

1 *The Two Forms of Religion: Being and Nothingness*

Most of this chapter is devoted to distinguishing the characteristics of first immanentism and then transcendentalism. But while the former has often defined religious traditions in their entirety, the latter never has. The final section explains how and why *all* transcendentalist traditions have existed as an unstable synthesis with immanentism.¹

The Characteristics of Immanentism

Again and again, historians and anthropologists articulate what is distinctive about religion as it functions in the particular society they study – in terms that could in fact apply to most societies that have ever existed. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro may be describing the Tupinambá of Brazil but in certain ways he is also describing any religious life untouched by transcendentalism.² These may be summarised by the following ten characteristics, all of which run into each another:

(1) The promiscuous attribution of personhood

As an element of human behaviour found in every society known to scholarship, it should be possible to understand immanentism in terms of the inherent characteristics of the evolved mind.³ I will not attempt to proceed very far into the field of cognitive science, which has its own internal debates about how mental processing

¹ Note again that the reverse is not true.

² In other ways (such as perspectivism), of course, he is describing something more particular: Viveiros de Castro 2011.

³ This does not mean that we *must* think as immanentists (or indeed as transcendentalists), contra the fears of Whitmarsh 2016: 5, about evolutionary psychology.

may or may not be organised and its own epistemological problems to overcome. Nevertheless, it has established some foundational points that all serious thinkers about religion must address. We are obliged, for example, to consider the implications of the fact that the human mind is not some force of pure intelligence that simply perceives the world as it is.⁴ It is extremely good at some things and rather poor at others; it is inconsistently attentive. Some lines of thought are followed more readily and intuitively than others. One of the best examples of this also turns out to be the most significant for a comprehension of religion. Not for the first time, David Hume arrived at the point without the benefit of subsequent theories of evolution:

There is an universal tendency among mankind to conceive all beings like themselves, and to transfer to every object, those qualities, with which they are familiarly acquainted, and of which they are intimately conscious. We find human faces in the moon, ascribe malice or good-will to every thing, that hurts or pleases us.⁵

The profound tendency towards anthropomorphism is impossible to deny for anyone who has cursed a car that has broken down – exhibiting what Alfred Gell called ‘vehicular animism’.⁶ What informs such behaviour is the persistent assumption that significant effects are caused by somehow personlike agents rather than by the brute operations of nonconscious and nonintentional matter.

Some scholars working within an evolutionary perspective have argued that this was the product of various cognitive traits which promoted survival, such as predator detection: if a twig falls and snaps behind you, it pays to start as if it were a wolf rather than the wind.⁷ Most promising, however, is the current interest in the supercharged development of social intelligence: the human mind appears to be distinguished by its capacity for complex feats of mind reading, speculating about the feelings, strategies, and intentions of

⁴ Many cognitive scientists argue that this is because the brain is an intricately related set of tools for carrying out specific tasks (summarised in Larson 2016). For an alternative approach: Heyes 2012, 2018.

⁵ Hume 2007 [1734–1737]: 40. ⁶ Gell 1998: 18.

⁷ Boyer 2001: 165; Atran 2002; Whitehouse and Laidlaw 2007: 13. Barrett 2007: 183. But see Willard 2017 on how ‘predictive coding’ may allow cultural expectations to shape perception.

other people.⁸ Perhaps it became so important for survival and reproductive success to understand the complexities of social relations that it decisively altered the priorities of human cognition. However it happened, it is as if this fixation upon the logic of the social was inexorably transferred to other domains of cognition, such that it structured the comprehension of powers, forces, qualities, or even abstractions.⁹ Of course, people in all societies discern ‘natural’ processes of cause and effect too. It is just that these are often held to proceed alongside a deeper or more satisfying level of explanation that revolves around the discernment of motivated agency.¹⁰

At a stroke, this perspective renders any social functionalist theory of why religion exists unnecessary (although functionalism in the broad sense is indispensable for understanding why it takes the forms it does, as the following chapter suggests). Without some such appeal to the evolved mind, moreover, it is difficult to comprehend why certain features are independently invented time and again within otherwise very diverse and disconnected cultures, including types comparable to witches, spirits of possession, ancestors, and so on.¹¹ Our attention is also drawn to the way that *de facto* assumptions (or ‘nonreflective beliefs’ in the terminology of Justin L. Barrett) may diverge widely from ostensibly esteemed knowledge.¹² The cognitive tendency towards agency detection certainly helps explain the promiscuous attribution of personhood in the historical and anthropological record.¹³

Two qualifications deserve brief acknowledgement: first that ‘personhood’ is used here to refer simply to motivated agency; *emic* theories of what exactly personhood is and how exactly matter relates

⁸ In neuroscience, the ‘social brain’ hypothesis makes such demands the driver of the ‘extraordinary size and complexity’ of the human brain (Adolphs 2009).

Thanks to Roger Albin. Even the ‘cultural evolutionary psychology’ approach of Heyes 2018, sees some genetically inherited predispositions towards pro-sociality, while arguing that more specific features such as mind reading and imitation are culturally transmitted – but still essentially universally present – cognitive mechanisms. According to this approach, immanentism might be seen as a ‘grist’ of these ‘mills’. Where this book refers to the ‘evolved mind’ it could potentially refer to such mechanisms insofar as they are universally established.

⁹ Note also Esther Goody 1995. ¹⁰ Evans-Pritchard 1976; Tambiah 1990: 58.

¹¹ Laidlaw and Whitehouse 2007: 24; Hutton 2004.

¹² Justin Barrett 2007: 181–189.

¹³ Promiscuous by the standards of modern science, that is, which is unusually parsimonious.

to non-matter, may vary enormously and are often composite.¹⁴ Secondly, many immanentist societies convey a sense that the capacity to organise the underlying realities of the universe in terms of personhood has distinct limits, as if any such identities might be merely shifting and plural masks allowing a dim apprehension of interacting powers or processes.¹⁵

There is naturally some variety in how and where these metapersons were located. To the extent that such metapersons are conceived to be present in the animals, objects, and landscape of the observable world around us, this disposition has been described as animism.¹⁶ ‘Animism’ sank into disrepute as a scholarly term for many decades due to its association with old civilisational hierarchies, but in recent years anthropology has cleared its head of this particular genealogical fallacy.¹⁷ ‘Animism’ has therefore been revived for its capacity to convey an ontology radically different from that of modern Western common sense, one in which the world is held to be full of subjects rather than objects: ‘The attribution by humans to non-humans of an interiority identical to their own.’¹⁸ One particularly striking subset of animism has become known as perspectivism, which is found in a number of societies in Amazonia and Siberia.¹⁹ If, in the animist view, non-humans such as animals are held to be essentially human, perspectivalist cultures complete this logic: the humans that appear as animals to us also see us as animals. These beings are not then fundamentally ‘other’, they are merely endowed with different bodies and perceptual equipment and therefore have a different, role-reversed view of the world, one in which, for example, people may be identified as prey.

¹⁴ Marilyn Strathern 1988; Carrithers, Collins, Lukes 1985; Descola 2013a: 207–226; Selz 2008: 23; Puett 2015: 233.

¹⁵ Maffie 2014: 88–89; Vernant 1991: 273; Valeri 1985: 9–18.

¹⁶ Since Tylor 1871: 385–366.

¹⁷ Aided by the ontological turn, current emphasis on the agency of the object, and Actor–Network Theory. Much of this work deliberately blurs (or ignores) the boundaries between the emic and the etic.

¹⁸ Descola 2013a: 129. See also Lambek 2013a: 16; Viveiros de Castro 2012: 40–41: ‘The world of immanent humanity is also a world of immanent divinity, a world where divinity is distributed under the form of a potential infinity of non-human subjects. This is a world where hosts of miniscule gods wander the earth. . . This is the world that has been called animist. . .’

¹⁹ There is some ambiguity as to whether perspectivism should be a defining feature of ‘animism’. See Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola 2013b: 38.

The great majority of societies in the historical record, however, have attributed features of personhood not only to the animals and things around them, but to all manner of beings that are not usually visible nor inextricably tied to a single material instantiation, namely to ancestors, spirits, and deities. It is not always helpful to make strong distinctions between these entities, which is one reason why the term ‘metaperson’ may be preferable.²⁰ But a very large number of societies have arranged their metapersons in a hierarchy, in which moving up the scale entails both greater distance from and greater powers over normal persons.²¹ In Bellah’s view, a more acute sense of distance between man and metaperson, and thus stronger sensations of reverence – the emergence of ‘gods’ – was a hallmark of the ‘archaic religion’ that accompanied the rise of kings and states: religious and political differentiation proceeded hand in hand.²² This must be qualified, for Sahlins has shown that societies without forms of political hierarchy have also imagined layers of godlike metapersons towering above them. They formed indeed a kind of invisible state before the state.²³

(2) *Cosmology is relatively monistic*

The literature is emphatic that visions of reality existing before and outside those produced by the Axial Age tend to the monistic.²⁴ In the words of Bellah, ‘Both tribal and archaic religions are “cosmological”, in that supernature, nature, and society were all fused in a single cosmos.’²⁵ Monism is a concept of which it is easy to lose control, however. If it is pushed too far it might imply that the inhabitants of immanentist societies imagine metapersons as inhabiting the world in exactly the manner that normal persons do. There would be no sense in having special, set-apart (‘sacred’) modes of representing or interacting

²⁰ See Lambek 2013a: 14; Landau 1999: 16, for problems with ‘gods’.

²¹ In a recent schema by Descola 2013a: 41, ‘Although they are in no way transcendent to human existence, deities are less immanent than spirits.’ Sahlins 2016: ‘Socially and categorically, divinity is a higher-order form of animism.’

²² Bellah 2011: 141, 189. The emergence of statehood is not a precondition of Descola’s ‘analogical ontology’, but it would seem that all state societies have been analogical (or more recently), naturalist.

²³ Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 23–64.

²⁴ Compare Oakley 2006: 15; Frankfort et al. 1946: 71.

²⁵ Bellah 2011: 266; Charles Taylor 2012: 34; Casanova 2012: 206.

with them. Evidently, the behaviour of ancestors, spirits, and gods is obstreperously obscured and mysterious.²⁶ The whole panoply of rite and sacrifice is an attempt to throw a rope bridge across the frustrating divide that separates person and metaperson. Moreover, it is precisely because there are normally some such emic distinctions between, say, cosmos and society, or gods and men, that so much energy is put into setting up relations between them (a truly monistic entity would allow for no inter-relationality).²⁷ Hence Jan Assmann refers not to monism but to

Conceptual compactness [which] results not so much from an inability to differentiate, a mere absence of later achievements, but from a will to connect and to integrate, to establish alliances, equations, and identities.²⁸

Certainly, for some purposes, it may make sense to describe the spirits and gods of immanentist societies as existing ‘beyond’ or ‘transcending’ domestic human society in some form – indeed, it is this which allows them to underpin, represent, or legitimate it.²⁹ However, they do not ‘transcend’ the mundane world in a ‘transcendentalist’ manner! Assmann comments:

Transcendence in the sense of otherworldliness is common to all forms of religion and concepts of the sacred. These gods and spirits are, however, not extramundane. Their otherworldliness does not prevent them from being immanent in nature.³⁰

The point is not then to deny that many immanentist cultures created special locations (otherworlds, underworlds, spirit worlds) for metapersons to inhabit, but rather that these locations were somehow

²⁶ Distinctions between men, spirits, and gods in Tahiti: Oliver 1974: 56; Hawaii: Valeri 1985: 32. Graeber 2015: 11, on the unknowability of *vazimba* spirits in Madagascar. Note Morris 2005: 313.

²⁷ Hence Descola 2013a: 201: analogical ontologies employ ‘a mode of identification that divides up the whole collection of living beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms and substances’.

²⁸ Assmann 2012: 371–372, which also advances ‘cosmotheism’ to capture the ‘cosmic immanence of the divine’.

²⁹ Bloch 1987.

³⁰ ‘Otherworldliness’ and ‘extramundane’ are almost synonyms, but twisted here in different directions, the latter implying a categorical break (Assmann 2012: 403, footnote 16).

circumscribed by or homologous to mundane reality in profound ways.³¹ This is why, whenever anthropologists or historians are obliged to explain the nature of religion in any given immanentist society – to a readership universally assumed to have been reared within naturalism and/or transcendentalism – they have nearly always understood that their main exegetical duty is the explosion of dualisms. Repeatedly, we are told that distinctions between society and cosmos, man and god, god and thing, man and thing, thing and god, were consistently overcome by the intensity of analogical reasoning to which they are subject, the chains of cause and effect strung between them, and the routine nature of their mutual participation.³² Above all, the nature/supernature distinction is often presented as an obstacle to grasping the emic sensibility.³³ Marshall Sahlins has recently referred to a raft of ethnographic literature in order to demonstrate the extent to which people of many societies have felt themselves to be living among metapersons, as empirical realities, as forces continuously dictating their fortunes, as *sharing their world* rather than inhabiting some distant other sphere.³⁴ Alfredo López Austin describes something like this as the experience of the sixteenth-century Nahua:

For the Nahuatl man, some of the supernatural beings had a reality as present, as immediate, as daily as he could capture through his senses. The supernatural was judged to be material, potentially visible, tangible, and audible. It was remote from man because of man's limitations, but man was immersed in the supernatural.³⁵

In Ancient Greece, the gods may be described as being 'entirely of this world. They may have dwelled on the most remote, elevated mountain in Greece. . . they may have been capable of flight, but they nevertheless inhabited the same ecosystem as we do'.³⁶ Indeed, gods had once lived with men; their reign was contingent, their immortality only

³¹ Eisenstadt 1986: 2; Obeyesekere 2002: 74.

³² For example, Viveiros de Castro 2011: 30; Poirier 2013: 51.

³³ This is very widely remarked but recognised as long ago as Frazer's *The Golden Bough* [1890–1936] 1994: 24. See, however, Viveiros de Castro 1998: 483 for a defence of 'supernature'.

³⁴ Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 38, refers to Frederik Barth among the Baktaman of Papua New Guinea, on 'how *empirical* the spirits are'.

³⁵ Cited in Read 1994: 48.

³⁶ Whitmarsh 2016: 23, distinguishing from the transcendent Christian God.

maintained through nectar and ambrosia.³⁷ Scholars of contemporary Central Africa report widespread apprehensions of a ‘spirit world’. In one sense this is distinct from mundane reality; in another sense it is not distinct at all, insofar as it is a simulacrum of this world.³⁸ According to one account today, it has its universities, airports, government.³⁹ Among the Chukchi of Kamchatka, the spirit world is a kind of reversed, upside-down version of this one, where day is night.⁴⁰

The submergence of the distinction between thing and spirit is no less important. This is again most fundamentally explicable in terms of the cognitive tendency towards agency or personhood attribution. Many behaviours, taking place within very divergent cultural systems, bear witness to this propensity to make objects into subjects, from the making of masks and fetishes in West Africa to the looting of temple icons in medieval India.⁴¹ To take an example from early nineteenth-century Oceania, the English missionary John Williams reported a conversation among the recently converted Samoans debating how to destroy their god of war, apparently resident within a piece of matting. When burning was proposed it was deemed too cruel a death for the god, and so drowning was opted for.⁴² In some of these cases, at the level of explicitly held knowledge there may well be important distinctions to be drawn between the object and the meta-person it represents or hosts. But at the level of non-explicit assumption, this distinction is often obliterated. Alfred Gell, in perhaps the most audacious act of liberation from the genealogical fallacy, has sought to resurrect the concept of the ‘idol’ in order to highlight such commonalities.⁴³

For all traditions outside of the monotheisms, and especially for immanentist ones, their academic exegetes have also been concerned to highlight the liquidity of movement across the man/god frontier.⁴⁴ For J. D. Y. Peel,

In Yoruba ontology humans and *orisa* [deities] though early distinguished from each other in concept, were still seen as occupying different points on a

³⁷ Davidson 2007: 213. ³⁸ For Dahomey, see Bay 1998: 250.

³⁹ Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 51 (and 15, 40); 2007: 385–386.

⁴⁰ Willerslev 2013: 149.

⁴¹ Mitchell 2006; Moin 2015: 495–496, drawing on Davis 1997.

⁴² Williams 1837: 438–439. ⁴³ Gell 1998; Sissons 2014: 103–105.

⁴⁴ Examples from Ancient Greece: Whitmarsh 2016: 45; China: Puett 2002; and the Americas: Harris 1995: 14.

single scale of power or life/spirit, and there were various ways in which they could instantiate, partake of or be transformed into the divine.⁴⁵

This has obvious significance for the matter of sacred kingship, as considered in Chapter 3.

(3) The afterlife is relatively undifferentiated and insignificant

In nearly all religious cultures, both immanentist and transcendentalist, however, there is one sense in which all persons must become somewhat 'meta': when they die. But to what extent is a form of ontological dualism entailed by the afterlife? In many societies, the dead are considered to remain within the community in an important sense and as the condition of the possibility of its existence. In some Central African societies the land of the dead has been seen as coterminous with the living, reachable through bodies of water, for example. Such substantial continuity is maintained across this boundary that 'death' itself may be a misnomer.⁴⁶ In the highlands of Papua New Guinea, recently dead ancestors could be imagined to take the form of Australian explorers making first contact.⁴⁷ In Hawaii, the dead Captain Cook could be identified with a volcano.⁴⁸ Wherever we find societies burying the dead surrounded by the paraphernalia of life such as chariots, money, or slaves, we surely also find afterlives that are simulacra of this life. Indeed such gravesites often indicate that social status – being a king, say – was something that could pass to the next life. The Jesuit Baltasar Barreira described his frustrations with West African interlocutors in the early seventeenth century: 'They evaluate all points about the next world in terms of things of this world, believing that the former are also material, and hence that they will employ in the other life what they used in this one.'⁴⁹ Hence, wherever in the world the archaeological record of gravesites suddenly plunges into mute emptiness it may be taken as an indication of the arrival of transcendentalism. Paradisical afterlives may be found in some forms

⁴⁵ Peel 2003: 83. ⁴⁶ MacGaffey 1994: 258.

⁴⁷ Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991.

⁴⁸ See CK. Julius Caesar's ascension to heaven was identified with a comet: Barton 1996: 152; Gradel 2002: 321.

