A Working Typology of Transcendence in Anthropology

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■ **ABSTRACT:** This article foregrounds transcendence and its definitions to formalize the term's value as a viable analytic for anthropology. It notes the proliferation of transcendences (plural) in anthropological literature and proposes a working typology of transcendence that recognizes the different scales within analysis on which transcendence is being used. Drawing upon this scalar-aware typology, it reviews existing scholarship in the field of anthropology of material religion, characterized by a detailed theoretical treatment of transcendence. Finally, this article redraws attention to the situatedness of transcendence in the history of anthropology and its attendant Christian legacy, in other words the scale of anthropology itself. It concludes that the most promising value of transcendence as an analytic lies in attending to the tensions between different scales in analysis.

■ **KEYWORDS:** material, mediation, religion, scale, transcendence

Transcendence shares most of its anthropological history with the study of religion, but it has not been accorded the same level of theoretical scrutiny as the concept of religion itself. Instead, in anthropological literature transcendence is most commonly employed as a secondary term in the articulation of theories of religion, its meaning presumed to be implicit, and definitions near redundant. This secondary status occludes the fact that transcendence itself has become a malleable, catch-all term with a meaning that shifts from paper to paper, book to book. This article foregrounds transcendence and its definitions in an attempt to formalize its value as a viable analytic in the studies of religion.

In a chapter eloquently titled "Is the Trans- in Transnational the Trans- in Transcendent?" (a nod to an earlier title by Kwame Anthony Appiah (1991), "Is the Post- in Postmodern the Post-in Postcolonial?"), Joel Robbins concludes that in both the transnational and the transcendent "what is rejected is first and foremost the places in which people who take up this thought have lived" (2009: 69). Robbins identifies transcendence with the domain that is an alterity to the mundane. This is not a universal definition, and we can easily find alternative conceptions of transcendence by other anthropologists. For instance, editors Diana Espírito Santo and Nico Tassi and their volume's contributors propose to think about the transcendent and the mundane as though located in a single domain (2013). Transcendent in their work is meant to challenge the dichotomy between the mundane reality and its constructed alterity (ibid.: 6)—the opposition that transcendence, as defined in Robbins's chapter, reinforces.

With the proliferation of the different transcendences in anthropological literature, there is a need to attend to transcendence systematically. This is the problem that I stumbled upon as I attempted to review the anthropology of material religion literature on transcendence for

the purposes of my own research, and what ultimately compelled me to devise a typology of transcendence. To riff on Robbins and Appiah, this article asks: is the trans- in transcendence the trans- in transcendence? It begins by looking at transcendence in anthropology broadly and proposes a working typology of transcendence that recognizes the different scales within analysis on which transcendence is used. In the second half, the article focuses on the smaller field of anthropology of material religion, where the theoretical discussion over the meaning of transcendence is most prominent and clear. This second section presents an attempt to refine the potential of transcendence for anthropological scholarship in religion by means of drawing together the existing material religion debates with the proposed typology of transcendence.

Scales of Transcendence

The word *transcendence* itself originates from Latin. In twelfth-century logical treatises, the Latin term *transcendens*—meaning 'that which surpasses [something]' (pl. *transcendentia*) and previously used to indicate 'nobility of being which is free from matter'—acquired a new 'transcategorical' interpretation. By the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, a new variation of the word—*transcendentalis* (pl. *transcendentalia*)—was likely introduced to extricate this new transcategorical sense from *transcendens* as linked with 'nobility of being' (Goris and Aertsen 2019). Philosophers Wouter Goris and Jan Aertsen conclude that once this distinction is made, a further distinction over what is being surpassed is made in philosophy between ontological, logical, and epistemological *transcensus*.

Indeed, the proposition that there are different kinds of transcendence is by no means new (see Saler 2000), and many have proposed different classificatory systems for transcendence. For instance, sociologist of religion Thomas Luckmann identifies three levels of transcendence: 'small' transcendence refers to things "temporarily out of reach" (e.g., in a different room, in a different city); 'medium' transcendence is in the "interpersonal sphere, where an experience is not accessible to us at a given time, though we know it to be humanly possible" (e.g., growing old for young people, being ill for healthy people); and 'great' transcendence refers to "realities outside the sphere of human perception" (Luckmann 1985, as cited in Luehrmann 2015: 142).

