experience of that mystery goes beyond the recognition of some strangeness that merely compares differences and calculates their threats. It induces in us a feeling of wonder, surprise, and astonishment in the flesh of the unknowable, which is also quite ordinary—like the biblical references to glory which allude to the transfiguration of the ordinary in its encounter with the divine. Recall the burning bush or Moses’ own illuminated face.

Theologically, we may imagine this brilliance as manifestation of the divinity of creation, “the love and the glory of God...deposited right at the level of what is created,” in the words of Jean-Luc Nancy.^{xiv} Not something *through* which an external divinity shows itself, but the very brilliance of God. As a sign of the luring excess of the Other, as well as a reminder that we cannot possess her otherness, glory “crosses the divide

between aesthetics and ethics.”^{xv} This is best expressed in the words of Irenaeus of Lyons: “The glory of God is the human being fully alive.”

Each creature’s glory is thus a manifestation of divinity in velling up its unique transcendence: its brilliance tailored to the creature’s shape. In its own singularity, a creature’s glory does not cover over its history and relations, but it transfigures them.^{xvi} In Christ’s glorification “those most material marks, the wounds in his hands and his side,...are glorified.”(36) So too, God envelops each and every one of our new becomings with divine glory, transfiguring, without obliterating the marks of their passions. It is a transfiguration that never by-passes the body in its complex historicity, but *transubstantiates* matter into divine flesh: “into a more subtle, spiritual, even divine, matter. To illuminate it so that it enlightens he, or she, who gazes upon it, who contemplates it.”^{xvii}

In our glorified singularity we encounter the Other. As persons already blessed by divine love, without which we could not love the Other in her or his transcendence.^{xviii} Enveloped by God, “illuminated-illuminating,” we seek that contact with the Other. We aspire to give and receive that which may open for us new paths for continuous liberation: a love that renounces its consuming impulses while opening itself to be touched by the Other. “[O]verflowing” our own worlds “in order to taste another brightness.”^{xix} Glowing with the touch of transcendence.

ⁱ Robert McLean, *Old Spain in New America* (New York: Association Press, 1916), 134.

ⁱⁱ OED

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://wow.allakhazam.com/db/itemset.html?setid=211>

^{iv} Ruether, *Sexism and God-talk: Towards a Feminist Theology*, 269.

^v Ibid., 254.

^{vi} Ignacio Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation", in *Mysterium Liberationis: Fundamental Concepts of Liberation Theology*, ed. Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino (New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 254.

^{vii} Ibid., 264.

^{viii} Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation", 259.

^{ix} Ibid. ; italics added.

^x Ellacuría, "The Historicity of Christian Salvation", 276; italics added.

^{xi} Ibid., 277; italics added.

^{xii} Roberto S. Goizueta, *Liberation, Method and Dialogue: Enrique Dussel and North American Theological Discourse*, ed. Susan Thistlethwaite, American Academy of Religion Academy Series (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 166.

^{xiii} Ibid., 24.

^{xiv} Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery, trans. Robert D. Richardson and Anne E. O'Brien, *Crossing Aesthetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2000), 17.

^{xv} Serene Jones, "Creation and Imagination: Reflections on Language, Law, and Beauty" (paper presented at the Transdisciplinary Theology Colloquium, Drew University, Madison, NJ, 2001).

^{xvi} (Mark 9: 2-8)

^{xvii} Irigaray, *Way of Love*, 173.

^{xviii} "My glory which you have given me in your love for me," says Jesus to God in John 17:24. Similarly, in his love, he gives the glory to the disciples, "that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that thou hast sent me and hast loved them even as thou hast loved me" (John 17: 22-3).

^{xix} Irigaray, *Way of Love*, 174.