⁴⁹ Brooks 1996: 307.

of immanentism but they tend to be concretely magnified versions of worldly good fortune.⁵⁰

Frequently, if not quite invariably, the scholarship is at pains to observe the relative insignificance of the afterlife.⁵¹ The definitive feature of the immanentist afterlife is simply that it is not the *raison d'être* of religious activity. As such, it may well be essentially untheorised. The missionary William Ellis recounted a conversation in Hawaii in the 1820s:

We afterwards endeavoured to learn from them something respecting their opinions of a state of existence after death. But . . . it could not be discovered whether they had any definite idea of the nature or even the existence, of such a state. Some said, that all the souls of the departed went to the Po, (place of night) and were annihilated, or eaten by the gods there. Others said, that some went to the regions of Akea and Miru . . . But to most of the questions, they could give no answer, as they knew nothing about it; none had ever returned in open day-light, to tell them any thing respecting it; and all they knew was from visions or dreams of the priests.⁵²

In these circumstances, it may be difficult to make people care about a new concept of the hereafter. The Welsh missionary John Davies in Tahiti found that even when working among people terribly afflicted by the new diseases brought by the English ships, they were irritated by talk of the next world and 'would say we want no other salvation but to live in this world'.⁵³ 'They cannot be persuaded that as to them, there is anything to be feared, or hoped for beyond the present life. Salvation from sin and its consequences is utterly despised. It is what they look upon as a useless and foolish tale.'⁵⁴

(4) The purpose of religion is to access supernatural power for the flourishing of existence in the here and now

If the afterlife is usually a vague and minor detail of the immanentist canvas, what is the central motif? It is simply the pursuit of power – but power conceived in the broadest sense possible. The basic immanentist assumption is that the capacity to achieve any worthwhile objective is dependent on the approval or intervention of supernatural forces and

⁵⁰ Paredes 2006: 528. ⁵¹ Firth 1996: 73; Gray 1990: 67–68.

⁵² Ellis 1827: 368–369. ⁵³ Davies 1961: 62; cf Sahllins 2004: 201.

⁵⁴ Davies 1961: 101. Compare the Kingdom of Ndongo, Heywood 2017: 90.

metapersons. These constitute the fundamental origin of the ability to produce food, survive ill health, become wealthy, give birth, and wage war. Supernatural power may at times be imagined as a unified impersonal force – like electricity – that can be accessed both with and without the intervention of metapersons. The Polynesian concept of *mana* could stand as a label for the whole category.⁵⁵ But it is always also in the gift of ancestors, spirits, and gods with whom it is therefore vital to maintain good relations. This may seem like a very obvious point. But the more seriously we take the emic conception that all power is ultimately supernatural in origin – what Sahlins calls determination by religious basis – the more radical the implications for understanding how immanentist societies and politics works.⁵⁶

(5) *Morality is communal, local, and unsystematised*

It follows that there is no sphere of religious values that may be differentiated from the values of society per se. What the stories and symbols and rites of immanentist religion embody are the normal appetites and desiderata of this world: heroism, consumption, fertility, sexuality, honour, order, peace, victory – in short, ‘life’, as A. M. Hocart put it.⁵⁷ (These are also the values of modern secular society.) This is not at all to suggest that immanentist religious activity is unrelated to morality, just that ‘morality’ here signifies the maintenance of successful communal living.⁵⁸ In seventeenth-century Central Africa, initiation cults aimed at the moral regeneration of society, punishing falsehood with sickness and death.⁵⁹ Everywhere, metapersons are ready to chastise oath breakers.⁶⁰ If Sahlins sees the precursor to the state in the heavenly hierarchies of metapersons,

⁵⁵ Valeri 1985: 98: *mana* is potency, efficacy, success. Among comparable terms and suffixes are perhaps *teotl* or *-teo* (Nahuatl: Maffie 2014: 31–32); *camac* (Quechua: Harrison 2014: 97); *evu* (among the Maka, see Geschiere 1997: 62–63 on its amorality); *ling* (Chinese); *-kis* (Bakongo), *baraka* (Arabic), *śakti*, (Hinduism), *saksit* (Thai).

⁵⁶ Graeber and Sahlins 2017: 53.

⁵⁷ Hooper 2006: 30–33; Charles Taylor 2012 refers to ‘human flourishing’.

⁵⁸ Immanentist systems vary quite widely, however, in the extent to which metapersons concern themselves with human morality; see McKay and Whitehouse 2015: 46; Obeyesekere 2002: 98.

⁵⁹ Thornton 2001: 76–77. Compare the morality of cargo cults in Mount Hagen (Papua New Guinea): Andrew Strathern 1980: 162.

⁶⁰ See Chapter 2.

then evidently the invocation of their displeasure provided the police, judiciary, and penal systems (see Chapter 2). This may be held to be aroused by ritual infelicities – by neglecting sacrifice, for example – but also by the flouting of taboos, conventions, or moral rules of thumb.⁶¹ More generally, ritual participation helps create communally oriented human subjects. However, immanentist systems have not developed systematic sets of ethical principles applicable to the whole of humanity and which deserve to be followed regardless of their impact on community. They have not made the internalisation of such abstract ethical codes a central function of religious life. And they are not formed around a worship of or search for ‘the good’. Ancestors in mid-twentieth-century Mount Hagen may have punished behaviour that was too egocentric, but they did so as social agents who have effectively thereby been ignored, who may themselves suffer from *popkl* (deep-seated anger and frustration), and may be partial or ambiguous in how they deal out sickness to those who have been wronged or done wrong.⁶²

(6) Metapersons (and their relations with persons) are defined by power rather than ethics

That is to say: ancestors and spirits and deities are not defined by their role in a good–evil dualism. They are no more or less given to moral behaviour than visible human persons. The field of the sacred is set apart rather by its veiled and abnormal power, a power which is in itself ethically ambiguous.⁶³ It was understood, as many would understand today, that the origins of evil lay not in the very being of any agent but in their contingent motivations and strategies – and these may be opaque. From the Andes to Madagascar, from Nigeria to Fiji, metapersons have been as capricious as fate or the weather or any other cosmic force that may bear humanity on or grind it down.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Peel 2003: 99.

⁶² Marilyn Strathern 1968: 559: ‘Thieving, quarrelling, and sexual intercourse are not bad in themselves: they become offences when they occur between related persons who thereby show they have “forgotten” the ghost who links them.’

⁶³ Gray 1990: 5; Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 8.

⁶⁴ Ancient Greece: Whitmarsh 2016: 31: ‘Gods strikingly uninterested in human morality’, ‘Their own behaviour can be disturbingly immoral’; Clendinnen 1991a: 76–80 on the Aztecs; Americas: Harris 1995: 14; Japan: Lin 2003: 67–68, and Hiroo 2003: 97; on the Chinese gods recognised by the Boxers:

They bring plague with one hand and cure it with the other. They may be terrifying, merciless, wrathful, violent. They may be petty, jealous, irritable, deceitful. They were, in that sense, no different from mortal lords and kings, who required constant appeasement and genuflection but could never quite be trusted.

Indeed, the tenor of relations with these entities is in many ways akin to that of normal social relations, and often takes on a decidedly transactional logic. Sacrifice is not quite a universal practice, for Philippe Descola has highlighted the importance of its absence in certain animist societies.⁶⁵ But in all other immanentist traditions, where some sort of distance has opened up between person and meta-person, sacrifice is the quintessential form of communication between them. One of the oldest (and therefore oft-critiqued) explanations of sacrifice is that it is a form of gift exchange with or debt payment to metapersons conducted to elicit the reciprocal bestowal of supernatural productivity and power.⁶⁶ This still remains the most compelling way of accounting for sacrifice as a global phenomenon, even if any given tradition of it may be loaded with all manner of other complex operations and significations.⁶⁷ The act of sacrifice therefore encodes something fundamental to the spirit of immanentism, which is the mutual dependency of life and death.⁶⁸ Like other immanent beings, the ancestors and gods require feeding – sacrifice can also be seen as the induction of metapersons into commensality – and that means they require violence, just as human must commit violence in order to eat.⁶⁹ But if this is gift exchange, it is with superior, unpredictable parties, who are by no means compelled to respond: like powerful humans, they may even simply require signs of submission.⁷⁰

Cohen 1997: 112; on the ‘thoroughly Olympian *orisa* of the Yoruba’: Peel 2003: 94; on Ancient Egypt, Frankfort et al. 1949: 72; Madagascar: Astuti and Bloch 2013: 205; on Oceania, Hooper 2006: 31; Charles Taylor 2012; Bellah 2011: 143, 158, 166 on the Kalapolo, Australian Aborigines, and Navajo; and especially 219–221.

⁶⁵ Descola 2013b: 36. ⁶⁶ As Socrates argued: Lannstrom 2010.

⁶⁷ For example, the complex transferences of identity between victim, sacrifice, and deity. See Valeri 1985: 62–71; Sissons 2014: 56–58; Puett 2002: 40–41, 52–53; Collins 2014.

⁶⁸ For example, Maffie 2014: 158.

⁶⁹ As a result, ancestors may begrudge pork given to other spirits, see Andrew Strathern 1970: 577.

⁷⁰ Clendinnen 1991a: 74–75.

If sacrifice is the exchange mechanism for the economy of life force – the giving of life in order to obtain life – then it follows that the more precious the gift the more powerful the return. This is one reason why human sacrifice should be independently invented in entirely unconnected regions of the world; the other reason is its utility in the construction of divinised kingship (Chapter 3).

If it needed underlining that the ‘transcendentalist revolution’ is not some generic feature of societal development – a congeries of features that any society must produce once it attains a certain level of political complexity, urbanisation, and literacy – but rather a contingent and distinctive if extremely powerful cultural pattern, then we need only consider what happened when the Spanish reached the New World. When they arrived into the Aztec empire in 1519, the Spanish found at its centre the great city of Tenochtitlan, which – at more than 200,000 people – was larger than Madrid. It was radiantly attractive, clean, and orderly, and the setting for social behaviour that spoke to their preconceived notions of civility.⁷¹ And yet at the heart of this city and the whole business of politics, was the Templo Mayor, dedicated to a god of war and a god of fertility, which churned through the slaughter of perhaps thousands of human victims every year, carried out by priests whose uncut hair was matted with their blood.⁷² This is a scene that was unthinkable in any other major Eurasian polity by this time. And yet when Europeans reached Benin, one of the most important states in sub-Saharan Africa, around the same time, they also found human sacrifice at the heart of politics – and when finally they reached the isolated societies of the islands of Hawaii, Tahiti, and Fiji in the eighteenth century, they found it once more.⁷³

The point here is not at all that such societies produced less ethical behaviours. All societies destroy human life in the name of some such ideal, whether justice or order or salvation, and once one accepts the basic immanentist proposition that all mortal flourishing lies in the hands of metapersons and the secondary proposition that these metapersons demand tribute or sustenance, then some

⁷¹ Díaz 2008: 146; Dodds Pennock 2012: 283, 294.

⁷² Dodds Pennock 2008: 21; Díaz 2008: 81 on Cempoala; the numbers are disputed, of course.

⁷³ Kirch 2010: 74.

kind of moral foundation for ritual homicide may readily be imagined.⁷⁴ Rather, these cases indicate what may happen to political theology in communities untouched by the transcendentalist devaluation of these immanentist propositions in favour of their universalised ethical codes – to which any reader vaguely shocked by such phenomena is indubitably the heir. Neither gods nor rulers are embodiments of the good here but are more or less successful participants in an economy of mutual fructification and destruction. One consequence is that the aesthetics of immanentist religiosity can sometimes embrace the themes of violence and darkness in a way that wreaks havoc among notions of the ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’ fashioned by the transcendentalisms.

Insofar as the purpose of ritual activity is the harnessing of power, then there is no reason why it must be conducted in a public and open context; indeed to the extent that this power is to be deployed for the benefit of an individual or select group rather than for the good of the community, it may well make sense to restrict access to it, and surround it with great secrecy.⁷⁵ In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa, indeed, the very hiddenness, scarcity, and exclusivity of rites have been taken as an index of their power.⁷⁶

Nor is a reverential attitude mandated by the immanentist mentality. The German navigator Otto von Kotzebue, generally rather relativist and celebratory about Hawaiian culture, commented on the rites of *kapu pule*, set about by strict taboos:

We expected a certain seriousness during these sacrifices and prayers; and were astonished at the profane disposition which manifested itself; the indecorous sport that was made with the idols; and the tricks which they delighted to play us during the sacred ceremony. Children show more sedateness in playing with their dolls.⁷⁷

The transactional quality to human–deity relations in immanentist traditions is nowhere clearer than when it breaks out into agonistic and antagonistic forms.⁷⁸ In Hawaii there was a procedure for ‘casting

⁷⁴ For voluntary human sacrifice among the Chuchki of northern Kamchatka, see Willerslev 2013: 148.

⁷⁵ For Papua New Guinea, Andrew Strathern, 1980: 171.

⁷⁶ Ferme 2001: 3, Peel 2003: 224; Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 84.

⁷⁷ Kotzebue 1821: 249.

⁷⁸ Whitmarsh 2016: 43; Evans-Pritchard 1976: 284, on the ‘huckstering’ between man and spirit.

off the gods' who had become tiresome, terrifying, or ineffective – who no longer reciprocated.⁷⁹ Michael Puett has drawn on the scholarship of Hawaii to elucidate how the spirits of Ancient China were not just 'powers with which one harmonised; they were often powers one fought, cheated, appropriated and tried to become or transcend'.⁸⁰ In the seventeenth century, European writers were wont to observe, as did Louis Le Compte (1655–1728):

The Chinese are, however, sometimes weary of saying useless addresses to their idols, which are very numerous; for it often happens, that if after worshipping them a great while, the people do not obtain the blessing they desire, they use them in the most reproachful manner; some load them with hard names, and others with hard blows.⁸¹

In the early twentieth century, the inhabitants of one village in the New Territories of Hong Kong decided to abandon their 'useless' ancestors who had not helped them out of poverty over the past 200 years, by dragging them out of the hall to set fire to them.⁸² In Ancient Rome the gods could be punished for national disasters – 'breach of contract' – by the closing of their temples.⁸³ Spanish missionaries found that the Mexica would weep to snag the attention of the gods but heap abuse on them if they were unresponsive.⁸⁴ As for the Incas, a story about their conquests of the fifteenth century had Topa Inca Yupanqui questioning why the *huacas* (the idols and metapersons they instantiated) had not rewarded him with victory after all the precious items and food he had given them. When they did not reply he threatened to burn all their possessions until they relented.⁸⁵ The *huacas* of subject people who rebelled would be whipped. When the Spanish arrived among the Incas and into a raging war of succession, both the main rivals angrily destroyed shrines and threatened *huacas* when prophecies went unfulfilled or battles were lost.⁸⁶

⁷⁹ Sissons 2014: 40 ('I am wearied of thee – I am terrified of thee! I am expelling thee.')

⁸⁰ Puett 2002: 323, and 40–43, 230, 289.

⁸¹ Cited in Reinders 2012: 94 (also 183); Gernet 1985: 82–84.

⁸² Watson and Watson 2004. ⁸³ Gradel 2002: 370.

⁸⁴ Clendinnen 1991a: 71. ⁸⁵ Stern 1982: 15.

⁸⁶ Gose 1996a: 23; Lamana 2005: 11; Law 1991: 71.

(7) *Religiosity tends to the empirical, pragmatic, and experimental*

These examples indicate the *empirical* quality of immanentist religiosity. Relations with metapersons were expected to produce tangible results and, under certain circumstances, could be set aside if they failed to deliver.⁸⁷ This point raises some significant theoretical questions that will be addressed Chapter 4. For the moment, it is enough to simply note the diversity of societies for which scholarship has observed such utilitarianism or ‘ruthless pragmatism’ at work, in which particular metapersons, rituals, or ritual specialists may be dropped if they fail to work in favour of alternatives.⁸⁸ In this particular sense, immanentism is not characterised by an absence of scepticism but a particular form of it.⁸⁹ Among the Tupinambá of Brazil, for example, a sixteenth-century missionary reports that ‘concerning some of those who make themselves into holy ones among them, they trust sometimes and sometimes not because most of the time they catch the holy ones in lies’.⁹⁰ As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro points out, missionaries who started out with an image of the universal credulity of the heathen realised that things were far more complicated. In Mount Hagen in the highlands of Papua New Guinea, a Big Man, Ru, recounted his leadership of a cult after a female spirit visited him in 1976. Since many people were dying he was able to convince people to join in the new form of cult activity, but then some children died and ‘our pigs did not grow well, so I decided to forget about Kindip [a ritual specialist] and go get another set of experts’.⁹¹ Ru had been involved

⁸⁷ I borrow the language of ‘empirical religiosity’ from Fletcher 1998: 6. See also Ando 2008: xiv–xvii, emphasising the importance of ‘empirical verification’ of ritual in Ancient Rome. Compare Peel 2003: 90–93.

⁸⁸ Eaton 1993: 274, referring to Melford Spiro. Widely invoked by Africanists, e.g., Iliffe 1995: 87. On Mongol eclecticism, see Jackson 2009: 115; Amitai 2013: 23.

⁸⁹ On scepticism as a general phenomenon, see Goody 1997.

⁹⁰ Viveiros de Castro 2011: 38–39. Graeber 2015:10, on hail charms in Madagascar: ‘Arguments about the efficacy of one or another sort of *fanafody*, or of *fanafody* in general, were, in fact, so common I would even call them a popular form of entertainment.’

⁹¹ Ru, translated Andrew Strathern 1993: 41.

in an earlier cult, the 'Red Box Money cult', about which a neighbouring Big Man, Ongka, had been sceptical all along.⁹² The great majority of the time such scepticism does not extend to the overarching system in which any given ritual effort takes place, but sometimes quite significant shifts in religious practice may indeed be related to empirical adversity. Before the arrival of missionaries on the remote Pacific island of Niue, the institution of chieftainship itself had been badly undermined by failures in harvest, which had led to a resurgence of shamans who claimed they were better able to control the harvests and weather.⁹³

(8) Dynamism, mutability, orality, and continuous revelation

This is one reason why immanentist religions display a particularly dynamic and mutable disposition. The most important reasons, however, are that these religious systems are not defined and authorised by canonical texts, and they do not pivot around a single decisive moment of revelation. For John K. Thornton, Central African religion was characterised by 'continuous revelation and precarious priesthood' in which a perpetual stream of knowledge arrived into this world through anybody who claimed to experience it.⁹⁴ There were few ways of arbitrating between valid and invalid revelations. Indeed, it may be tempting to attribute the key attributes of immanentism simply to a lack of literacy.⁹⁵ But note that immanentism has flourished in societies with large literate classes and magnificent feats of second-order thinking. It is not so much the absence of literacy that is crucial as the fact that no set of teachings have been enshrined as uniquely authoritative.