Elsewhere, evolutionary psychologist Gregory Gorelik (2016) proposes a four-mode model of transcendent experiences: (a) group-directed transcendence, (b) theory of mind-evoking transcendence, (c) aesthetic transcendence, and (d) epistemic transcendence. That is, four modes of transcendence that evoke (a) a sense of group unity, (b) perception of suprahuman agents, (c) feelings of awe, and (d) a sense of revelation of hidden truths and enlightenment, respectively.

As anthropologist Michael Lambek concludes in his review of the anthropological literature on religion, transcendence "[does] not refer to distinct realms of thought, practice, or being in any absolute sense, but [to] matters of scale and perspective" (2013a: 21). He illustrates this malleability in the anthropologists' use of transcendence by applying the transcendence–immanence dichotomy to the ways in which religion manifests in society. He observes that in secular societies religion is transcendent, that is, objectified and standing apart from society. Whereas in societies where religion is dispersed and infuses all aspects of social life, it is immanent (ibid.: 19). With this example, Lambek demonstrates how transcendence can be applied vis-à-vis society, a position that he contrasts with transcendence situated vis-à-vis the world—an articulation that is most characteristic of theoretical treatments of religion. A difference in scales—for example, between society and the world—indicates an inequivalence and incommensurability[1] for the concept in question. Following Lambek, the literature on transcendence needs to be conscious of these scalar differences amid its anthropological approaches, and, in what follows,

I propose a working typology of transcendence in anthropology: the seven scales of what can be transcended and how.

(1) To transcend is to go beyond the limits, and, on the materialist scale, it is a crossing of a physical boundary (Buchli 2020; see also Robbins 2009; Valentine 2016). For instance, one transcends the Earth's atmosphere by entering outer space.

(2) Transcendence of boundaries can also happen on a metaphorical scale, such as the transcendence of society in Lambek's example described above (2013a), where the transcendent is set apart from society as opposed to being diffused as part of society (see also Bille et al. 2010; Bloch 2008; Engelke 2015).

(3) According to Webb Keane (2007), transcendence in the project of Protestant Reformation is about transcending the material world and producing, entering, or partaking of the immaterial. In Protestantism, the religious goal of transcendence is achieved by overcoming materiality and getting as close as possible to a dematerialized spirituality, a project coterminous with immateriality. On this scale, transcendence is a crossing of the boundary between the material and immaterial, itself an extension of Cartesian mind–body dualism (provided that the boundary between the material and immaterial itself shifts between different contexts). This is the scale of transcendence on which the secularizing project of modernity and religion are most frequently located (Keane 2007: 41; see also Buchli 2016; Taylor 2007). It is also the scale on which anthropologists have placed the Hindu transcendence of *maya*—transcendence of the illusion of the material world (e.g., Good 2000; Miller 2005; Mohan 2015).

(4) The fourth scale of transcendence in this typology is derived primarily from the phenomenological tradition. It is the transcendence of the self, identity, and consciousness, where the transcendent is an alterity to human perception (e.g., Csordas 2004; Holbraad and Willerslev 2007; Saler 2000; Viveiros de Castro 2012). This transcendence recognizes that what is an alterity to humans can, nevertheless, be perceivable to other nonhuman perceiving beings and, thus, nontranscendent to them.

(5) Different again is the transcendence of human nature, an overcoming of human limitations and a going beyond the human. It is the scale of transcendent posthumanism, transhumanism, and immortality (e.g., Bernstein 2019; Bialecki 2022; Carroll and Parkhurst 2020; Farman 2020). Even though a transcendent posthuman might be able to perceive what is alterity to a human, the scale is distinct from the phenomenological one. The transcendent on this scale is the human with an expanded ability to perceive. There can be a further alterity that transcends the posthuman in the phenomenological sense on the fourth scale.