⁹² Andrew Strathern 1980: 166–170.

⁹³ Nicholas Thomas 1991: 93; Tomlinson 2009: 71. The Tikopia ritual cycle 'the work of the gods' had no practitioners after the disastrous epidemic of 1955: Swain and Trompf, 1995: 211. The Romans adopted the cult of Cybele during a period of failed harvest, famine, and portents of defeat during the second Punic War: Beard 1996. Cf Friedel 2008: 199–200 on Maya divine kingship.

⁹⁴ Thornton 2001: 73–4; 1992: 246–248; Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 146.

⁹⁵ Iliffe 1995: 87.

(9) *The concepts of 'religion', 'belief', and 'belonging' have little emic resonance*

Scholars of immanentist societies are typically at pains to underline that the concept of 'religion' itself is alien to their subjects' self-understanding.⁹⁶ There are nearly always, as noted above, a web of concepts and behaviours surrounding relations with metapersons that mark them out as special in some way. But such relations tend to permeate all aspects of life, and the ideas, stories, habits, and rituals that pertain to them are not abstracted out into a conceptual unit of 'religion'.⁹⁷ The idea then that society is made up of individuals who may choose to 'belong' to a 'religion', as if it were one among several options, is also likely to be alien. Religion is therefore not an entity that can determine social identity in and of itself; it is simply part of one's cultural inheritance. Anthropologists in particular are likely to repudiate the emic relevance of the concept of 'belief' for many societies too.⁹⁸ The meaning of 'belief' is notoriously hard to pin down, but tends to be used for propositions that are affirmed in the light of the possibility that others may doubt their validity. Some of the societies that anthropologists have studied have simply been essentially unaware that profoundly different ways of understanding the world are possible. But even where such awareness is developed, it has usually not led to the habitual use of a concept for a type of knowledge that has such self-reflexivity built in. Instead 'all people act and react in the landscape of the real' as the Africanist Paul Landau put it.⁹⁹ For the Wari in Amazonia, the typical verb would simply be 'to see'.¹⁰⁰

(10) *Localism and translatable universalism*

The absence of notions of either 'religion or 'a religion' lies at the heart of the question of the portability of immanentism, which is much more

⁹⁶ Africa: Ellis and ter Haar 2007, Greene 1996: 135, Baum 1999: 35, Peel 2003: 89; Pre-Islamic Central Asia: DeWeese 1994: 27; Pacific: Swain and Trompf 1995: 15; Amazonia: Viveiros de Castro 2011. Jonathan Smith 1998 on religion as an etic term more generally.

⁹⁷ Hooper 2006: 31.

⁹⁸ Needham 1972; Lambek, 2013b: 141; Boyer 2001: 10–11. For a dissenter see Morris 2005: 153.

⁹⁹ Landau 1999: 21.

¹⁰⁰ Vilaça 1997: 97. Handelman 2008 relates 'belief' to the fracture of monism by monotheism.

vexed than it may initially appear. ‘Pagan’, ‘traditional’, or ‘tribal’ religions are often contrasted with the ‘world’ or ‘universal’ religions by virtue of the way they were embedded in local milieux. There is a certain truth to this. The metapersons of the immanentist imagination are often grounded in important ways, rooted to particular temples or features of the landscape, and held to be the guardians of particular peoples, cities, or states.¹⁰¹ When considered in terms of whole systems, the great majority of immanentist religious forms have remained tied to a particular society. In another sense, however, it would be entirely misleading to attribute an image of staticity and closure to immanentism. In fact, both individual metapersons, and particular ways of relating to them (‘cults’) have travelled large distances across immanentist societies: they can travel with conquerors (Hellenistic religion to West Asia) with the enslaved (Central African religion to the Caribbean), or be invited in from glamorous neighbours.¹⁰² Indeed, in Chapter 4 we shall have cause to underline the particular appeal of rites from afar. Relatively recently before the missionaries arrived in Tahiti, the cult of the war god ‘Oro had been imported into there from the Leeward island group, and was changing the social status of different political and ritual specialists in specific ways.¹⁰³ Partly in reaction to Robin Horton’s arguments, some scholars of African religion emphasise the capacity of cults to traverse and express macrocosms.¹⁰⁴ Possession cults, for example, could claim initiates from across hundreds or thousands of square miles, facilitating the work of traders moving amongst many different peoples.¹⁰⁵

It is not quite right to describe immanentism as ‘tolerant’ because that would assume a pre-existing notion of isolable and competing religious systems. Instead the religious field was rather borderless and elastic.¹⁰⁶ Assmann refers to the ‘translatability’ of religious forms across the diverse societies of ancient Mesopotamia or the Roman world.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰¹ See Scheer 2011 for concrete examples of how ritual embeddedness in landscape could and could not be overcome among Bunong converts in Cambodia.

¹⁰² For the spread of a cult among different clans and tribes in Mount Hagen, Papua New Guinea, see Andrew Strathern 1970: 572; 1979: 99.

¹⁰³ Thomas 2010: 103. ¹⁰⁴ Hefner 1993b: 20–22; Fisher 1994: 71.

¹⁰⁵ Ranger 1993; Fisher 1973. ¹⁰⁶ Whitmarsh 2016: 26, 238; Peel 1968: 123

¹⁰⁷ Assmann 2010: 18–19; Momigliano 1986: 286; Ando 2008: 45.

This was not an automatic process, and the Durkheimian qualities of religion naturally allowed distinctions to be drawn between our cults and ‘theirs’.¹⁰⁸ Yet equivalences could be found between particular metapersons, such that a sun god here was equivalent to a sun god there: the names and associations of metapersons could proliferate, combining and recombining with various others, taking in more local or more universal guises in different contexts. It was the shared, universal forms of immanentism that allowed such translatability to occur. There is an important sense in which immanentism is a more truly universalist – as well as universal – form of religiosity than the divisive transcendentalisms. It may seem as if appealing to a certain unity among extremely diverse worldviews steers us uncomfortably close to the Christian concept of ‘paganism’. In fact it helps undermine a more insidious feature of the Christian worldview, which is that of a world of competing ‘religions’.¹⁰⁹

The Characteristics of Transcendentalism

The following discussion has two aims. The principal aim is to identify what makes transcendentalism distinctive in terms of fifteen attributes, which are exemplified by reference to Buddhism and Christianity. The set of transcendentalisms is of course wider than this, including forms of Islam, Judaism, Jainism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and perhaps Neo-Confucianism, but the discussion would need to be substantially adjusted as well as greatly expanded in order to incorporate them properly. The second objective is to show the rather different ways that Buddhism and Christianity have formulated the transcendentalist project. So often do the following attributes entail each other that readers will find points recapitulated under many headings.

(1) An ontological breach opens up between a transcendent realm and a mundane one

Transcendentalist traditions embody the frightening apprehension of meaninglessness and relativism that they have been constructed

¹⁰⁸ See Rüpke 2010 for evolving notions of religious pluralism in the Roman Empire – including that of ‘foreign superstitions’.

¹⁰⁹ In its full and recent sense, the concept of religion itself is a product of post-sixteenth-century interactions, however; see Stroumsa 2010.

against. Indeed, they weaponise that apprehension and fiercely insist on it, but as the defining feature of only one plane of existence: our own. Mundane existence is therefore not just afflicted by transience, corruption, unsatisfactoriness, and negligibility, it is defined by it. It is cast into the shadows by the pure light of the transcendent. This dimension of reality is now considered as inherently superior to that of normal life, but it is so distant from us that it is radically unknowable and ineffable. This is what the literature of the Axial Age means by the ontological breach that cuts previously monistic worldviews in two.¹¹⁰

The transcendent dimension may be defined as that which is attained by liberation or salvation. In Buddhism this is nirvana – *nibbāna* in the language of the Pali canon.¹¹¹ In many Buddhist traditions, that which lies ‘beyond this world’ by pertaining to the realm of nirvana may be termed *lokottara*; it is defined against *laukika* to form a dichotomy that corresponds quite well to ‘transcendent’ versus ‘mundane’.¹¹² One of the reasons why the nature of *parinibbāna* (attained on death) is still a matter of disagreement is because the Buddha is said to have refused to offer an account of it – even whether it was existence, nonexistence, both of these things or neither of them.¹¹³ It could only

¹¹⁰ Hefner 1993b: 9 on ‘dualization’ of cosmology.

¹¹¹ The Pali canon (or *Tipiṭaka*) is the basis of the Theravada tradition. However, current scholarship, as in the work of Gregory Schopen, tends to resist seeing these texts as a uniquely superior guide to early Buddhism, noting, for example, the evidence of other early corpuses such as the Sanskrit *Mūlasarvāstivāda vinaya*. The Pali texts are read here for their ideological vision rather than as documents of the reality of early Buddhism as a social movement. See also Collins 1990. My thanks to Benjamin Schonthal and Stefano Zacchetti for discussion.

¹¹² These are Sanskrit terms (in Pali; *lokkuttara* vs. *lokiya*). Holt 1991: 21–22. *Laukika* (worldly) is a common term in Sinhala; see also Southwold 1983: 77–79. See below for the *lokottaravāda* school.

¹¹³ I therefore follow Collins 1998: 22–23, in seeing Buddhism as a soteriological system, but for a rather anti-transcendentalist and anti-metaphysical reading of *nibbāna*, see Kalupahana 1992: 90–100. Collins 1998: 164–165, sees *parinibbāna* as a form of real if ineffable existence, analysing the *sutta*-s in Udāna 80–81: ‘That sphere (*āyatana*) exists, monks, where there is no earth, no water, no heat and no wind, where the sphere of infinite space does not exist, nor that of infinite consciousness, nor that of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there is neither this world nor the other world, neither moon nor sun; there, I say, there is no coming and going, no duration (of life, to be followed by) death and rebirth; it is not stationed, it is without occurrence(s), and has no object. This, indeed, is the end of suffering.’

be talked about by describing what it was not: it was what happened when one escaped the cycle of rebirth, when desire was extinguished, when illusions fell away; it was permanence rather than transience. It was not a 'realm' in that sense but a status that stood completely outside of the normal laws of reality, including cause and effect, and the purchase of language or concepts.

The Christian heaven may often be granted more content than this, but it is still radically different from this worldly existence.¹¹⁴ Moreover, heaven is really simply an attribute of, or way of talking about, God. God is therefore the principal transcendent dimension of reality in Christian ontology, surpassing the laws of existence as something unconditioned, uncaused, infinite, and sometimes ineffable. As with any theistic system, the basic anthropomorphic drive remains apparent in the attribution of conscious agency to cosmic forces, but the process of transcendentalisation attempts to tug the nature of the metaperson as far away from our normal concept of a person as it is possible to get. In one sense, of course, that is not very far at all: for God remains loving, judgemental, fatherly, and so on. In another sense, however, God is forbiddingly unknowable, inscrutable, and completely beyond the normal limitations of personhood.¹¹⁵

A resonant symbol of the new nothingness exalted by the transcendentalist traditions is the reluctance or hostility towards representing the divine or liberated state that has emerged from among these traditions from time to time. This is very far from a defining feature of transcendentalism, for it cuts too hard against the grain of human cognition (to be denied images to work with is to be forced into strenuous mental labour). Nevertheless it is striking that aniconism emerged among forms of Judaism, Islam, early Christianity, Protestantism, and the Byzantine orthodox church.¹¹⁶ Tacitus noted of the Jews: 'They regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end.'¹¹⁷

¹¹⁴ However, see the section 'An Unstable Synthesis' for the weak hold of apophatic visions of heaven.

¹¹⁵ See Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 268–269, for an assertion of the transcendentalist dimension to Christianity contra Bruno Latour 2010.

¹¹⁶ For Byzantium's phase of iconoclasm: see Michael Humphreys 2015.

¹¹⁷ 'Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples; this flattery is not paid their kings, nor this honour given to their Caesars': Tacitus 1931: 183 (*The Histories*, V, v).

An important aniconic movement developed among Jainism (Śvetāmbara Jaina) in the fifteenth century. The first few centuries of Buddhist material culture are characterised by a dearth of representations of the Buddha – or, more interestingly, representations of his absence.¹¹⁸ Even in artistic scenes otherwise full of concretely realised persons and metapersons, it was felt most appropriate to represent the Buddha by an empty throne or a footprint: an evocation of the unrepresentable Buddha through his representable effects. As one climbs the temple of Borobudur in Java (c. 800 CE) and reaches the uppermost level representing enlightenment, the Buddha statues are hidden by perforated stupas through which he may only be glimpsed obliquely, and his enlightenment is fully expressed only by the pure symbol of the complete stupa at the centre.¹¹⁹ (See Figures 1.1 and 1.2) The monotheistic strand is most given to aniconism due to its jealous monopoly of metapersonhood. But wherever we find these movements we find precisely an anxiety over some characteristic features of immanentism: the human disposition to attribute personhood to things; to convey ideas through images and to make images into ideas, to fuse representation and substance, to speak the ineffable.

(2) Escape from mundane existence – or salvation – becomes the definitive goal

‘For our Saints and Sages, to be blessed with life is a true joy. They therefore have nothing in common with what these cunning Barbarians say about the intelligent soul, which according to them is shackled at birth and liberated at death as if it were emerging from a dark prison. They teach people to regard life as a torment and death as a joy.’

Huang Zhen offering a Confucian critique of Christianity, 1639¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ It is unnecessary to imagine explicit prohibitions against iconic representation, and the shift from aniconism to iconism was part of a larger shift in Indic religious culture: DeCaroli 2015. Nevertheless, as Wenzel 2011, argues ‘the early “aniconic” phase of Indian Buddhism seems to share with Christianity the notion that the highest truth—Buddhahood or enlightenment and the godhead respectively —was ultimately invisible. Indeed, the invisibility of the Buddha secured the truthfulness of the depiction.’ Aniconic tendencies have sometimes emerged outside transcendentalist traditions: Doak 2015.

¹¹⁹ Seckel 2004: 63. See p. 9 for the editors’ comparisons with other aniconic dynamics.

¹²⁰ Gernet 1985: 171.



Figure 1.1 The upper level of Borobudur, a Buddhist temple in Java, constructed c. 800 CE.

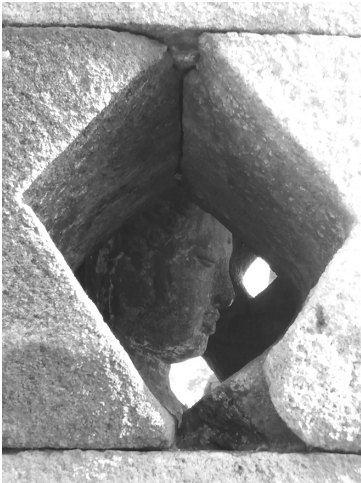


Figure 1.2. A Buddha glimpsed through a stupa at Borobudur.

Transcendentalism launches an all-out assault on the immanentist project of securing a flourishing existence in the ‘here and now’ by insisting that any such ‘flourishing’ is relatively worthless. Ultimate purpose is drained out of mundane existence in order to concentrate it

in the attainment of the transcendentalist objective. This is salvation, liberation, or enlightenment.¹²¹ Again, it is Theravada Buddhism which shows how far removed this is from an ‘afterlife’ per se.¹²² For most Buddhist cosmologies contain many layers of heavens and hell, which the good may enjoy and the wicked endure, but these are categorically distinct from nirvana: even the most glorious heaven populated by the most evolved divine being is still at bottom a form of suffering – at least for the hegemonic *nibbānic* orientation pursued by the sangha (monastic community).¹²³ In Christianity, the newly distant form of afterlife is indicated by how deeply it problematises relationships with the ancestors that many immanentist societies have felt living amongst them: those who never converted are sucked away into an unreachable hell; while those who now convert are lifted up into a far distant heaven.¹²⁴ Not only is the soteriological objective incomprehensible by the standards of worldly existence, but it cannot be obtained by the normal forms of human success. One certainly does not enter it, like an Aztec warrior accompanying the passage of the sun or a Viking cast into Valhalla, by fighting courageously in battle.¹²⁵

Instead, temporal *adversity* may indicate or stimulate soteriological prowess; indeed, transcendentalism may be considered a colossal effort to draw the sting of mundane misfortune: for the Anglican cleric Jeremy Taylor (1613–1667): ‘Christ . . . hath taken away the unhappiness of Sickness, and the sting of Death . . . of decay and change,

¹²¹ Apart from various Weberian thinkers, see also Okuyama 2000, discussing Shimazono Susumu. There are, naturally, diverse understandings of the afterlife that crosscut the immanentism/transcendentalism divide: see Tweed 2006: 150–156.

¹²² See Pande 1995: 289, on the Upaniṣadic and particularly Buddhist shift towards ‘the understanding that the fundamental need of man is not a utopian rearrangement of this world, nor a heaven, however fine – but a transcendence of it’.

¹²³ Which Spiro 1982 contrasted with the kammatic Buddhism of most layfolk, in which a better rebirth is sought. Moreover, where *nibbāna* is consciously desired, it is often interpreted in terms of superior saṃsāric flourishing – precisely akin to the attainment of heaven – see the section ‘The Immanentisation of Buddhism’.

¹²⁴ For qualifications to this, see ‘The Immanentisation of Christianity’. Nevertheless, the problem of the abandonment of the ancestors was a genuine one for many converting peoples. On heaven as radical alterity for Papuan converts, see Robbins 2009: 58.

¹²⁵ Dodds Pennock 2008: 36–37, 171–177; Clendinnen 1991a: 195–196.

and hath turned them into acts of favour.¹²⁶ Christianity takes the tortured, destroyed human body as its symbol, as a visceral image of something higher, and many of the missionaries mentioned in the companion volume were inspired by dreams of martyrdom. The history of Christianity, as we shall see, is characterised by a particular ability to both stimulate and defy persecution. On one level, the Buddhist vision may work to deprecate worldly success: even a prince – as the Buddha once was – is no worthwhile object of jealousy, for he is still sunk into the cycle of craving and suffering. Transcendentalisms are therefore much less beholden to promises to secure a better existence in the here and now.

Both traditions do also find a way of connecting mundane fortune and soteriological status. But note the way that Christians may slip effortlessly between attributing any bounties they receive to the mercy of God (in the manner of an immanentist metaperson) while any setbacks they experience are attributed to the final mystery of his being (in the manner of a truly transcendent force): ‘God moves in mysterious ways his wonders to perform’ may seem a banal saying, but it encodes an important truth about Christian means of handling the empirical.¹²⁷ Buddhism attaches soteriology to worldly fortune more profoundly insofar as the effects of *kamma* also improve one’s lot in this life: it may therefore act as an important buttress of social hierarchy.¹²⁸ But note how this potentially undercuts the basic immanentist proposition: by removing the gods out of the most fundamental understanding of cause and effect. Via the doctrine of *kamma*, fortune or misfortune become simply the product of one’s past actions and thoughts.¹²⁹

(3) Religious activity is profoundly restructured according to a process of ethicisation

The relativistic challenge to morality as a given quality of communal life resulted, in all variants of the Axial Age, in the attempt to produce much more comprehensive, abstract, and explicit understandings of ethics, founded upon on the golden rule and aiming for universal

¹²⁶ Davis 1974: 335. ¹²⁷ This is a form of ‘conceptual control’: see Chapter 4.

¹²⁸ For how this works in contemporary Thailand, see Bolotta 2018.

¹²⁹ On one level; on another level, metapersons remain at large and influential: several causalities coexist.

applicability. If these were expressed in the Greek and Chinese cases principally through the vehicle of what could be termed, with some reservations, ‘philosophy’, the transcendentalist systems made what is now usually identified as ‘religion’ the vehicle. Five further features distinguish transcendentalist morality from its immanentist counterpart: ethical norms are codified, arranged into lists of prohibitions and injunctions as in the Ten Commandments of Christianity or the Five Precepts of Buddhism¹³⁰; adherence to ethical norms is connected to the attainment of liberation or salvation; that adherence is considered to be a matter of interiority more than mere obedience; the overall ethical vision is highly idealised to the point of utopianism; this vision represents an inversion of worldly norms in certain ways.

As Charles Taylor has realised, the transcendent dimension of existence is characterised by a moral absolutism: ethical ambiguity has been expunged from cosmic reality, and this pure vision of ‘the good’ is placed at the heart of religious life.¹³¹ In fact this absolutist dualism – good versus evil or merit versus sin – was translated into real properties or forces in themselves that individuals may share in. As Hocart put it, most bluntly, about India: it is now ‘better to be good than to be healthy and wealthy.’¹³² Moreover, morality has been refitted for the macrocosm: transcendentalism creates moral communities which are potentially distinct from – and may far outstrip in scale – the communities to which one otherwise *de facto* belongs. These new communities are committed to a moral vision not only for its ability to preserve order among any one society, but for its essential role in facilitating individual salvation. If ritual is the characteristic mode of religious activity in the immanentist mode (and sacrifice the most typical form), then ethics is the characteristic mode of religious activity in the transcendentalist mode (and self-sacrifice the most typical form).¹³³

Indeed, the radicalism of this ethical revolution is signified by a most shocking innovation: the repudiation of blood sacrifice.¹³⁴ In many ways, Buddhism presented itself as an inversion of the concepts and norms of prevailing Vedic culture, for which animal sacrifice was

¹³⁰ Assmann 2010: 44, 52, on the revolutionary arrival of God as lawgiver.

¹³¹ Charles Taylor 2012: 33–39; 2007: 152. ¹³² Hocart 1970: 72.

¹³³ Weber 1948: 273–274; Sharot 2001: 8.

¹³⁴ Muslim Eids are an exception. La Loubère 1987 [1691]: 376, on Siam. See Parry 1986: 467, for the way in which soteriological systems may affect gift exchange in general.

one of its greatest mysteries.¹³⁵ Indeed, as if intent on demonstrating the truth of its insight into the purely contingent nature of language, the Pali texts took the Vedic term for sacrifice or ritual foundations – *dhárman* – and twisted it to mean ‘teachings’.¹³⁶ And one of those teachings was the utter worthlessness of sacrifice. The deliberate causation of suffering that it necessitated could now only be considered as grave karmic damage. A deprecation of bloody sacrifice is not therefore a peculiarity of Western or Christian rhetoric.¹³⁷ Instead, in parts of the world, such as Central and Inner Asia, where several transcendentalisms encountered and engaged each other, we find that they resorted to such accusations in order to disparage their rivals. Thus the Muslim ritual of halal could be attacked as animal sacrifice by Buddhists, while Muslims could assert that human sacrifice took place in Hindu temples.¹³⁸

The extent to which memories of human sacrifice may linger on in the folk memory while also being castigated by transcendentalist morality is disclosed in Obeyesekere’s analysis of events in the Sri Lankan chronicle, the *Mahāvamsa*.¹³⁹ There is a trace too of lingering sacrificial logic in the *jātaka* tales and paintings that dwell on bodhisattvas as giving up their body for the good of humankind – leaving their body parts behind as merit-filled lifeboats for the soteriologically adrift.¹⁴⁰ This idea is conveyed too by the story of Christ. Part of the power of Christianity is that it concedes the logic of sacrifice – indeed human sacrifice – in order then to banish it, just as it concedes the presence of a single metaperson in order to banish other metapersons.¹⁴¹ ‘It is finished,’ says Christ from the cross: he is the sacrifice to end all

¹³⁵ Pollock 2005: 403–404. The Vedic tradition developed its own ‘Axial’ problematisation of sacrifice: see Collins 2014.

¹³⁶ Brereton 2004 for latter translation of *dhárman*. Meanwhile karma (Pali: *kamma*) was translated from ‘action’ to ‘intention’: Gombrich 1996: 51, who describes this ‘ethicisation of the world’ as a ‘turning point in the history of civilisation.’

¹³⁷ Compare the Buddhist caricature of non-Buddhist societies through cannibalism: Monius 2002: 103. Note the disapproval of blood sacrifice by state officials and Buddhist monks in China: Dean 2017.

¹³⁸ Elverskog 2010, 62–64, 99. When the Mongols converted to Buddhism they tried to end animal sacrifices: Golden 2011: 111.

¹³⁹ Obeyesekere 1997. ¹⁴⁰ Ruppert 2000: 16–23.

¹⁴¹ Parallels between Christian and pagan visions of human sacrifice go back to Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1994.

sacrifices.¹⁴² The rationalisation of this is surprisingly weak: why the pain and bloodshed of the son of God should assist the salvific quests of others is most difficult to elucidate.¹⁴³ But because it meets the immanentist mentality part way, it became a powerful theme of evangelism. A chronicle account of the conversion of Vladimir of Rus in the late tenth century CE:

No longer do we slay one another as offerings for demons, for now Christ is ever slain and segmented for us as an offering to God and the father. No longer do we drink the blood of the offering and perish for now we drink the pure blood of Christ.¹⁴⁴

In medieval Christian culture, the importance of Christ's blood, his continual sacrifice, was replayed in the form of his ritual dismemberment and consumption in the mass.¹⁴⁵ Among the Tupi-Guarani in sixteenth- to eighteenth-century Brazil, the fact that the blood sacrifice was ingested by the flock spoke profoundly to local ideas of exocannibalism as a powerful ritual device.¹⁴⁶ In nineteenth-century Oceania, and among the Bunong in twentieth-century northern Cambodia, and no doubt in many other areas, missionaries recognised the powerful appeal of referring to Christ as the ultimate sacrifice, obviating the need for all further ones.¹⁴⁷

For all the importance of this line of continuity, it would not do to obscure the profound implications of the transcendentalisation of sacrifice in Christianity. The single god did not need to be fed; he was not really going to benefit from burnt meat. If he demanded sacrifice from his followers, it was of their worldly self-seeking and pride.

(4) The inversion of worldly values and the soteriological virtuoso

How impressively did divine wisdom show the vanity of the mirth and wine, the pomp and pride, the distinction and power, of which these departed ones, for a brief period, could once boast; and how strikingly did the hand of God stamp transitoriness on things earthly, even the most

¹⁴² Martin 2005: 303–304.

¹⁴³ Bossy 1985: 3–6, on the attempt at rationalisation by Anselm of Canterbury.

¹⁴⁴ Ilarion cited in Shephard 2009: 212. ¹⁴⁵ Bynum 2007. ¹⁴⁶ Lee 2017

¹⁴⁷ Scheer 2011; Marilyn Strathern field notes, Mount Hagen 1965: 'And Jesus told the whiteman to take his blood everywhere, all over the world, and everyone could eat communion' (I. 2016–8. 65).

coveted and valued, in order to call the attention of the thoughtless sons and daughters of Hawaii more strongly to the things that are heavenly!

Hiram Bingham, on the death of high chiefs in Hawaii.¹⁴⁸

How peaceful it is to live by dying each day.

Francis Xavier, 1542, welcoming the hardships of missionary work in Goa.¹⁴⁹

Christianity presupposes that man does not know, *cannot* know, what is good for him and what evil: he believes in God, who alone knows. Christian morality is a command; its origin is transcendent. . .

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*.¹⁵⁰

As transcendentalism weaponised relativism so the values it came to exalt scrambled the usual signals of human success – as Nietzsche famously realised. Ethics took on an otherworldly quality, as if they were at war with human nature. The unattainability that Edward Westermarck noted for Christian ethics could apply no less well to Buddhism.¹⁵¹ Normal human appetites were ruthlessly problematised. Is it any wonder that transcendentalism bucks against certain evolved tendencies of human cognition, given that it also bucks against the evolutionary imperatives of sexual gratification and kin preference? Consider Siddhartha waking up on the night of his renunciation after an evening of revelry and walking among the women of the palace now asleep and disgustingly contorted, the whole scene appearing ‘like a cremation ground before the eyes’.¹⁵² He walks outwards into the night, leaving his young wife and child behind. The real truth of the human body was simply foul decay. This is the insight revealed by the meditative practice of *aṭṭhika-saññā* or contemplation of thirty-eight parts of a skeleton, in the forest monasteries of Sri Lanka.

Immanentist traditions sometimes produced superficially similar forms of ascetic behaviour. Fasting or sexual abstinence or self-mutilation may be seen as means of corraling supernatural power, or as a form of auto-sacrifice.¹⁵³ Such forms of asceticism may have been

¹⁴⁸ Bingham 1849: 267. ¹⁴⁹ Francis Xavier, 20 September 1542: Xavier: 258.

¹⁵⁰ Nietzsche 1968: 70.

¹⁵¹ See discussion in Robbins 2012: 7–9; cf Charles Taylor 2007: 614.

¹⁵² Gornall and Henry 2017: 86.

¹⁵³ Clendinnen 1987: 230; Weber 1948: 271–274.

'ethicised' or 'axiologised' to use the language of Obeyesekere, by creeds such as Buddhism.¹⁵⁴ Transcendentalist asceticism may be understood as an attempt to deny the concrete, animal, and embodied qualities of the human person in order to somehow close the gap with the ethereal nothingness of the transcendentalist realm. It is an attempt to turn a human being into an idea. If this was unachievable within the normal structures of life, then the structures of life would have to change – at least for a few. These monastics, mendicants, and hermits are soteriological virtuosos, taking on the burden of the utopian strangeness of transcendentalist morality so that the rest of society does not need to.¹⁵⁵ But then the rest of society remains correspondingly further from liberation. And so many were attracted to the living out of self-denial: joining orders of monks such as the *pamsukūlika* in medieval Sri Lanka who only wore rags from dust heaps and the crematorium, or religious orders in medieval England who worked with lepers, and identified with them, and only imitated Christ all the more successfully if they caught the disease themselves.¹⁵⁶

How clearly this speaks to the redefinition of the sacred. In the immanentist mode one may become sacred by approximating the qualities of metapersons: amassing power, success, brilliance. In the transcendentalist mode one does it by denying the quest for power, success, brilliance. Therefore, when ascetic aesthetics arrived in immanentist societies they could be received with bemusement, as the Jesuit Francisco de Gouveia reported with some dismay from Angola in 1564.¹⁵⁷ He found that there was no intrinsic merit in the signals of poverty and hunger that he so diligently emitted.

What is monasticism but an institution that tears across kinship, which snubs marriage and lifts children away from their parents? Simon de La Loubère observed in Siam in the 1680s that a monk 'sins when he grieves his parents lost to death'.¹⁵⁸ In one of the most popular accounts of the Buddha's life, the *Vessantara Jātaka*, Siddhartha returns to his kingdom after having achieved enlightenment only to find that his elders refuse to accord him respect. He rises into

¹⁵⁴ Obeyesekere 2002: 75–76, 117, 122; Collins 1982: 36.

¹⁵⁵ Bellah 2011: 451, on the importance of renouncer types in all variants

¹⁵⁶ Coningham et al. 2017; Rawcliffe 2006: 141–142.

¹⁵⁷ Francisco de Gouveia, 1 January 1564, MMA, XV: 230. Compare Bartlett 2007: 68–69.

¹⁵⁸ La Loubère 1987 [1691]: 440.

the air and tells them a story of one of his past lives as the king Vessantara, in which he had given away not only his treasures and his kingdom but his children too. Caste was undermined no less than family or seniority: the brahmans, his rivals, were stripped of their pretensions to inherent superiority and left only with status as a matter of mere convention.¹⁵⁹ Thus the acid of relativism ate through all social conventions in order to make way for absolutist morality. Just as people left behind their old ascriptions as they began to ‘take refuge with the Buddha’ in parts of northern India, so the Christ of the New Testament welcomed the despised and impure.¹⁶⁰ All such traditional statuses were cast into irrelevance, along with the primacy of kinship again.¹⁶¹

Large crowds were travelling with Jesus, and turning to them he said: ‘If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple.’¹⁶²

(5) Individual interiority rather than ritual action becomes the privileged arena of religious life

From a boy I had been led to consider that my Maker and I, His creature, were the two beings, luminously such, *in rerum naturâ*

John Henry Newman¹⁶³

Your own self is your master; who else could be? With yourself well controlled, you gain a master very hard to find.

The Dhammapada, chapter 12, verse 160.¹⁶⁴

This anti-communal quality to transcendentalism is extremely important. It reflects the fact that the fields of ethics and salvation arrived in a form that was not only universalised but individualised. It is

¹⁵⁹ Caste was soteriologically relativised but not rejected per se, according to Samuels 2006.

¹⁶⁰ Pollock 2005: 406.

¹⁶¹ Pollock 2005: 407; Obeyesekere 2002: 182–189, on Buddha’s social nominalism.

¹⁶² Luke 14:26; see Kee 1993: 3, and Martin 2005:186: ‘All basic social institutions and arrangements . . . [had] a question mark put against them.’

¹⁶³ Newman 1890: 195 (thanks to William Whyte). ¹⁶⁴ Easwaran 2017: 157.

the self – not the social group – which becomes the most fundamental focus of religious life.¹⁶⁵ Each human being takes on alone the burden of responsibility for her liberation. This is important insofar as certain histories of the self have considered it to have been in some sense a creation of Western thought, the Renaissance, the Reformation, or even modernity. Yet evidently the self became the subject of intense focus in all the Axial Age bursts of creativity in first millennium BCE Eurasia, in keeping with the general context of reflexivity and second-order thinking.¹⁶⁶

As will be considered in more detail in the section ‘An Unstable Synthesis’, in practice of course, religion never lost its Durkheimian dimension as a phenomenon of communal participation, ritual action, and external observance. But transcendentalism frames these activities within a powerful relativisation of them. They become merely secondary refractions of interior states, as the person within is made the locus of endeavour. In the Pali Buddhist canon, clinging to rules and rituals (*silabbata-parāmāsa*) is explicitly identified as an obstacle to progress towards nirvana.¹⁶⁷ In immanentist contexts such a critique of ritual as ‘merely mechanical’ would simply make no sense. But this is what Paul does when he twists the meaning of the term ‘circumcision’ such that it is no longer either a bodily fact or an illocutionary event:

For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh. But he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that which is of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the letter; and his praise is not from men, but from God (2:28–29).¹⁶⁸

No doubt the principal reason why the focus on the self should have been so searching in the Indic traditions was because of the way they developed hand in hand with the ancient practices of yoga and meditation. These functioned as telescopes for the soul, magnifying the inner landscape to an exceptional degree. In Buddhism this resulted

¹⁶⁵ Compare Gauchet 1999: 45, on inwardness; Charles Taylor 2007: 154.

¹⁶⁶ See Assmann 2010: 36–37, on the arrival of ‘a kind of inner transcendence’, and Charles Taylor 2009: 32, for the social embeddedness against which it may be contrasted.

¹⁶⁷ Kalupahana 1992: 151.

¹⁶⁸ Compare the Buddha redefining ‘brahman’ from an ascriptive to an achieved inward status in the *Dhammapada* (e.g., verse 396, Easwaran 2017: 249). Thanks to Alastair Gornall.

in a paradox: the doctrine of *anattā* or ‘no-self’.¹⁶⁹ Superficially, this may seem like a contradiction of the transcendentalist infatuation with the self; in fact it is a function of it. The focus on the self was so acute that, on a theoretical plane, it dissolved from sight, much as it may in the hands of modern philosophers. The result was a most extraordinary achievement of anti-anthropomorphic, anti-agential mental labour. It amounts to a kind of denial of personhood not only to all other forces in the world but the human subject itself. The Buddha’s assault on the brahmins’ reification of the self (*ātman*) was also an assault on their ascription of agency to the cosmos (*brahman*) and on sacrifice as the mediating term between the two: thus was the analogical exuberance of elaborated immanentism rubbished.¹⁷⁰ On another level, of course, the self – or the interior zone in which the illusion of the self was generated – remained the most significant realm of soteriological action. It was, as everywhere in the Axial Age vision, the contents of one’s thoughts and feelings that ultimately determined one’s progress. In Christianity, meanwhile, the self was also identified only to be chastened and disciplined. Joel Robbins’s work on Christianisation of the Urapmin of the highlands of Papua New Guinea, has indicated how profoundly new and unsettling this sudden revelation of the self as the principal site of religious endeavour could be.¹⁷¹ And, as in other Axial traditions, the revelation of the self also implied the imperative of its transcendence, in the sense that one was now obliged to value other selves just as one might value one’s own.¹⁷² This may be why explicit selfhood and explicit ethics arrive together.

(6) *Truth, belief, and offensiveness*

Gods word is flat contrarie to the nature and disposition of man.