(6) Transcendence can also be about transcending knowing, and it is important to stress the difference of this scale here. It is not about transcending what we know at the present time or transcending that which is perceivable to humans and posthumans. It is transcending being able to know altogether. The transcendent on this scale is the non-explicit and non-representable; in some cases, it is the truth, the ideal, a spirit, or a God (e.g., Reinhardt 2020; Robbins 2016; Sobchack 2008; cf. Cook 2010; Gellner 1992; Gutschow 2004; McDaniel 2011 on Buddhist enlightenment, the mind's extinction, and awakening).

(7) Finally, I would like to isolate transcendence of time as a separate and seventh scale. On this scale, the transcendent is eternity (e.g., Carroll 2017; Lackenby 2021).

Crucially, as Lambek points out, because of the difference in scales, what is transcendent from one perspective may be immanent from another (2013a: 21). This necessitates the anthropologist to be scalar-aware, if we are to engage in productive theoretical exchanges about transcendence. For the rest of this article, I draw upon this scalar typology in a review of the theoretical approaches to transcendence in the field of material religion, where the anthropological definitions of transcendence are among the most sketched out.

Anthropology of Material Religion and Transcendence

Transcendence is an important heuristic for the analysis of religious practices in the interdisciplinary field of material religion. Advancing a critique of the pervasive dematerialization of religion in the post-Enlightenment scholarship on religion, material religion scholars have reinvigorated an interest in the study of religion's materiality (Engelke 2010). They problematize the equivalence between the transcendent and the immaterial that has dominated religious studies and draw attention to the material qualities of transcendence. While attending to the materiality of transcendence is one of their key propositions and contributions to the study of religion, transcendence itself is defined differently across the field's scholarship. In this second half of the article, I recenter this corpus of work on religion around the notion of transcendence in order to make explicit the authors' scales of analysis, and their definitions, and thus facilitate a multi-scalar-aware discussion of the authors' theoretical perspectives on religion.

There are three main issues in the anthropology of material religion that shape how transcendence is used and defined in the authors' works. The first centers around the opposition to the dematerialization of religion in what Charles Taylor calls the 'immanent frame' of modernity (2007). Insofar as they argue against the dematerialization of religion, theorists of material religion tend to take different routes. They diverge in the extent to which they problematize or outright reject the opposition between materiality and immateriality. Second, theorists of material religion accord varying degrees of agency to the material in transcendence as a process, and they have different ideas about where the material's agency to affect stems from. The third divergence, as Keane (2013: 4) summarizes, is around whether the analysis departs from within the 'religious perspective' that considers the existence of the transcendent a given, or from the position of an outsider that asks how people produce the experience of the transcendent with material means. That is, if transcendence is treated emically as a real thing acting upon the material world, or as an etic category for material practices that evoke a religious experience. The differences between scholars' respective perspectives on transcendence can be helpfully elucidated by recognizing the scale on which the author situates transcendence in their work. Indeed, there are two main scales of transcendence in the anthropology of material religion: transcendence between material and immaterial, and the absolute self-revealing transcendence that transcends knowing and that is God and other spirits and beings acting upon our world. One of the two scales usually takes precedence in these scholars' writing.

In what follows, I tease out what the different theorists of material religion propose with respect to each of these debates, how they frame transcendence in their works, and where tensions emerge out of a difference in scales of analysis. For instance, where Bruno Reinhardt (2020) writes about transcendence, Birgit Meyer (2013) and Patrick Eisenlohr (2009) write about the question of immediacy (Reinhardt 2020: 1527). I start by reviewing the current strands of thinking from the media turn (Meyer and Moors 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Morgan 2008; Stolow 2013; De Vries 2008) and semiotic ideology (Keane 2003, 2006, 2007, 2013; Lambek 2013a, 2013b), concerned with transcendence primarily on the im/material scale. I then consider scholars who fore-

ground self-revealing transcendence in their work: proponents of the ontological turn (Espírito Santo and Tassi 2013) and the ecological approach (Reinhardt 2015, 2016, 2020).