William Perkins, 1608.¹⁷³

¹⁶⁹ Collins 1982; Wynne 2010 for an argument as to its evolution.

¹⁷⁰ Tambiah 1976: 34.

¹⁷¹ Robbins 2004; compare Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 258–259, on Mongolia.

¹⁷² There are some intriguing parallels with stoicism here, which arguably had much in common with transcendentalisms and Buddhism in particular. Notice that this conception of a multitude of selves – extensive to either humanity or all living beings – has no need for the *immediate* community.

¹⁷³ Dixon 2011: 799, citing Perkins 1608: 481.

On truth's path, wise is mad, insane is wise.

Jalâl al-Din Rumi (1207–1273)

May I gain access to the truth of the dhamma through my thought
and my respect.

Yuan Phai, (Thai, late fifteenth century)¹⁷⁴

Similarly to the history of the 'self', or 'religion', the cluster of concepts around 'truth' and 'belief' is sometimes held to be distinctively European or monotheistic or Reformation or Enlightenment in origin.¹⁷⁵ Once again this disguises the origins of a broadly equivalent mentality implicit in all the Axial Age revolutions. Here we may proceed from what Ernest Gellner made the definitive quality of 'ideological' systems: their offensiveness.¹⁷⁶ The transcendentalist teachings are offensive in that they are predicated on the assumption that alternative visions of reality exist and indeed typically predominate. Offensive systems are set up to be jarring, to challenge these alternative accounts masquerading as common sense. They generate hope and fear by virtue of the distance opened up between 'how things seem to be' and 'how things actually are'. The *Vessantara Jātaka* is an excellent example of the way that such counterintuitive accounts snag the emotions.¹⁷⁷ As it happens, this evocation of offensiveness comes close to Weber's portrayal of the prophet as the voice of anti-traditionalism, conveying an alarming message pitched at a higher level of meaning than ordinary discourse allows.¹⁷⁸

There is no doubt much worthwhile scholarly discussion to be had with regard to how easily exact equivalents to the English terms 'truth' and 'belief' may be found in the various languages employed in the texts of the various transcendentalisms. But the essential conclusion

¹⁷⁴ Baker and Phongpaichit (trans.) 2017: 15.

¹⁷⁵ Anthropologists' historicisation of 'religion' tends to emphasise the Reformation and/or Enlightenment as fundamental cognitive watersheds. Asad 1993: 27–54, is sometimes interpreted as showing the irrelevance of 'belief' in Christianity before the seventeenth century. In fact, these comments pertain to something much more particular, and Asad himself acknowledges the importance of (power-authorised) truth (36–39). I shall affirm that Reformation/Catholic reform significantly intensified the significance of interiority and orthodoxy as doctrinal assent in the section 'A few notes on reform'. See also Tomlinson and Engelke 2006.

¹⁷⁶ Gellner 1979. ¹⁷⁷ Collins 2016: Introduction. ¹⁷⁸ Hefner 1993b:12.

would surely be that all such traditions peddle in the ‘truth’ rather than simply ‘knowledge’, and all aspire to ideological hegemony.¹⁷⁹ This may take its most aggressive form in the monotheistic traditions following what Assmann calls ‘the Mosaic distinction’, by which all other religions were rendered inherently false or evil.¹⁸⁰ But it is a recurrent theme of this book that Buddhism mounts a no less assertive claim to be the vehicle for profound truths that otherwise lie veiled. It had its origins, after all, in a milieu that valued formal and public debates in which all premises were laid open to question.¹⁸¹ The Pali texts have the Buddha explicitly denounce tradition or any appeal to authority as invalid epistemology. They routinely frame their teachings within a description of the Buddha arriving in a public park where many other intellectuals and renunciants had set up their stall and then proceeding to win them all round.¹⁸²

(7) The closure and textualisation of the canon and the historical singularity of primary revelation

If the transcendentalist traditions remained of ‘axial’ importance it was partly because of the astonishing durability of scripture as an authority structure.¹⁸³ In one sense, the flow of revelation suddenly became ‘discontinuous’, or at the very least impeded and hierarchicalised, simply because of the historical singularity of their founding teachers.¹⁸⁴ All subsequent claims could now only be evaluated in the light of their original insights. In fact, as Weber indicated, ‘the closing of the canon’ was a more drawn out and contingent process that was still evolving

¹⁷⁹ Duara 2015: 119; Bellah 2011: 276.

¹⁸⁰ Assmann 2010: 2–3. Therefore traditions based on textual doctrine, a founding figure and revelatory moments are ‘counter religions’.

¹⁸¹ Jayatilleke 1963: 233–242; Obeyesekere 2002: 110–112, 124.

¹⁸² Schonthal 2017: 182. Gombrich 1988: 87, even suggests that *pasāda* in the Pali canon is reasonably equivalent to ‘faith’. Some esoteric traditions of knowledge in immanentist societies (initiation cults, mystery cults) may seem approximate in their esteem for counterintuitive assertions, but the power of such knowledge is typically a function of its very secrecy and exclusivity. The transcendentalist traditions, on the other hand, are distinctive by their desire to broadcast their teachings as widely as possible (their power lies elsewhere).

¹⁸³ See d’Avray 2010: 102, on the fixity of literacy.

¹⁸⁴ Pollock 2005: 409, notes how Buddhism shifts ‘scripture’ from the anonymous and timeless voice of the Vedas to the arrival and preaching of the Buddha as concrete historical event.

centuries after the initial revelations.¹⁸⁵ This process of canonisation is greatly enhanced by the use of texts but it is not exactly dependent on it. The main body of Pali Buddhist works (*Tipiṭaka*) was apparently first established as an orally transmitted canon and only set down in texts many generations afterwards.¹⁸⁶ In other words, certain recitational devices and strategies employed within specialist institutions (such as the sangha) are apparently able to replicate some of the stability of cultural memory afforded by the text. This implies, too, that canonisation is not simply a function of the appearance of the technology of writing.

Immanentist traditions have shown the capacity to challenge and reformulate societal norms.¹⁸⁷ In this book we shall encounter developments – prophetic movements, witch hunts, bonfires of the idols – that sought to restructure religious life in quite general terms as a response to profound upheaval. But in the normal course of events they tended to dissipate as swiftly as they arose. It is possible that it is primarily the absence of a textual foundation that ensures that such movements do not turn into anything more lasting or far-reaching in their implications.¹⁸⁸

The formation of a textual canon both reflects and drives the development of a clerisy who must act as its exegetes and who establish their authority upon it. It both reflects and drives the quest to fix upon ‘the truth’ and a codified set of ethical principles. And it both reflects and drives the creation of self-conscious moral communities defined by their relationship to the text.¹⁸⁹

(8) Intellectualisation and conceptual control

One of the most problematic – but still somehow essential – features of the Weberian tradition is the theme of ‘rationalisation’. It is perhaps in

¹⁸⁵ See Hefner 1993b: 11, for a good summary of Weber’s sociology of knowledge as applied to the closing of the canon. Assmann 2012: 390–395, puts a great deal of emphasis on the ‘secondary canonization’ of the Axial Age. Stroumsa 2009.

¹⁸⁶ Wynne 2004. ¹⁸⁷ Hefner 1993b: 13–16.

¹⁸⁸ As suggested by Fisher 1973: 28–35; Iliffe 1995: 87; also see Ranger 1993: 85–86, on the impact of literacy on the exportability of renewed traditional forms of African religion. However, literacy is obviously not remotely a sufficient cause for the development of transcendentalism.

¹⁸⁹ Assmann 2012: 394, notes ‘a strong alliance among revelation, transcendence, and secondary canonization’.

relation to this issue that genealogical critiques of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century developmental schemas deserve most consideration, lest we slip into a teleology of progressive mental liberation. It is therefore important to distinguish specific developments that have been discussed under the heading of ‘rationalisation’ from more sweeping evaluations of whole systems of thought as more or less ‘rational’ or superior at making sense of reality.¹⁹⁰ On this point, then, there is merit in not drawing too sharp a distinction between transcendentalist and immanentist religions.¹⁹¹ Apart from their diversity, many of the latter have shown considerable intellectual dynamism, fecundity, and flexibility, and continued to produce compelling explanations of the world in the face of societal upheavals.¹⁹² Many immanentist societies developed professional priesthoods that functioned as an intellectual class given to producing impressively systematised and elaborate cosmologies. Reading Valeri Valerio on Hawaii, Jan Assmann on Ancient Egypt, or James Maffie on the Aztecs is an antidote to any immediate assumptions of relative incoherence or simplicity of thought.¹⁹³ Lastly, it is also important to distinguish strongly between different versions of transcendentalism. The fact that monotheism did not emerge in the same milieu of philosophical ferment as found in other Axial Age cases means that the role of formal rationality was less central in both its initial formulation in Judaism and its reformulation as Christianity. Very early on its formulation, however, Christianity was already drawing upon the Greek intellectual tradition under the

¹⁹⁰ I follow here Hefner 1993b (e.g., 15); see also Obeyesekere 2002: 120–125. My discussion here does not represent a profound engagement with Weber’s work and in particular his distinction between value rationality and instrumental rationality, on which see d’Avray 2010.

¹⁹¹ As recognised by Geertz 1973: 174. Note Ghosh 2014: 251, 255, on Weber’s approach to ideal types.

¹⁹² Ellis and ter Haar 2004: 20; Ranger Intro 1975, and Hefner 1993b.

¹⁹³ Valeri 1985. However, Valeri may have oversystematised Hawaiian thought and smuggled in some Dumontian dualism: see Charlot 1987. Maffie 2014 is the most radically immanentist reading of any worldview I have come across, in which dualisms are repeatedly denied and the functioning of power (*teotl*) reigns supreme, ‘without transcendent deities, purpose, truth, norms or commandments’ (523). However, it does not demonstrate that the Aztecs produced a field of competing schools that deployed systematic second-order and reflexive thinking spurred by radical epistemological scepticism in the manner of Ancient Greek, Indian, and Chinese cases.

influence of Platonism, and its subsequent elaboration of monotheism exhibited intense rationalisation.

Indeed, let us consider the case of ancient Greece.¹⁹⁴ What happens to a religious field that is not itself wholly restructured according to transcendentalism but yet sits within a society in which intellectuals have laid everything open to searching criticism, exhibiting some of the most impressive feats of second-order thinking and explicit debate? The result is an unmistakable distance that starts to open up between these elites and their religious inheritance – and it is surely worth pausing on the fact that it was often the *immanentist* qualities to the gods, their anthropomorphic features, or their amorality, for instance, that troubled various Greek thinkers. If gods fight battles, can they be wounded?¹⁹⁵ Were cult statues instantiations of gods or representations of them?¹⁹⁶ Did sacrifice as some sort of commercial exchange make any sense?¹⁹⁷ Secular models of reality that simply left the gods out of the picture could be constructed; outright materialism asserted; idolatry mocked; tragic and comic poets could underline the perversity and unfathomableness of divine behaviour; and little bubbles of proto-transcendentalism could emerge, destined eventually to slip into the Christian tradition itself.¹⁹⁸

It is very intriguing that a small but noticeable distance also opened up between some literati and their religious inheritance in the Chinese version of the Axial Age – where again much of the religious field was relatively unreconstructed by the intellectual ferment around it. The result is that from the age of Confucius onwards we find indications of a relativisation of popular religion, an awareness that ritual behaviour was more socially useful than grounded in unarguable truths, and a long-lingering suspicion of superstitious excess – all famously inspirational for much later European Enlightenment thinkers.¹⁹⁹

This is suggestive that immanentist systems may strain to cope with exceptionally highly charged, combative, sophisticated, and open intellectual fields. And yet, Greek and Roman immanentism *did* survive into late antiquity; Chinese immanentism has persisted in some form

¹⁹⁴ Or ancient Rome: Rüpke 2010: 23, refers to ‘rational argumentation’ as ‘resource of de-traditionalization’.

¹⁹⁵ Humphreys 1986: 95–98; Whitmarsh 2016: 37, 133.

¹⁹⁶ Ando 2008: 32–33. ¹⁹⁷ Lannstrom 2010 on Socrates’ critique of sacrifice.

¹⁹⁸ See the section ‘An Unstable Synthesis’.

¹⁹⁹ Paramore 2017: 21–22; Puett 2002; 2013; Sharot 2001: 88.

(albeit alongside Buddhism and Daoism) and was largely accepted by the literati into the twentieth century. Moreover, the freedom of intellectual enquiry in the case of Greece may contrast strikingly with long stretches of monotheistic history, for example, in which the closing of the canon entailed distinct limitations on the scope of rational enquiry.²⁰⁰ And there is now much scholarship on the enchantment of the world under the conditions of modernity, in which, particularly in areas outside the West, the forces of modern capitalism, individualist competition, and digitalisation have driven recourse to novel, experimental, empirical, results-focused forms of ritual practice – have made immanentism particularly compelling, in other words.²⁰¹ All this speaks, again to the importance of distinguishing aspects of ‘rationalisation’ in a narrow sense from rationality in general.²⁰²

What remains of value, then, from the theme of rationalisation, for our purposes? It follows from the discussion thus far that if all religious traditions are means of understanding and ordering existence, transcendentalist traditions are ones that have been battle hardened against philosophical onslaught. It may be more helpful to refer to this process as ‘intellectualisation’ and to conceive this in four aspects:

First, the process of canonisation and textualisation necessitates the development of a class of literate intellectuals – a ‘clerisy’ – to act as its guardians and exegetes. Everywhere, this amounted to the establishment of a tradition of scholarship, insistently concerned with ordering, systematising, arguing, and providing intellectual justifications for their core commitments.²⁰³ As a result, whatever their genesis, all the transcendentalisms create sophisticated traditions of philosophical thought. They subject the ‘intuitive’ understandings of religious life to unusually intense forms of scrutiny.²⁰⁴ They pour energy into

²⁰⁰ Hefner 1993b: 16. Rüpke 2013: 23, on an ‘anti-intellectual current’ among fourth-century Christian thinkers.

²⁰¹ Thanks to Peter A. Jackson (see 2016) and Giuseppe Bolotta for relevant conversation. Note, however, that these ritual forms seem quite weakly rationalised: they are not logically gathered together in a doctrinal mode and are subject to critique from secular or more transcendentially oriented elements.

²⁰² Hefner 1993b: 16. Wittrock 2004: 54.

²⁰³ See Hefner 1993b: 14–18; Geertz 1973: 175; Peel 1968: 140; Tambiah 1976: 207–208.

²⁰⁴ Larson 2016: 11–13, on intuitive and reflective cognition. If elaborate immanentist mythologies are the product of ‘reflective’ thought, transcendentalisms are hyperreflective.

elaborating and disseminating ‘doctrine’ – understood as a select but integrated bundle of truths as opposed to a general cultural inheritance of stories and practices. In Harvey Whitehouse’s theoretical schema such doctrinalism involves a quite distinct cognitive mode to the ‘imagistic’ form that dominates much religious activity.²⁰⁵

Second, the ‘offensive’ quality of transcendentalist traditions means that they are engineered to engage in and provoke intellectual competition and debate.²⁰⁶ They set out to prove their assertions and demand proof of the assertions of others.²⁰⁷ Where other transcendentalisms are encountered they are likely to be engaged in both agonistic and mimetic relations.²⁰⁸ And when the milk of pure immanentism is encountered, the acid of transcendentalism will proceed to curdle it, creating distinction and competition where there were none. Third, transcendentalisms appear to thrive amidst sensations of epistemological crisis, social upheaval, and multicultural challenge. This is what Robert Hefner means when he argues that the world religions ‘often enjoy a competitive advantage over their rivals in that they are pre-adapted to the macrocosm. Catalysts of moral crisis, they stand ready to provide, or impose, prefigured ideals for a posttraditional world’.²⁰⁹

Fourth, transcendentalism provides generalised explanations of worldly vicissitudes which are impervious to empirical examination. For Weber, the most important features of rationalisation were the disenchantment or demagification of the world and a more holistic approach to the problem of evil and misfortune.²¹⁰ This involves the replacement of a plural, piecemeal, and *ad hoc* approach to the question of suffering – by engaging diverse metapersons through diverse ritual forms on the occasion of each setback – with a single story or account. As Clifford Geertz put it:

The problems of meaning, which in traditional systems are expressed only implicitly and fragmentarily, here get inclusive formulations and evoke

²⁰⁵ Whitehouse 2000. Peel’s analysis (2016: 76–78) of Yoruba *oriṣa* cults indicates how far towards more stable, expansive, doctrinal forms an oral immanentist system might go – while not matching that of Christianity and Islam.

²⁰⁶ On the Buddhist tradition: Garrett 1997.

²⁰⁷ For example, Elverskog 2010: 57. Of course, transcendentalism may rhetorically deplore reason: on Luther, Roper 2016: 106.

²⁰⁸ Mimetic relations (stealing forms, arguments, properties from each other) have been particularly visible among Asian transcendentalisms: Duara 2015: 6.

²⁰⁹ Hefner 1993b: 26. ²¹⁰ Ghosh 2014: 256–264; Sharot 2001.

comprehensive attitudes. They become conceptualized as universal and inherent qualities of human existence as such.²¹¹

In Buddhism the concept of *kamma* supplied a single principle as the explanation of all the vicissitudes of life. Indeed the process of converting villagers in far northwestern Thailand to Buddhism, as observed by Charles F. Keyes, was a matter of inducting them into seeing suffering ‘not as the consequence of the malevolence of spirits, though these may still be the immediate agents, but as the result of a general ‘law’, namely that of *kamma*.’²¹²

Again, it must be emphasised that whether the results of this were any more ‘rational’ in absolute terms is a moot point.²¹³ Christianity may be taken as an intensification of the problem of suffering as much as a solution to it. There is, however, one intriguing implication of the transcendentalist approach to explaining and dealing with misfortune: a certain enhancement of ‘conceptual control’ in the sense that the term has been used by certain cognitive scientists.²¹⁴ This derives from transcendentalism’s devaluation of the mundane world: whatever happens in this plane of existence is ultimately irrelevant. The ostensible objective of religious activity is therefore withdrawn from empirical jeopardy. From one angle, at least, the moral underpinning provided by Christianity is little different from that provided in less absolute terms in some forms of immanentism: here we also have a metaperson who acts as a ‘big brother’ providing supernatural punishment of mundane wrongdoing. The key difference is that these sanctions are provided in an afterlife that lies beyond the discernment of mortals in the ‘here and now’.²¹⁵ In this context, mundane disaster may entail transcendent rewards.²¹⁶ As for Buddhism, the operation of *kamma* could always be used to shift attention away from the business of metapersons and towards forms of ethical attainment. When the gods of Sri Lanka failed to protect the island from an invasion from southern India in the thirteenth century, the main Pali chronicle was

²¹¹ Geertz 1973: 172; Hefner 1993b: 7, 21. ²¹² Keyes, 1993: 268.

²¹³ In modern Bangkok and Colombo, for example, people from all social groups evidently find the immediacy of ‘piecemeal’ diagnoses and prescriptions relating to particular forces and deities to be intellectually and emotionally compelling: Jackson 2016, Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, Dean 2017 (for spirit mediumship in Singapore).

²¹⁴ See Chapter 4. ²¹⁵ Obeyesekere 2002: 74–75.

²¹⁶ Briggs 1996: 125–126.

able to explain it in terms of the sins of the Sinhala people.²¹⁷ It led to a redoubling of commitment to an authentic form of the Buddha's teaching.²¹⁸

(9) Self-conscious identity and pugnacity – albeit construed differently by the Indic and monotheistic variants

We have already described the religious harmony of the ancient world, and the facility with which the most different and even hostile nations embraced, or at least respected, each other's superstitions. A single people refused to join in the common Intercourse of mankind

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*²¹⁹

Implicit in the 'offensiveness' of the transcendentalisms is their potential mobilisation for identity construction: they create moral communities which are presented as compelling 'reference groups' for adherents, and these may be either coterminous with or in competition with their other social identities.²²⁰ Yet this process worked quite differently in the Indic and monotheistic variants. Since the broad lines of the monotheistic understanding of identity are relatively widely understood, they will not be spelled out at length here. The case of Buddhism is more complex.

To avoid misunderstanding, it should first be noted that the dynamics of boundary construction are of course always historically contingent to some extent. The Ottoman emperor may cite an uncompromising verse from the Koran (71:26) when writing to his Safavid counterpart Ismail in 1514 – 'Do not leave a single unbeliever on the earth' – but the exigencies of Islamic empires had long meant that large numbers of unbelievers were peacefully incorporated in practice.²²¹ The characteristic intolerance of Christianity, meanwhile, only truly crystallised in the Papal revolution of the eleventh and

²¹⁷ Liyanagamage 2008: 78, implying a notion of 'sociokarma', briefly discussed later in this chapter.

²¹⁸ Gornall (forthcoming).

²¹⁹ Gibbon 1993, 1: 489; compare David Hume 2007 (1734–1737): 61.

²²⁰ See Hefner 1993b: 25–29, on the theory of reference group formation, and 'the moral economy of self-identification'.

²²¹ www.fas.nus.edu.sg/hist/eia/documents_archive/selim.php.

twelfth centuries according to some historians.²²² Equally, Buddhism in China was subordinated to Confucianism in certain ways for much of Chinese history, while it was in a position to materialise its assertion of hegemony far more successfully in the Theravada world. And so on.

Nevertheless, from a global perspective, the divergence between the approaches to identity taken by the Indic and monotheistic forms are clear enough and no less clearly rooted in differences in their most fundamental orientation. Because monotheism is in a sense merely an inflation of immanentist anthropomorphism, it must deal with the sphere of the metaperson by monopolising it; because Buddhism side-steps the sphere of the metaperson it need only relativise it.²²³ Monotheism is set up to destroy other religious forms; Buddhism to encompass and subordinate them.²²⁴

Since Buddhism does not depend on any anathemisation of other religions, it may share ground and combine with them in a way that monotheism tends to preclude. It leaves adherents free to engage in relations with metapersons of diverse origin in a rather pluralist or 'polytropic' fashion.²²⁵ Buddhism was not founded upon a covenant with a jealous metaperson demanding 'faith', but rather invited adherents to become followers or receive instruction. In these respects it resembled many Hindu traditions and also Daoism. This enabled what Prasenjit Duara refers to as the 'dialogical transcendence' of the Asian traditions, which 'permits coexistence of different levels and expressions of truth'.²²⁶ Of all the case studies explored in the companion volume, this was most characteristic of the 'combinatory field' of religion in Japan, as is evident in the letter by Toyotomi Hideyoshi to the Portuguese viceroy in 1591, lecturing him on the barbarity of exclusivism: 'The shin is spoken of India as the Buddhist dharma, in China it is regarded as the Confucian way, and in Japan it is called Shinto (Way of the Gods).'²²⁷

²²² Moore 2007; Iogna-Prat 2002. ²²³ Keyes 1993: 266.

²²⁴ Josephson 2012: 26, uses the phrase 'hierarchical inclusion'; cf Schonthal 2017: 189. Daoism, partly in reaction, could also be conceived in this way: Palumbo 2015: 100.

²²⁵ By 'polytropism', or spiritual cosmopolitanism, Michael Carrithers 2000 meant the tendency to turn a disposition of reverence towards sacred entities of many different traditions in an *ad hoc* and pluralist fashion. Also see Chau 2011.

²²⁶ Duara 2015: 6, and see 142. ²²⁷ Takagi 2004: 62.

It is with good reason, then, that much scholarship of Buddhism is concerned to emphasise how different all this is from the field of exclusive identities set up by the monotheisms. Yet, if we push the distinction too far we end up failing to perceive something vital to the historical power of Buddhism, and which it indeed shared with all other transcendentalisms. In essence this is an assumed position of sublime ethical and soteriological superiority. Benjamin Schonthal has summarised the ways other views may be disparaged as ‘misguided (*micchā*), counterproductive (*akusala*), wicked (*pāpaka*) or ignorant (*avidya*)’ in the scriptures.²²⁸ There was then certainly a potential concern with orthodoxy as well as the orthopraxy. It is true that Buddhist institutions rarely approached Christian churches in their desire or capacity to police these concerns among the lay population, principally because their focus was on maintaining the integrity of the monastic order rather than lay society, and this was most fundamentally a matter of adherence to a code of conduct rather than to a creed.²²⁹ Yet, at certain historical moments, when Buddhism found its claim to hegemony under attack, it could indeed produce discourses of pugnacious ideological repudiation that spread well beyond the monastery.²³⁰ We find this developing in seventeenth-century Japan and Siam and also in eighteenth-century Sri Lanka. In all these cases, such discourses arose as a reaction to Christianity itself, which became configured in both the official and popular imaginations as a kind of demonic sorcery.²³¹

In contexts where several transcendentalisms compete for attention, the current scholarly emphasis on the artificiality of the concept of ‘religion’ can itself feel artificial. For here we find religious specialists (ulema, brahmans, mendicants, bhikkhus) making direct equivalences between themselves and their rivals, between their teachings and alternative ones.²³² Anyone who has seen the headless and defaced Buddha

²²⁸ Schonthal 2017: 195; Collins 1982: 87. *Micchādīṭṭhi* is deployed in an Ayutthayan law of the 1660s: CK.

²²⁹ I am grateful to Tomas Larsson for this point. Also Yao and Gombrich 2017: 220.

²³⁰ Schonthal 2017: 183–184.

²³¹ CK; Josephson 2012; also see Young and Senanayaka 1998. But for earlier instances in Lankan history: Alan Strathern 2017b: 227.

²³² Elverskog 2010: 95–103, highlights the contingent, provisional nature of religious boundaries in the Silk Road region, but much of the material speaks to their sensed reality.

statues of Angkor, part of a systematic iconoclasm in the reassertion of Hinduism under Jayavarman VIII (r. 1243–1296), will appreciate that the Indic traditions do not always settle into dialogic accommodation.²³³

Genealogical and etymological approaches have enriched the scholarship of religion by highlighting the relative modernity of terms such as ‘Buddhism’ or ‘Theravada’.²³⁴ But such a focus on the late appearance of these concepts in emic usage may obscure their rough comparability with other emic terms or their etic utility in capturing important aspects of how agents in the past actually behaved. Buddhists did not need to wait for Western scholarship to produce an ‘ism’ for them to appreciate their kinship with other Buddhists. Chinese monks making journeys to Thailand or Sri Lanka or northern India knew they were operating in a shared ecumene.²³⁵ Nor did they need to have any exact equivalent to the term ‘religion’ in order to represent to themselves the Buddha’s dispensation as a distinct phenomenon: the term *sāsana* (the teachings and practices inaugurated by the Buddha) fulfilled a similar function, while *dhamma* (teachings, law) occupied a broadly equivalent semantic niche.²³⁶ The *sāsana* was a contingent historical reality in a way that the *dhamma* was not; it required the active intervention and protection of human beings. The great reform of the Sangha in Sri Lanka by Parakramabāhu I (1153–1186) was described in a charter (*katikāvata*), which referred to monks ‘who having succumbed themselves to the poisonous influences (arising from) the non-observance and ill-observance (of precepts) through ignorance and imperfect knowledge were destined to the sufferings of the *apāya* [a hellish plane of existence]’. He could not remain indifferent ‘seeing such a blot on the immaculate Buddha-*sāsana*’.²³⁷

Similarly, it is quite proper to warn against assuming that ‘taking refuge with the Buddha’ may be understood in the same terms as a Pauline vision of ‘conversion’ or that the missionary mentality of Christianity was straightforwardly replicated in Buddhism. But from

²³³ Coe 2003: 128.

²³⁴ And also ‘religion’ or ‘faith.’ For example, Skilling 2007: 184.

²³⁵ For a sense of participation in a shared Pali world, see Fräsch 2017. In 1433, Ma Huan reported of Siam that ‘the king is a firm believer in the Buddhist religion’, according to the translation of Smithies and Bressan 2001:11.

²³⁶ In Japan, the word *buppō* was used for ‘Buddhist law’: App 2012: 35.

²³⁷ Tambiah 1976: 164.

a larger perspective it would be perverse not to recognise a common proselytising impetus.²³⁸ The Vinaya enjoined monks to ‘Wander forth, O monks, for the benefit of many... Do not two of you take the same road.’²³⁹ The Lan Na chronicle of the early sixteenth century, *Jinakālamālīpakaraṇam*, reported that in 1523, the king of Lan Na offered sixty volumes of the Pali canon to a neighbouring ruler in order ‘produce faith in him’.²⁴⁰

The conversion described here was to the new ‘Theravada’ form of Buddhism that had crystallised in the era of Parakramabāhu I, which established the Mahāvihāra vision at the centre of the reorganised Lankan monastic order. The Mahāvihāra worldview may also be seen as an explicit retrenchment of Buddhist soteriology against the movement towards theism that swept across first millennium CE Eurasia. While forms of Mahayana Buddhism elevated the soteriological significance of metapersons (Bodhisattvas), the Theravada school defined itself by its rejection of their ultimate significance. It reduces deities in a deliberate and conscious manner; it is Buddhism with its offensiveness towards the theistic, anthropomorphic urge hardened anew.²⁴¹

(10) Universalist creeds fashioned for export as coherent packages

Transcendentalist traditions are not all equally concerned with expansion and conversion,²⁴² but their offensiveness engenders a strong potential for expansion. Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism in

²³⁸ Brekke 2002: 45–55; Yao and Gombrich 2017: 231; Deeg 2015: 269–276, on Chinese terms for conversion centred on the concept of transformation, and Sanskrit and Pali terms ‘to instruct’; Pollock 2005: 406; Elverskog 2010: 96; Keyes 1993, on late twentieth-century Thailand; Wyatt 2001: 28, on thirteenth-century Thailand; Palumbo 2015: 98–99, on sixth-century China; for seventeenth-century Chinese Chan Buddhist missions, see Wheeler 2007.

²³⁹ Tambiah 1976: 65.

²⁴⁰ As Grabowsky 2007: 125, gives the translation of ‘*pasāda jananat kam pesei*’. (see above, footnote 182 on *pasāda*).

²⁴¹ The fifteenth-century Sinhalese monk Maitreya Vidāgama’s *Budugunālanākāraya* attacks deity worship in a rationalist manner: ‘Why call them gods... if they hang about at the doors of people waiting to receive their gifts like beggars?’ (Ilngasinha 1992: 214–215). Note Skilling 2013: 89–94.

²⁴² Sikhism has been relatively unconcerned with proselytism. Judaism has been a proselytising creed at points in its history but was also tied to ethnicity in an unusual way.

particular are distinguished by exceptional mobility. As noted in the previous sections, elements of immanentist traditions may move long distances too.²⁴³ But what distinguishes the proselytising transcendentalisms is their capacity to move *as whole systems* that necessarily involve a radical reframing of other forms of knowledge. They may be seen as mechanisms for preserving the integrity of cultural transmission over space and time.²⁴⁴ These transcendentalisms explode the de facto universalism of the immanentist world and replace it with a de jure universalism. The teachings of Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism are addressed to the whole of humanity – or even, in the latter case, all living beings. The touchstone of each tradition is not a particular temple or landscape but a portable, endlessly reproducible set of texts.

(11) The establishment of hegemony through the monopolisation (monotheism) or inferiorisation (Buddhism) of metapersons.

Transcendentalism recalibrates the meaning of relations with metapersons by redescribing them according to the language of soteriological-ethical endeavour.²⁴⁵ In that sense, the Indic and monotheistic variants represent very different forms of the same project. In essence, the monotheistic approach looks relatively simple to comprehend: it is mass deicide, the exclusive monopolisation of metapersonhood. But such simplicity is deceptive. The Christian God is three beings as well as one being, much as a Hindu deity may be singular or plural at different levels of understanding. Moreover, Satan must be counted as a metaperson – indeed an extremely active one, and he has his minions, his devils, just as God has his angels. This is before we begin to consider the development of the cult of the saints. In this light, Christianity seems scarcely monotheistic: certainly, it has shown itself to be more promiscuous in the attribution of personhood than it may first appear.

The presumed existence of demons and fallen angels had many consequences for the mission field. Missionaries considered themselves

²⁴³ See ‘Localism and Translatable Universaism’ under ‘The Characteristics of Immanentism’.

²⁴⁴ Hefner 1993b: 5. On Buddhism as universalism: Obeyesekere 2002: 120–121 and passim; Collins 1998: 28–29.

²⁴⁵ Hefner 1993b: 14.

to be at war with these entities as agents of possession who could only be combatted through their rites of exorcism.²⁴⁶ In practice, missionary discourse has often been ambivalent about the nature of the deities and spirits imagined by rival traditions. They may be deemed ‘false’ in the sense of being actually nonexistent, but they may also be ‘false’ in the sense of not deserving of worship – because they are in reality demons masquerading as gods.²⁴⁷ Typically, converts have seen existing metapersons as overmastered rather than disproven.²⁴⁸ Even doctrinally, Christianity does not so much as abolish all other metapersons as (a) wipe away other pantheons and replace them with a new simplified set, and (b) order that set according to ethical and soteriological principles.

In essence, Buddhism operated by sidelining the sphere of metapersons: neither their eradication nor their assistance was vital for enlightenment. This must be qualified with regard to traditions of Mahayana Buddhism, where Bodhisattvas may become godlike metapersons endowed with the power to release people into nirvana. Nevertheless, in all Buddhist cultures, the sphere of relations with metapersons is allowed to continue in a form that is recognisable from immanentism. Local pantheons endure or are bundled into an expanding Buddhist universe of gods.²⁴⁹

But the central point is that the gods themselves, in all forms of Buddhism, are subordinated to the Buddha.²⁵⁰ This was conveyed by the image of the deities listening to the Buddha’s first preaching of the dhamma, as described in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. They cry out:

At Bārāṇasi, in the Deer Park at Isipatana, this unsurpassed Wheel of the Dhamma has been set in motion by the Blessed One, which cannot be stopped by any ascetic or brahmin or deva or Marā or Brahmā or by anyone in the world.²⁵¹

The gods were among the first converts to Buddhism, and as the Wheel of the *Dhamma* rolled into new lands, the new metapersons it encountered were converted and improved. They were not denied either

²⁴⁶ In all the cases of CK, especially Japan. ²⁴⁷ Paredes 2006.

²⁴⁸ For example, Holbraad and Pedersen 2017: 255. ²⁴⁹ Gombrich 1988: 25.

²⁵⁰ See Obeyesekere 2002: 176–177, on the ‘axialogisation’ of Brahmanic deities in the canon.

²⁵¹ Bodhi 2000: 1846.

existence or power, but their power was configured as banal, wild, or ugly until it had been Buddhicised. Ancestors and spirits were therefore domesticated by the compassion of the Sangha.²⁵² This process is particularly clear in the scholarship on the taming of the gods of Japan, where monks founded shrine temples in locations associated with *kami* (gods, spirits).²⁵³ It was not always a pacific process: the spirits and their ritual interlocutors could resist and strain against the leash.²⁵⁴ But the result was a kind of permanent pacification of supernatural power: it was the quasi-human, nonethical, violent, and capricious qualities of the immanentist metapersons that were constrained and controlled. Buddhism converted both persons and metapersons and rendered them both more predictable, compassionate, harmonious. The gods were ‘emptied of particularity’ as Mark Teeuwen puts it, through their reclassification in Buddhist terms.²⁵⁵ Thus were they encompassed.²⁵⁶

Notice that the field of metapersons is also ethicised in this vision, if less completely than in the Abrahamic traditions. The high gods are fashioned into beings who have amassed great quantities of merit and who now act in accordance with the Buddha’s dispensation. In Sri Lanka the gods were conceived as recipients of a ‘warrant’ from the Buddha to protect the *sāsana*.²⁵⁷ Contrariwise, the figure of Mara (mentioned in the quotation from the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*) acts as the Buddha’s negative, trying to tempt him away from the realisation of enlightenment just as Satan tempted Jesus in the wilderness. There are demonic beings too in this vision: evil metapersons who have failed to fashion themselves according to the *dhamma*.²⁵⁸ In both Buddhism and Christianity, the evil beings are inferior to the Buddha/God in terms of both ethics and supernatural power. In both traditions, this assertion was stamped onto the landscape whenever a new church, monastery,

²⁵² DeCaroli 2004: 186–187. ²⁵³ Rambelli and Teeuwen 2003a: 11.

²⁵⁴ Grabowsky 2007: 123; Rambelli and Teeuwen 2003a: 30. For a wonderful example of the permanent placation of a thunder god, see Lin 2003.

²⁵⁵ Teeuwen 2012: 74, and see 70.