Im/material Transcendence: The Media Turn and Semiotic Ideology

The media turn is credited with invigorating a wide, cross-disciplinary interest in the material among researchers of religion (Engelke 2010). Beginning at the intersection between anthropology, philosophy, and art history, the turn's proposition to study religion as mediation has inspired a diverse group of writers and generated an abundance of new scholarship (see Meyer and Moors 2006; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Morgan 2008; Stolow 2013; De Vries 2008). Religion, Matthew Engelke explains, produces and inspires problematic oppositions, which can be helpfully resolved with and through the prism of media. Proximity and distance, presence and absence, mediate and immediate, visible and invisible, immanent and transcendent, natural and supernatural, mortal and immortal, human and divine, known and unknown, knowable and unknowable, revealed and concealed, material and spiritual—mediation helps us to think of these and other pairs as *conjunctions*, the *ands*, not as oppositions but as dialectics (Engelke 2010: 377). In the media turn, "religion is often understood as the set of practices, objects, and ideas that manifest the relationship between the known and visible world of humans and the unknown and invisible works of spirits and the divine" (ibid.: 373). In other words, the media turn thinks of religion as organizing "access to the transcendental" (Meyer 2013: 29).

Where others see transcendence, Meyer, one of the central theorists in the media turn, proposes a theoretical solution to the "problem of immediacy" (2006; see also Eisenlohr 2009). Meyer avoids the term 'transcendence' altogether and uses 'transcendent' or 'transcendental' to delineate the order of the divine and spiritual. To resolve the assumed tension between mediation and immediacy in religion, she proposes the notion of 'sensational form' (2006). "Sensational forms," Meyer explains, "are relatively fixed modes for invoking and organizing access to the transcendental, offering structures of repetition to create and sustain links between believers in the context of particular religious groups" (2013: 315). The media "are made to 'disappear' through established and authorized religious sensational forms that mark these media as genuine to the substance they mediate" (ibid.). Although the medium can appear as media from the outside, from within it is rendered invisible and sacralized. In Meyer's terms, this is how a religious medium is able to collapse the distance between the believer and the divine and create a sense of the immediate presence of the transcendent.

In Keane's semiotic ideology transcendence is conceptualized from a subtly different perspective—his approach foregrounds the historical character of transcendence. Keane (2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2013, 2014) and Lambek (2013a, 2013b)—who also draws on Keane's semiotic ideology—both look at transcendence in terms of the continuously renegotiated historical tension between materiality and immateriality that becomes manifest in successions of semiotic ideologies, which compete and displace one another through time. Keane (2007) argues that the Reformation era's attack on fetishism in the Catholic ritual laid the grounds for the purifying project of Protestant Christianity, and eventually modernity. It introduced a marked division between materiality and immateriality and accorded superior value to the immaterial as that which transcends materiality. The Reformation thus solidified Protestantism as a religion coterminous with immateriality and by association with the transcendent as immaterial. Crucially, Keane demonstrates that the Protestant purification from the material ritual did not result in a religion free of materiality, but rather a religion that merely privileges a different kind of materiality.

Keane uses the notion of semiotic ideology to communicate this distinction. Purification, he argues, displaced the Catholic semiotic ideology of materiality with the Protestant semiotic ideology of immateriality, which is an ideology of semiotic signs embodied in materials, nonetheless. Consider the importance of the creed—a verbalization of belief—in post-Reformation Protestantism, as described by Keane (2007). Although the creed rises to prominence in the Protestant Church as a religious form purified of material fetishism, it has its own material qualities—it is a text that can also be read out as a succession of sound waves reverberating through the air, produced by human vocal cords. 'Pure' immateriality is simply unachievable in Keane's materialist framework. Its pursuit is what Keane terms the "modern subject's anxious transcendence"—"the irresolvable tension between abstraction and the inescapability of material and social mediations" (2006: 322). In an argument that bears the legacy of Talal Asad's influential analyses of religion and secularism as historically and geographically situated categories of phenomena (1993, 2003), Keane proposes that the Protestant semiotic ideology of immaterial transcendence has permeated the intellectual discourse in modernity and has shaped both the Western category of religion and the traditions classified as religions. Reformation movements within the purifying paradigm of antiritualism advanced by the Protestant Reformation have taken place in religious traditions other than Protestantism and have become identified with modernity itself. The entanglement between transcendence and immateriality is, therefore, (a) an empirical relationship that an anthropologist can study ethnographically in the field among Protestants and other religious communities, where it exists in relation to other semiotic ideologies and is often identified with modernity, and (b) a framework that has influenced anthropology's own understanding of transcendence (Lambek 2013b).

Elsewhere Keane draws attention to the recurrence of iconoclasms throughout Christian history (2013). He argues that "if spirit means transcendence, then materialization and people's responses to the perception of things constantly threaten to become problems" (ibid.: 6). It follows that the Christian doctrine of incarnation itself is a generative problem that defines Christianity: "In just what way can any being that transcends the material world actually be available to perception?"—this is the question that Keane places at the core of Christianity (ibid.; see also Cannell 2005). Accordingly, each period of iconoclasm has reproduced its own version of the Christian semiotic ideology of the relationship between materiality and immateriality and of transcendence. Hence, Keane proposes that "one factor that has entered into the production of Christianity's sheer complexity is precisely the recurrent conflict between purifying projects of transcendence and countermovements toward materialization, each provoking the other" (2007: 41). Transcendence, by implication, should be "applied historically rather than simply formally," suggests Lambek (2013a: 21). Plus, he continues, what is transcendent at one time may be immanent at another. In Keane's work the big and absolute transcendence is an external force that is made perceivable through material expressions in small historically specific transcendences. This material expression happens within the semiotic ideologies of purification or materialization and, thus, of a historically specific framing of the boundary between materiality and immateriality.

The differences and similarities in transcendence as defined by the media turn and by the semiotic ideology approach lie in their respective positions with regard to the core three issues in the scholarship of material religion. As far as their positioning vis-à-vis the immanent frame (Taylor 2007) is concerned, proponents of both frameworks write in opposition to religious studies' former identification of transcendence with the immaterial, and they maintain that a focus on the material qualities in religious practice is crucial. They also agree that the big and absolute transcendence that their religious interlocutors believe in is only perceivable by means of a material mediation; their relationship with transcendence is constructed in relationships

with its material manifestations. Thus, for the purposes of their anthropological analysis of religion, it suffices to focus on materiality. After all, semiotic ideology treats immateriality as a kind of materiality and situates immateriality within the immanent frame. As regards the second debate on the material's ability to instantiate religious experience, they are in agreement that these objects can manifest the transcendent for those who treat the objects as having the agency to do so. The subtle difference between the two approaches lies in the third debate. The media turners' theoretical approach is etic, insofar as it frames media as producing an experience of the transcendental, whereas "emically, these are media to which things 'have happened'" (Christopher Pinney, in Belting et al. 2014: 242). Also starting from the position of the outsider, the semiotic ideology approach lends itself to the analysis of the historical construction of both the etic perspective of the outsider (of the anthropologist as a product of modernity) and the emic perspective of the religious interlocutor. For instance, one could study the semiotic ideology of the media turn. In paying attention to how the relationship between materiality and immateriality has been shaped and reshaped through time, it allows the comparative analysis of different semiotic ideologies and theorizes how something can be a transcendent experience from one perspective and immanent from another.

To reiterate, there are two main scales of transcendence in anthropology of material religion: transcendence between material and immaterial, and the absolute transcendence that transcends knowing and which is self-revealing. The two theoretical perspectives that I have discussed so far have foregrounded the first scale. Although these authors tend to acknowledge the existence of the second scale in the eyes of their interlocutor, the first scale allows them to focus their attention away from transcendence onto the material, as well as the relationships people enter into with and through the material. In the following section of the article, I look at the approaches that take more of an emic position with respect to transcendence, recognizing and theorizing its power to affect.