²⁵⁶ Schonthal 2017: 194, on ‘a staccato tacking back and forth between’ separation and encompassment in Buddhist boundary-making.

²⁵⁷ Malalgoda 1976: 24. ²⁵⁸ Josephson 2012: 32.

or Buddha footprint was planted on top of the site of an old shrine to a vanquished metaperson.²⁵⁹

(12) *The ambivalent status of magic*

Societies organised by immanentist religious traditions may identify forms of religious behaviour as negative from time to time, especially when they seem to have an *anti-social* or politically disruptive character. Indeed, Christianity acquired (and transformed) the language of superstition from pagan Roman discourse.²⁶⁰ Magical activity aimed at delivering private personal advantage rather than more communal benefits has always needed to be policed.²⁶¹ But the strong discourses of vilification of magical practices that were deployed by Christianity and Islam were of a different order. These must wipe the slate of the supernatural clean so as to write on it anew.²⁶² The miracles of Jesus were then writ large. But the scriptures also represent Jesus' attitude towards the production of miracles with a degree of ambivalence.

In one sense, this is all quite different from Buddhism, which did not attempt to monopolise the manipulation of supernatural power. And yet, here too one may discern a certain relativisation of such practices. The scholarship of Buddhism is not currently always inclined to underline this point. Its task is to shake the field free from the legacy of orientalist scholarship, which preferred a super-rationalist figure of the Buddha, and sometimes viewed the mythical and miraculous elements of the stories and practices of real world Buddhists as embarrassing corruptions or trivial accretions. There is no doubt that from the Pali canonical texts onwards the Buddha is presented as acting within a world in which supernatural events and

²⁵⁹ *Mahāvamsa* XVII: 28–31 (Guruge 1989: 40–42), on the foundation of Thūparāma dagaba on the site of an important yakkha sacrificial rite; Grabowsky 2007: 129.

²⁶⁰ Stephen Smith 2008. Both China and Rome inherited 'Axial Age' philosophical traditions; both developed something like a notion of superstition.

²⁶¹ I do not use 'magic' as a significant concept here – in a way, it is subsumed within the category of immanentism, a form of religiosity focused on mundane prosperity – but everyday use of the term gestures towards the more private, individual, amoral, technical, instrumental, and automatic of ritual acts.

²⁶² For example, 2 Kings 21:6.

powers are simply taken as a fact of life. However, from a global comparative perspective, it is more noteworthy that the Buddhist tradition preserves an unmistakeable ambivalence about the status of these affairs – which betrays the new values of transcendentalism.²⁶³

In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the Buddha presents a very comprehensive list of magical arts that renunciators might be tempted to practise, including all manner of prophesying, predicting the movements of enemy forces, harvests or astrological events, peddling demon-pacifying charms, reciting spells to bring on deafness, invoking the goddess of luck, and ‘promising gifts to deities in return for favours’: These are described as ‘trifling and insignificant matters, those minor details of mere mortal virtue’ – they are not ‘evil’ note, just *laukika* – worldly, and therefore ultimately distractions.^{264,265} The Buddha granted that miraculous powers such as flying through the air or walking on water are quite accessible to the monk. But in the *Kevaṭṭa Sutta* he makes it clear that even though exhibiting these powers may win followers, they should be regarded as a source of humiliation and disgust.²⁶⁶ In a typical manoeuvre of conceptual redefinition, the only ‘miracle’ worthy of the name is that of helping another being on the road to enlightenment – much as Muhammad’s sole miracle was the Koran.²⁶⁷ Here and there in the subsequent history of Buddhist monasticism, as in the eighth-century Taiho Code in Japan, meddling in magical arts was explicitly reproved.²⁶⁸

In an immanentist field, magical practices may be ambivalent insofar as they may be the source of harm as well as good for the wider community; in a transcendentalist field they are ambivalent insofar as they thwart or detract from the soteriological quest.

²⁶³ Schonthal 2017: 191–192.

²⁶⁴ *Brahmajāla Sutta* (the first sutta of the *Dīgha Nikāya*) III: 21–27, in Bodhi 1978: 58–61.

²⁶⁵ Aśoka’s rock edict IX refers to rites ‘which may achieve their purpose or they may not. Moreover the purposes for which they are performed are limited to this world.’ Tambiah 1976: 67.

²⁶⁶ *Kevaṭṭa Sutta*.

²⁶⁷ According to tradition: Buhl et al. 2017 (thanks to Azfar Moin).

²⁶⁸ Piggott 1997: 217, 223; Conlan 2003: 186; compare Frascch 2017: 70.

(13) Clerisies form institutions with great organisational power, potential autonomy from state structures, and independent moral authority

The development of clerisies (learned guardians of transcendentalist scripture and interpretation) was noted previously in relation to the creation of traditions of scholarship. But on an institutional plane the consequences are no less significant. Sangha, church, and ulema have shown tremendous organisational power, maintaining their integrity, coherence, and techniques of discipline, their chains of command and common purpose even while states rose and fell around them. Indeed, states were driven to compete with, co-opt, or thwart such rival concentrations of hierarchy and organisation. Above all, the clerisy of transcendentalist tradition wields a moral authority that is quite distinct from that of the state.²⁶⁹

(14) Transcendentalist traditions emerge outside the development of state ideology

The transcendentalist traditions were neither in origin nor *in toto* an articulation of a political vision: they were only drawn upon for that purpose subsequently. Indeed, they preserve a certain strand – however fine or invisible for long stretches of time – of anti-political or at least extra-political normativity. Islam is an exception of sorts, given that it became the central feature of a rapidly expanding politico-legal entity within the lifetime of its founder. But Muhammad was not a prince when his revelations began. Instead the process of the translation to the political sphere merely happened unusually quickly, taking years rather than centuries.

²⁶⁹ Eisenstadt 1986c: 4, the new elites ‘were recruited and legitimized according to distinct, autonomous criteria, and were organised in autonomous settings, distinct from those of basic, ascriptive units. They acquired a country-wide status consciousness of their own. They also tended to become potentially independent of other categories of elites and subjects. They saw themselves not only as performing specific, technical, functional activities, but also as potentially autonomous carriers of a distinct cultural and social order related to the transcendentalist vision prevalent in their respective societies.’ Also: Hefner 1993b: 19, 24.

(15) The dynamic of reform

All the foregoing characteristics are liable to erosion. But transcendentalism fights back: it generates movements of reform, which call on the authority of scripture, or the imagery surrounding their founders, or the soteriological imperative, in order to reassert its primacy. The following section considers why such impulses of reform were necessary.

An Unstable Synthesis

It is remarkable that the principles of religion have a kind of flux and reflux in the human mind, and that men have a natural tendency to rise from idolatry to theism, and to sink again from theism into idolatry.

David Hume²⁷⁰

The vision of transcendentalism set out in the previous section looks like no religious tradition that has ever been lived out in practice. That is because such traditions are always unstable syntheses of transcendentalist and immanentist forms. It is important to recognise that, in one sense, this is so *from their very inception*, as a matter of their core conceptual arrangements. It is no less important to grasp that it is also *a matter of history*, as the transcendentalist traditions are forced to gradually make peace with the structures of mundane reality in order to thrive and survive. Every single defining feature of transcendentalism was subject to reversal, contradiction, and subsumption. It would take a volume in itself to illustrate all the ways in which this took place.

Our task here is to acknowledge the historical significance of these lines of 'immanentisation' without losing sight of the overall distinctiveness of transcendentalism from a global comparative perspective. To take just one example, the individualist and anti-communal dimension of transcendentalism emphasised above only ever mattered in a very particular sense. Monasticism may trample across other forms of sociality such as kinship, but only to replace it with a new form of communal life.²⁷¹ And did Buddhist monks ever entirely detach

²⁷⁰ Hume 2007 [1734–1737]: 58.

²⁷¹ It could even work to stabilise inheritance by dealing with the problem of second sons: Moore 1999: 145.

themselves from family ties? Unlikely.²⁷² As Christian villagers placed their salvation in the sacramental rituals that brought them together, or as townspeople joined confraternities of the devout, amongst many other developments, they effected the communalisation of soteriology. Indeed in both Buddhism and Christianity, collectivities such as kingdoms and nations could come to be seen as sharing a soteriological fate.²⁷³ And yet, when we place Christianity alongside the immanentist traditions that have dominated the religiosity of humankind from the very beginning, the contrast is unmistakable. For Christianity never lost that focus on the discipline and responsibility of the self, and if that focus weakened for stretches of time in its diverse local forms, myriad movements also emerged to clarify and intensify it.²⁷⁴

Transcendentalism is therefore treated here as a *historical* process as well as an ideal type. If this means considering its vicissitudes after the inception of its central vehicles, it may be no less worthwhile to seek intimations of it in earlier and other traditions.²⁷⁵ There is no need to deny that interesting precursors and analogues may be found outside the core cases.²⁷⁶ Movements towards the ethicisation of the afterlife may germinate outside the world religions.²⁷⁷ Jan Assmann has delineated several ways in which Ancient Egyptian culture evolved some of the characteristics of transcendentalism while never reaching the fully fledged form it took in the Axial Age.²⁷⁸ In particular the jealous monotheism and otherworldly aesthetics instituted by the fourteenth-century BCE Pharaoh Akhenaten are fascinating to consider in this light – although it is no less significant to register that subsequent pharaohs obliterated his top-down religious revolution almost entirely.

²⁷² Clarke 2014. ²⁷³ On ‘sociokarmic thinking’: Walters 2003.

²⁷⁴ See Robbins 2004: chapter 4, for the tension between individualist and ‘relationalist’ approaches to salvation among the Urapmin. See Bossy 1985: 94, on Martin Luther’s reinterpretation of atonement as a ‘rejection of the event from the field of social relations’.

²⁷⁵ Indeed, the ‘Axial Age’ itself is merely a moderately convenient periodisation or typology with no more – and in some ways less – substance than terms such as ‘Renaissance’ or ‘Enlightenment’. Apart from the fact that it has no emic basis, it is probably more useful as typology rather than periodisation.

²⁷⁶ Just as with Renaissance and Enlightenment.

²⁷⁷ Obeyesekere 2002: 174–176, argues that this is rare among ‘small-scale societies’ but notes a few examples of ‘occasional ethicization’. Root 2013: 56.

²⁷⁸ Assmann 2012: 396; 2010: 46–47. Also note Arnason: 2012: 341; Bellah 2011: 244.

The strongest parallels, intriguingly, are to be found in societies that participated in the 'Axial Age' without producing hegemonic transcendentalist world religions. Ancient Greek religious-philosophical culture shows several signs of what might be called 'proto-transcendentalism' here and there: developing notions of judgement of the soul upon death; the afterlife-focused sects inveighing against unbelievers revealed in the fourth-century BCE Derveni papyrus; Pythagorean reincarnation; Plato's creator god and the immortal souls trying to reach him.²⁷⁹ Beyond the cult of Christ itself, some of the myriad forms of the late Roman Empire show some transcendentalist qualities.²⁸⁰ The long history of Judaism has shown the evolution of some of the core characteristics of the 'transcendentalism' explored here while conspicuously not exhibiting others – most importantly in relation to the role of the afterlife. The visions of Jewish prophets and Christ may be placed in a continuum with the 'supernatural utopianism' exhibited by prophetic traditions in immanentist traditions too (Chapter 4). Zoroastrianism has invited much debate as to whether and to what extent it belongs in the paradigm.

These examples all derive from societies that participated in cultural currents swirling around Eurasia. In later periods, the influence of globally circulating cultural forms must also be acknowledged. The *babalawo* priests of the Ifa cult in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Yoruba land exhibited a few features that brought them closer to a transcendentalist clerisy, but they were, however, already in a social world that included the presence of Islam and Christianity.²⁸¹ Indeed, one particularly intriguing phenomenon is the way that immanentist systems may react to pressure from transcendentalist rivals by acquiring some of their characteristics – in particular that of hardened identity construction. The most striking example of this process is perhaps the formation of a self-conscious tradition of Shinto in Japan, discussed in the companion volume.²⁸²

²⁷⁹ Emonds 2015: 559; Larson 2016: 250–276; Whitmarsh 2016: 115–116, 133; Ando 2008: 28–30 on platonic anti-idolatry and ineffability; Lannstrom 2010.

²⁸⁰ Ando 2013; Rüpke 2010.

²⁸¹ Peel 1990 offers a limited comparison with Hindu Brahmins.

²⁸² CK; Compare Baum 1999, Mark 1999, on the Dioula of Senegambia and monotheistic influence.

Much more significant, however, is the way that fully realised transcendentalisms came to reproduce forms of immanentism. Most theorists of the Axial Age have sought to conceptualise this. Weber acknowledged the continuing appeal of magic, especially, but not only, among the peasantry, down to and beyond the Reformation.²⁸³ Voegelin referred to the ‘archaic mortgage’; Bellah has reiterated the principle that ‘nothing is ever lost’; Eisenstadt was fascinated by the enduring power of ‘pre-Axial’ forms in Japan; Assmann refers to older forms relegated to the ‘archive’ of cultural memory, as in the encrypted cosmotheism that reemerged into the gnostic and magical forms of the Renaissance.²⁸⁴

There are four reasons why transcendentalist traditions always form amalgams with immanentism. The first is that the conceptual structure of transcendentalism entails endless paradox. The transcendent sphere can never float entirely free from the mundane world: it must materialise within the limitations of the human mind and human needs. As Michael Lambek puts it, ‘Transcendence in this sense of unimaginable Otherness is not stable, it requires a completion through immanence.’²⁸⁵ An inscription underneath an Amitābha statue from Tang China articulates it thus:

As a matter of general principle, while highest truth is devoid of any image, without images there would be nothing to make visible its [being the] truth; and while highest principle is devoid of all words, how, without words, would its [being the] principle be made known.²⁸⁶

The second reason is that the evolved structures of human cognition and need which produce the characteristic features of immanentism naturally remain in place. Most importantly, heaven and nirvana are always likely to register as paradisaical versions of this world in the popular imagination.²⁸⁷ This is crucial because it means that the actual

²⁸³ Weber 1948: 277.

²⁸⁴ Bellah 2011: 267; also Charles Taylor 2012: 37–38; Assmann 2012: 373; Moin (MS); Gauchet 1999: 46.

²⁸⁵ Lambek 2013a:16; also Keane 2006.

²⁸⁶ Wenzel 2011 notes this apologetic tone in many other votive inscriptions.

²⁸⁷ For Buddhism see Spiro 1982: 69–70, but note villagers’ incorporation of the hegemony of the *nibbānic* vision at a certain level of discourse (78). Spiro sees kammatic Buddhism as the result of both inherent elements of Buddhism and its *popularisation*: although it ‘accompanied and developed in response to the sociological shift in Buddhism from an elitist to a mass religion’, in fact it

soteriological objective for the great majority – even of Theravada Buddhist layfolk – will have been some enhanced or absolute conception of good fortune: it was a deferred form of being they were after rather than nothingness.²⁸⁸ As Melford Spiro intuited, on some level, we all flinch from pain, reach out for pleasure, and fear nonexistence.²⁸⁹ Meanwhile, the ceaseless desire to access supernatural power may shift the significance of the Koran from uniquely authorised logos to a receptacle for magical potency. The anthropomorphising tendency, the attribution of personhood or agency to chains of cause and effect, continues unabated. As Cicero understood, idol and deity will ever be conflated: ‘The form resembling living creature has such powers over the affections of the miserable that it arouses prayers to itself.’²⁹⁰ In modern European cities the capacity of holy images to produce ‘spectacular miracles’ continues.²⁹¹ Consider how hard it is to rid the mind of the notion that human beings contain immaterial persons and these persons stay around us in some form when they die. Even in societies subscribing to religious traditions that officially have no place for this notion – such as Christianity – ancestors find a way of making an appearance in the form of ghosts.²⁹² Indeed, if it is true that transcendentalism is less well supported by the mental tools cognitive scientists have hypothesised, then its rise to hegemony is all the more in need of explanation. Its susceptibility to immanentisation, on the other hand, is predicted by such theories.

Harvey Whitehouse has pointed out the vulnerability of doctrinal forms of religiosity to the tedium effect.²⁹³ They may therefore give way to or require stimulus from religious forms that are conveyed through an ‘imagistic’ mode. Participation in a dramatic event such as an initiation ritual produces a ‘flashbulb memory’ that long endures thanks to the bombardment of the senses and the arousal of the emotions. For our purposes, we may note that imagistic events will tend to involve an immanentisation of the sacred, which is to say,

‘merely transplanted seeds already sown by contradictions inherent in the very fabric of *nibbānic* Buddhism’ (68). Compare Cannell 2005 on Mormon afterlife.

²⁸⁸ While many Mahayana traditions will have explicitly heavenly visions of the afterlife.

²⁸⁹ Spiro 1982. Thanks to Vic Lieberman for discussion.

²⁹⁰ Cited in Ando 2008: 57; cf Versnel 2011: 479.

²⁹¹ Garnett and Rosser 2013. ²⁹² Cannell 2013.

²⁹³ Whitehouse 2000:150ff; discussion in Peel 2016.

an evocation of its presence. Transcendentalism risks leaving the senses for dead, but rituals must bring them alive.²⁹⁴ And as soon as transcendentalist traditions allow iconic representation, they open the possibility that these icons will be treated as if they are coterminous with what they represent. Furthermore, other universal propensities of cognition ensure that the attempt to halt the flow of revelation will always be in vain. Prophetesses, ecstasies, and visionaries continued to populate Christian and Buddhist history.²⁹⁵ Above all, human beings continue to dream – in the literal sense. In all societies, dreams have been credited as an essential mode of communication with supernatural beings, and transcendentalism has only ever been able to frame rather than squash their interpretation, as Charles Stewart's work on Naxos shows so clearly.²⁹⁶ Finally, a minority will continue to have 'religious experiences', profound, life-changing transformations of perspective and subjectivity, often characterised by a dissolution of the self–other barrier, which constantly demand the application of meaning.²⁹⁷

The third reason is the logic by which the transcendent takes on institutional forms that acquire social and political functions.²⁹⁸ As Christianity, for example, worked its way from the margins into the centre ground of a society, it had to take on the Durkheimian roles that religion had always fulfilled: far from challenging the primacy of the family, the givenness of the cultural inheritance, or the justice of the political status quo, it had to become the most fundamental legitimator of each. The French ambassador to Ayutthaya in the 1680s, Simon de La Loubère, for example, noted that if the Gospel were placed in the hands of the Chinese they would surely be appalled at those passages where Jesus affects not to know his family or tells a disciple to follow him rather than bury his parents. Therefore,

²⁹⁴ Note Gunson 1978: 233, on a spur for revivalist movements in Polynesia: 'We are all too formal here, too dead.'