Self-Revealing Transcendence: The Ontological Turn and the Ecological Approach

Contributors to Espírito Santo and Tassi's edited volume (2013) form another thread within the field of material religion that can be broadly subsumed under the ontological turn (see also Bräunlein 2016; Burchardt and Höhne 2015; Hazard 2013; Meyer 2019 for related approaches that draw on the philosophy of new materialism for religious studies). They adopt the media turners' position on material mediation as a necessity in the bridging of the separation between human beings and transcendence posited by religion (Espírito Santo and Tassi 2013: 14, quoting Meyer 2006, 2008). However, rather than focus on the 'medium of objectification' as merely a means of religious experience, these scholars focus on how the material form "participates intrinsically and unpredictably in the creation of persons . . . spirits or deities" (Espírito Santo and Tassi 2013: 17, drawing on Miller 2005). This volume develops Meyer's approach through the prism of thingness, departing from the theorization of the artifact, object, or im/materiality. Building on the work of Amiria Henare, Martin Holbraad, and Sari Wastell, they adopt a 'thing-as-heuristic' in place of a 'thing-as-analytic' approach (Henare et al. 2007: 5). By this they mean that they are interested in what things 'do' and their ontological effects in religious contexts—a move away from interpretation and contemplation of objects and their underlying meanings. In this way they shift the focus from the media turn's focus on the 'mediation of cosmology' to the material dimension of creating, living, and transforming cosmologies. As Holbraad (2007) argues in his analysis of the Polynesian term *mana*, transcendence is the very idea

of the ontological separation between concept and thing, and Espírito Santo, Tassi, and their collaborators are working against it. Their aim is to collapse the distance between the human and the world, the signifier and the signified, and the conceptual and the material. Transcendent, in their view, is not separate or opposite. It is overlapping with the material. Together the transcendent and the material can be constitutive of the same entity or connected "by a shared matrix of animated substance" (Espírito Santo and Tassi 2013: 12), and their intersection is their primary focus. Finally, rather than assuming a single reality that is understood in different ways by the anthropologist's 'informants,' Espírito Santo and colleagues focus on how people themselves collapse the distinction between the transcendent and the material through their engagement with things and produce their own spirits and cosmologies (ibid.: 25).

As well as departing from the media turn's discussion around mediation, the ontological turn in material religion has a distinct stance on the three issues discussed here. Firstly, Espírito Santo, Tassi, and their collaborators go beyond the media turn's challenge of the modernist semiotic ideology that equates transcendent with the immaterial, and apply an ontological lens. Writing outside of the context of Abrahamic religions, they reframe the relationship between material and transcendent as one existing in the same matrix of interconnected substance. Through levelling the field, the contributors open it to being refigured according to alternative perspectives. Their focus, thus, is not on different semiotic ideologies but on different ontologies. In framing the transcendent as inside the ethnographic field alongside the material, they set the debate about im/materiality aside. They move away from materiality to consider things, material, concepts, and the transcendent as part of the same horizon of substance. By association, on the second issue, they treat things as self-revealing in unexpected ways and accord them agency that cannot be explained through mediation alone. Finally, they adopt an emic perspective, recognizing phenomena habitually grouped under transcendence as distinct things that exist and affect other things in their respective ethnographic fields. Ultimately, tying the discussion back to transcendence, the introductory chapter to Espírito Santo and Tassi's volume resists creating a singular theory of transcendence. Such a theory of transcendence presupposes an ontological separation between different orders of phenomena, which is not universal. Instead, they use their interlocutors' own terms as situated in their respective ontologies.

Where Espírito Santo and Tassi (2013) are happy to draw on the media turn's focus on techniques and mediators as instantiating a relationship with the transcendent, Reinhardt (2015, 2016, 2020) is completely dissatisfied with the media turn's approach. Drawing on Charles Hirschkind's (2011) and Aisha Beliso-De Jesús's (2015) critiques of the media turn in material religion and Kathleen Stewart's (2011) atmospheric attunements, he proposes an alternative—the ecological approach to material religion. Hirschkind draws attention to the problematic equivalence between mediation in media technologies and mediation in theology—a foundational assumption for the media turners (2011: 92–93). As he points out, even though the Qur'an, for instance, mediates between humans and the divine it cannot be reduced to being a mere mediator. Like a ball in the game of football, the Qur'an is a "constitutive and necessary element" in this relationship (ibid.: 93). He suggests that the framework of the media turn is implicitly built on the internal versus external dualism characteristic of Protestantism, whereas how the inside and outside are articulated differs across traditions (ibid.: 96). Similarly, Reinhardt agrees with Beliso-De Jesús's (2015: 31) observation that the distance the media turn constructs between the here and there, and which it purports to collapse through mediation, is itself artificial. In her research, she finds that instead of creating 'mediations,' Santería practitioners "already exist within fields of electrifying copresences" (ibid.: 43). Furthermore, as some media scholars have observed themselves, the medium itself is not a static entity. It is historically enabled in the process of 'becoming-media' (Horn 2007; Siegert 2003; Vogl 2007). Synthesizing

these critiques in his own work, Reinhardt (2015) observes that the Pentecostal processes of becoming a medium might be better conceptualized by drawing on the Deleuzian pair: the virtual and the actual. Rather than a shift from mental beliefs to embodied affects, or from the 'ideal' to 'real,' as the media turn suggests, Reinhardt argues that the Pentecostal experience of the divine is better understood in terms of the actualization of the Holy Spirit's virtuality: "[t]he Spirit is always already there, as a virtuality, but it crosses an affective threshold (Sedgwick and Frank 1995) to actualize variously" (Reinhardt 2020: 1531–1532). Drawing on Stewart's (2011) atmospheric attunement, he suggests that the 'immediacy' Meyer observes in transcendence happens not by "invisibilizing technologies semiotically" but in atmospheric attunements that "dissolve the 'foregroundness' of artifacts into the pervasive 'backgroundness' of the ecological medium" (Reinhardt 2020: 1548).

Effectively flipping on its head the relationship between the medium and the divine, Reinhardt attempts to rewrite the 'secular grammar' in the anthropology of material religion. In his ecological approach, it is the transcendent that prefigures transcendence, not the medium. This virtual transcendence-as-tangible-flow also does not exclude the possibility of transcendence as defined by the boundary between material and immaterial. Indeed, he recognizes that there are two kinds of transcendence upon which different Christian traditions draw (Reinhardt 2016: 91), in other words two scales. "The first type of Christian tradition draws a clear-cut boundary separating divine transcendence from immanence . . . [t]he second type of transcendence is . . . an overflow, a wave of transcendental power that pours over immanent grounds" (ibid.), with the former arising as a purification of the latter, as a dualism that cannot be universally applicable across all religious contexts without occluding the importance they may accord to transcendence on the absolute scale.

Let us finally consider Reinhardt's stance on the three issues under examination here. Firstly, writing in a direct challenge to the immanent frame of modernity (2016), he argues against looking at the problem of the absolute transcendence from the perspective of immaterial–material dualism. Instead, he adopts Deleuze's (originally intended as anti-religious) philosophy to advance an argument that treats the religious perspective seriously. Secondly, Reinhardt explains that his interlocutors attune to the divine flow through the affordances of religious practice and objects; thus he conceptualizes the material in terms of its ability to draw human attention in. Hence, he accords the material the agency to both participate in transcendence and to distract from it. Thirdly, he approaches the debate from an emic perspective, incorporating his interlocutors' view of transcendence as a real thing that acts in the field without resorting to a 'secular grammar.'

These are the two main overarching approaches to transcendence in the anthropology of material religion, whose differences ultimately come down to whether the scholars treat transcendence as (a) a category for material relationships that are socially construed as transcendence in a given context, or as (b) a self-revealing force outside of human understanding acting upon the material world. Each approach is partial and has its respective strengths, and together they offer two complementary perspectives. A focus on material relationships lends itself to easier cross-cultural comparison and classification of similar phenomena. In the process, however, the notion of materiality becomes ever more diluted as it tries to contain more and more ethnographic cases (Reinhardt 2016). As a result, Reinhardt argues, "definitions of materiality become intrinsically and performatively bound to questions of [academic] intervention—thus of normativity, authority, difference, and freedom" (ibid.: 78). It also carries the risk of producing a patronizing anthropological analysis of sacred phenomena reduced to a universal tendency of people to set certain material practices apart as more special than others. A focus on case-specific

definitions of self-revealing transcendence, which foregrounds the interlocutors' own account, resolves this ethical tension. But these accounts, in turn, risk becoming close in appearance to theology (in the analyses of mainstream religions) or philosophy (in the accounts of Indigenous ontologies), thus conceivably losing some of their theoretical purchase for anthropology's comparative studies and the general theory of religion.

In sum, the differences between the two approaches come down to whether the scholars of religion approach their subject with a secular or agnostic perspective; whether they objectify beliefs in transcendence as an order of social phenomena or allow the possibility that the transcendence may in fact be self-revealing. Taking all of this into consideration, the viability of transcendence as an analytic for comparative study appears increasingly dubious, but there is one more scale that is worth making explicit before making a final assessment—the scale of anthropology.

The Im/possibility of Transcendence as an Analytic

Reviewing the literature on secularism, Engelke (2015) makes an interesting observation that almost none of the critical theory of the secular addresses the secular in relation to sub-Saharan Africa. In an attempt to fill this gap, he also concludes that the processes he observes in the region cannot simply be subsumed under antisecularism either—by which he means a resistance to the import of secularism from the West. He further notes that religious change can also be "a *change to religion*." That is, "not a shift *within* transcendental and supernatural orientations but, rather, a shift *to* them. . . What transcendence does is make a certain kind of option—the 'secular' option—necessarily of a different epistemological and even ontological order" (ibid.: 95, original emphasis). In sub-Saharan Africa, he argues, the historical shift was not between the 'traditional' and the 'secular,' as is common in many Western societies, but between 'traditional' and 'religious.' In a society where the secular option becomes available, transcendence has a structural function for delineating how this secular option is different. Echoing Lambek's (2013a) point about religion being transcendent of society, briefly touched upon above, Engelke points out that his Masowe interlocutors come to be aware of their own religiosity as a result of becoming aware of their religion's transcendence of the secular society.

Both Engelke and Lambek help us recognize that in some societies, the recognition of certain phenomena as transcendence is often motivated by the need to articulate how one's own society is different from a secular society; that is, by the need to translate one's beliefs into a secular logic. The use of the term 'transcendence' itself already implies the secular possibility of comparability (not yet equivalence) between, for example, a Muslim God and a Māori spirit. By contrast, for a nonsecular Muslim, there is only one God, *Allah*, whereas *hau*, the Māori spirit of the gift, is of a different order of phenomena. From the Muslim perspective, the two cannot be uncomplicatedly subsumed under one category of transcendence. In fact, to draw such disparate phenomena together in a comparable fashion is one of anthropology's superpowers—the trick from which anthropology historically derives the bulk of its intellectual capital.

Much like religion and secularism, as brilliantly argued by Asad (1993, 2003), the notion of transcendence has its own history, with its contemporary meaning developed to a large extent in Western philosophy and later anthropology—both bearing strong Christian, specifically Western Christian, influences (see Cannell 2005 for a detailed discussion of the Christian influence on the anthropological heuristics and canon). Transcendence is not a universal category of cross-cultural phenomena; it is an Indigenous term anthropologists have co-opted as their own for cross-context translation and comparison. Indeed, following Lambek, transcendence has "to

be applied historically rather than simply formally" (2013a: 21). With this in mind, the resort to transcendence as an etic framework of analysis demands a critical assessment of the relationship arising between the proposed theoretical understanding of transcendence, the religious legacy that it carries, and the phenomenon deemed related from this perspective. In his work on social hierarchies, David Graeber observes the political capital enjoyed by those set apart from the rest of a society as transcendent beings (2007). To deem someone transcendent, and the other person not, is political. An anthropologist choosing to deem something transcendent and to deny something else transcendence is likewise ultimately making a political decision even just by placing these two phenomena on the same scale of transcendence and positing comparability in the first place. Thus the only way transcendence can be a viable analytic is with the recognition of its situatedness in anthropology's own intellectual history and the power structures nested therein. A scalar-aware discussion of transcendence—in the studies of religion and anthropology more widely—is a reflection on the tensions between what our interlocutors describe to us (self-revealing transcendence), why anthropology deems this to be transcendence (anthropology's semiotic ideology of transcendence, its history and theological legacy), and what the political implications of this comparison are (e.g., whose spirits and gods are reduced to the same order of phenomena, for the sake of whom and whose vision for the world). The most promising value of transcendence as an analytic is in exposing these inequalities and the scales' incommensurability.

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▪ NOTES

1. I employ incommensurability here in the sense articulated in the theoretical lineage of Marilyn Strathern (2004) rather than Elizabeth Povinelli (2001): an incommensurability of method rather than of cultures, societies, and ontologies.

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