²⁹⁵ Christian 1981.

²⁹⁶ Stewart 2012; Kinberg 1993. Julian 'the Apostate' dreaming of Asclepius, a proof of paganism: Momigliano 1986: 294.

²⁹⁷ If religious experiences are not considered much in this book it is not because their emotional power is denied. For an atheist's account of an overwhelming 'religious experience', see Ehrenreich 2014.

²⁹⁸ Martin 2005:12, refers to Christianity's encounter with the logic of social organisation.

missionaries must instead emphasise the capacity of Christianity to authorise obedience.²⁹⁹

Many processes may be placed under this heading, including the tendency for institutions such as cathedrals, temples, monasteries, mosques, and shrines to attract wealth: the more successful they were at convincing the surrounding population that they must look to their otherworldly status, the richer and more successful in worldly terms the institution itself tended to become. No less surely, locality and landscape were resacralised: the universal had to be brought down to the ground. In Japan, Buddha splintered into Bodhisattvas such as Hachiman who in turn splintered into different versions of himself to preside over different temples; in Christendom, saints emerged to sanctify villages and towns, and these too literally splintered into relics that cast them into geographical and bodily plurality; in Islam, the bodies of sufi saints splintered and seeded the ground no less spectacularly.

The fourth reason is that as the transcendentalisms expand – both into new sectors of any one society and into new societies tout court – so they must meet immanentism on its own terms in order to obtain victory. This is explored at length in Chapters 4–6.

Before considering some of the ways these processes worked in the *longue durée* histories of Buddhism and Christianity, it would be wise to relate this comparative procedure to historiographical tendencies within each field. In both, Weber is liable to be invoked as an old ghost who must be exorcised but is never quite laid fully to rest. In both, the notion of ‘popular religion’ has been identified as an obstacle to scholarly progress, especially insofar as it is conceived as some sort of vegetative immersion in the immanent.³⁰⁰ In both, the tones of a domineering Protestant voice are discerned and reprovved. Not just Hume, quoted previously, but a string of thinkers from Hobbes to Hocart may be charged with a Protestant disdain for the ‘magical’ proclivities of the masses.³⁰¹

As always, such critiques have helped to develop fresh perspectives and reinvigorate their fields, while teetering on the edge of the genealogical fallacy in their more emphatic formulations. The fact that

²⁹⁹ La Loubère 1987 [1691]: 418–419; Luke 9:59–60.

³⁰⁰ On ‘vegetative’ mental life for Weber: Ghosh 2014: 263. Note Fletcher 1998: 239.

³⁰¹ Hobbes 2012, III: 1024 (*Leviathan* IV, 45); Hocart 1970: 78, on Buddhism.

a concept was developed in a context that modern sympathies find unpalatable – such as the deprecation of Catholicism – need have little bearing on its analytical utility. Why not consider instead that the particular historical predicament of Protestantism stimulated a certain kind of insight?³⁰² Or that resurgent transcendentalisms are likely to involve conceptualisations of an immanentism that otherwise had no need of a name?³⁰³ The English Puritan William Perkins could come to see Catholicism as the natural religion of mankind after the fall, which always tends towards the man-centred, ‘under new terms, maintaining the idolatrie of the heathen’, once he realised how hard it was in practice to eliminate the immanentist urge.³⁰⁴ It should go without saying that whatever value judgements were once hung from these concepts, they have long since fallen off in scholarly discourse.

There are several ways, however, in which the analysis presented here has been enriched by recent critiques. The teleological edge of past grand narratives is blunted by a recognition of the inevitable recurring power of immanentism, as a universal cognitive tendency that may be triggered in diverse ways.³⁰⁵ For example, there is a certain common ground of empiricism that immanentism shares with the mentality of scientific endeavour, and which is observable in European history from at least the Renaissance, in the interest in astrology, alchemy, and natural magic.³⁰⁶ Equally, there are features of modern capitalism, urbanisation, and globalisation which may propel a notably ‘immanentist’ and experimental approach to the manipulation of metapersons and supernatural powers – all in the expectation of enabling the individual to get ahead and gain mastery of the mysterious forces that propel some to fortune and others to inferiority.³⁰⁷ The extraordinary proliferation of these forms in

³⁰² See Robbins 2012: 14. After all, we are all creatures of such predicaments.

³⁰³ Protestant thinkers needed only to resurrect a language of idolatry deployed by Christians against paganism. See Cameron 2010: 208, on Heinrich Bullinger.

³⁰⁴ Dixon 2011: 804; thanks to Leif Dixon for discussion.

³⁰⁵ See ‘A few notes on reform’ for the immanentisation of Protestantism.

³⁰⁶ Henry 2002: 54–67, on natural magic and the development of science; Moin MS.

³⁰⁷ Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Geschiere 1997. Thanks to Peter A. Jackson (and see 2016) for discussion. Note also the ‘Prosperity Gospel’ of some Pentecostalist and Charismatic preachers.

certain modern environments indicates how quickly they rise and fall according to an economy of perceived efficacy.³⁰⁸

The emphasis on the inherent rather than merely contingent union of transcendentalism and immanentism is also distinct. The ‘split personality’ or fundamental instability of Christianity in some recent anthropological writing ought rather to be seen as a property of all transcendentalisms.³⁰⁹ Still, Jesus is a particularly vivid symbol of that tension: what is his story – the miracles of his life and death – but a provision of empirical proof for those who need it, a transformation of the distantly divine into vulnerable flesh and blood, and even a recapitulation of the awful logic of human sacrifice?³¹⁰ Thus was the ‘hidden god’ revealed in ungodlike suffering.³¹¹ The implications of Christ’s physical nature, the visceralities of childbirth and torture, could be rather repulsive to seventeenth-century East Asian Neo-Confucian and Buddhist scholars; it was, indeed, the confusion of the transcendent and the immanent in Christian doctrine that they found irrational.³¹² Christ himself is just the first of many subsequent solutions to the impossible harshness of the transcendent vision. It has already been underlined that Christianity shares ground with immanentism insofar as it takes a metaperson as its essential focus, and that the journey from a violent and particular god of the Israelites to a transcendent, abstract entity can never truly be accomplished. This is a god who responds to entreaties just as immanentist deities do, and is therefore constantly interfering in the world in ways large and utterly small; who fills lowly priests and rural fonts with an overflowing grace. He remains a war god, as Chapter 5 will detail at length; he remains a god of the weather and can be as pitiless as the elements in his wrath.³¹³ This is the terrible god that the missionary William Ellis sensed as he climbed the slopes of the volcanoes of Kilauea in Hawaii in 1823, not so very different from the local

³⁰⁸ Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988.

³⁰⁹ Cannell 2005, 2006; Robbins 2012; Mitchell and Mitchell 2008; Peel 2016: 105–124. On Christianity’s combination of transcendence and immanence see: Lilla 2007: 31; Martin 2005: 183; Handelman 2008; Eisenstadt 1986b: 238–239; Kim 1987.

³¹⁰ But see Gauchet 1999: 119: his proximity was necessitated by ‘unrepresentable remoteness’.

³¹¹ Roper 2016: 106, on Luther’s *deus absconditus*.

³¹² Gernet 1985: 214–232.

³¹³ Boxer 1959; 309–310 (letter of 1564); Davis 1973: 59.

goddess deity Pele.³¹⁴ A truly apophatic vision of god has always struggled to gain purchase.³¹⁵

Another paradox inherent in transcendentalism is worth our attention. The latter is defined by a particularly marked distinction between the clerisy and laity. But the more that distinction is conceived as corresponding to soteriological status (such that monastics or priests are closer to heaven or nirvana), the more that the layman's potential for salvation or liberation is problematised. It was partly in response to this that both Buddhism and Christianity developed, either in their canonical texts or their subsequent formulations, a concept of merit or grace.³¹⁶ This can be understood as an immanentisation of soteriological progress, such that what would otherwise be a matter of intrinsically individual moral–cognitive discipline becomes akin to a *mana* of the soul, a 'stuff' with real presence that may be stored, measured, transferred, or bestowed. It operates in that sense just like an immanentist supernatural force – except that instead of producing worldly benefit, it effects a salvific boost. The Catholic Church and the sangha thereby eased the soteriological burden they placed on the shoulders of the laity by setting up a new kind of gift exchange, receiving the tokens of immanentist endeavour (alms) or ritual (a mass, a *pirit* ceremony) in return for the priceless promise of liberation expressed in their sacraments or blessings. This also helped to soften too intense a focus on the self and rendered salvation more of a function of the proper conduct of social relations.

Ritual too was attacked but could never be defeated. It returned soon enough to the centre of religious life for the great majority.³¹⁷ Ritual action may be fashioned to express transcendentalist principles but it hardly does so reliably; indeed it is not a reliable vehicle of information in general. To the extent that symbolic action invokes ideas, they become meaningful in a more immediate and powerful but also diffuse, multivalent and unstable form.³¹⁸

Considering how such paradoxes played out as Buddhism and Christianity evolved from fringe sects to become the presiding ideologies of large stretches of Eurasia again involves some delicacy in historiographical terms. Many historians have found the notion of

³¹⁴ Ellis 1827: 246, 252, 262.

³¹⁵ On debates around the apophatic god in Christian theology: Insole 2001.

³¹⁶ Samuels 2008 on Buddhist merit in scripture and practice.

³¹⁷ Hocart 1970: 174; McMullin 1989: 11, on Japan. ³¹⁸ Bell 1992: 182–186.

'popular religion' too crude a tool for the purposes of monographic research. It may be taken to assume class distinctions where none exist (princes are no less avid for relics than peasants), or to make the lower strata mere uncomprehending receptacles for religious energies issuing from above. 'Magic' is a vexed category, often in the eye of the beholder. When anthropology influenced cultural history in the 1960s and '70s, it helped historians see how all strata may participate in a common cultural life shaped by the same sacred landscape and subterranean structures of meaning.³¹⁹

However, from a global comparative perspective we still need a conceptual language to help us grasp the apparently rather predictable ways in which the 'world religions' or 'great traditions' are shaped as they settle into society at large. 'Immanentisation' avoids some of the pitfalls of the language of popular religion without denying the force of the intuitions behind it. In fact, it is hardly implausible that monks and priests are likely to speak the voice of transcendentalism with greater consistency than peasants.³²⁰ Nor is it implausible that sections of the population characterised by lack of education, low levels of literacy, relative immobility, distance from major urban centres, and closeness to the land, might show a loosely distinctive form of religiosity. It is just that such propositions are very rarely investigated in a systematic and globally comparative manner.³²¹ Stephen Sharot, at least, has examined the scholarship of China, the Indic world, and Europe, and concluded, amongst other things, that 'in the popular forms of all the world religions, soteriology has been overshadowed by thaumaturgy'.³²² Immanentist intuitions evidently recur regardless of the hostility of intellectual-hegemonic discourses of transcendence or secularisation. Still, 'immanentisation' does not in itself presuppose distinctions between classes/status groups nor any unidirectional flow of influence between them; we are free to acknowledge that bhikkhus and rajas may engage chthonic spirits just as intently as villagers.³²³

³¹⁹ Davis 1974. ³²⁰ Johnson 2006 for a nuanced discussion of Europe.

³²¹ Moore 2003: 17, suggests the need for a comparative history of popular religion.

³²² Sharot 2001: 248. Sharot in fact distinguishes between elite/popular (referring to *religious* elite); great/little; and official/unofficial dichotomies, all of which are somewhat different but overlap. See also Riesebrodt 2010.

³²³ See Schopen 1997 against the lay/monastic divide; and DeCaroli 2004: 17–18, who avoids terms such as 'rural', 'folk', 'village-based', or 'local' to

Indeed, the consistent and often overriding interest of lords and princes in immanent power is a principal argument of this book and its companion volume.

The Immanentisation of Buddhism

By contrast with the split personality of Christianity, Buddhism may appear much more uncompromisingly transcendentalist in terms of its core conceptualisation, and in one sense it is. In another sense, however, it makes a pact with immanentism that is even more whole-hearted: it simply leaves the sphere of relations with metapersons to proceed largely as it always did, albeit now subtly relativised and reframed.³²⁴ But that process of reframing could take a very long time. The history of kami worship in Japan shows how for long stretches of time they could be considered as capricious amoral entities who must be implored, cajoled, and reprimanded into reciprocity.³²⁵ While they were gradually tamed and endowed with Buddhist functions through the *honji suijaku* theory, still both layfolk and monks could interact with them in fundamentally immanentist ways.³²⁶

Moreover, the Buddha himself was no ordinary mortal. Just as with Christ, his soteriological perfection also endowed him with the ability to work miracles.³²⁷ It is true that the Pali texts distinguish him from godhood per se (he is much more important than that), and that in the hegemonic doctrine of the Theravada tradition his attainment of nirvana does not render him in a form ready to dispense boons. But what La Loubère reports of seventeenth-century Siam rings true: on the one hand the Buddha's enlightened status meant that he existed nowhere and with no ability to do good or evil to men, but 'nevertheless on the other hand they offer up prayers to him and demand of him whatever they want'.³²⁸ In other words, whatever particular canonical texts say, there are in every tradition discernible urges to treat Buddha as a

describe the field of relations with spirits, but opts for '*laukika*', 'popular', and 'nonsoteriological'.

³²⁴ Reynolds 2005: 214, 'Buddhism in almost all its manifold cultural settings is an amalgam, in which one of the elements bound with it is something called animism, shamanism, or the like.'

³²⁵ Ohnuki-Tierney 1991. ³²⁶ CK.

³²⁷ As picked up by Gervaise 1688: 182–183. See Reynolds 2005: 217.

³²⁸ La Loubère 1987 [1691]: 414.

conventional metaperson.³²⁹ Indeed, from one angle, this is what the Mahayana tradition formalised – albeit with great intellectual sophistication and complexity – through the reification of Bodhisattvas, the various incarnations of the Buddha.³³⁰

From another angle, however, this development also derived from an intellectual attempt to wrestle with an inherent transgression of the transcendentalist/immanentist boundary equivalent to that embodied in Christ: for Buddhists were likewise compelled to consider how a real historical person could also surpass mundane existence in the most complete form imaginable. Just as the first centuries of Christianity were replete with arguments as to how to conceive the nature of Christ *qua* God, so too Buddhists argued about whether the Buddha could ever really have been a man. The *lokkottaravādins* – or ‘transcendentalists’ – denied this possibility, thereby producing a germ of Mahayana Buddhology.³³¹

Unless we grant the significance of the supernatural qualities of the Buddha in all traditions, it is difficult to understand why a cult of his relics should have become so important. Relics speak in a transcendentalist register, to be sure: they may be *memento mori*; they concretise and immortalise the moral authority of their original persons. But they also speak to the desire for embodied and tangible sacrality, and as such they are always liable to be apprehended as condensations of immanent power. The relics of the Buddha, then, were usually granted a *mana*-like force, preserving his powers in this plane of existence long after his *parinibbāna*. This is how they became central agents in the establishment of capitals, the foundation of temples, the conduct of diplomacy, and the waging of war.³³²

The underlying equation here is simply that soteriological virtuosity equals immanentist power, and this is a paradoxical but irresistible principle manifest in the historical development of all transcendentalist traditions. Perhaps the self-discipline, liminality, and transgressive otherworldliness conveyed by the ascetic practices of early Christian

³²⁹ He is ‘affectively divine’: Collins 1982: 18. For an example from modern ethnography see McKinley 2016: 1.

³³⁰ Though the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara merging *laukika* and *lokottara* functions is popular in Theravada regions too, see Holt 1991.

³³¹ Kalupahana 1992: 141–143.

³³² Strong 2004; Scheible 2016: 98–99. Tambiah 1976: 87–88; Wyatt 2001: 34–35.

saints and mendicants, Islamic sufis, or Theravada forest monks intrinsically trigger sensations of supernatural mastery: these are people able to endure lives that others can only marvel at; their strange conquest of human nature signalling their power.³³³ Tambiah, for example, analysed the manner in which Thai forest monks are liable to be attributed with magical powers that are of little use to themselves, having diminished their attachment to worldly benefits, but of great value to the laity.³³⁴ In earlier periods of Thai history the accumulation of merit was expected to be visible in the demonstration of abnormal power.³³⁵ In Japan, Zen monks pursuing the most abstruse and rationalised of philosophies could become the focus of popular hopes for their blessings.

The need to develop strategies of popularisation may be particularly clear in Buddhism given that its elite carriers are monastics rather than priests. This means that they are at once dependent on the laity and yet also not defined by an orientation to serve them. As DeCaroli has put it about both early Jains and Buddhists: ‘How do those concentrating on a personal quest for enlightenment establish the religious authority and pertinence necessary to merit public support?’³³⁶ Pattana Kitiarsa’s fieldwork in the Thai temple of Wat Thepthanthong shows that recourse to the business of the immanent can be a quite conscious decision:

‘The abbot once told me and other monks that “we need to find some tricks (*ubai*) to attract devotees to our temple. We cannot survive without patronage from laypeople. Magic is not encouraged in Buddhist teachings and ecclesiastical laws (*vinaya*) but sometimes it is quite necessary when we have to deal with popular expectation. I have built this temple with donations generated through magical and supernatural rites as much as by adhering to Buddhist teachings.”’³³⁷

In more profound, holistic and intellectualised ways, a transcendentalist system may become repurposed for immanentist ends. This is one way of conceiving of the emergence of Tantric Buddhism from the seventh century CE. It is telling that tantrism constitutes an inversion

³³³ Reynolds 2005: 225. Catholic saints must fulfil immanentist (miracles) and transcendentalist (virtue) criteria in order to qualify: Faubion 2006: 192.

³³⁴ Tambiah 1984; Kitiarsa 2012: 36–37.

³³⁵ See CK; cf Shugenja of Japan. Also see quotation in DeCaroli 2004: 31.

³³⁶ DeCaroli 2004: 34. ³³⁷ Kitiarsa 2012: xviii–xix, 1.

of transcendentalism across various dimensions simultaneously, and conveys a certain sense of the transgression and paradox that this entails. As a greater focus was placed on the capturing of supernatural forces, a highly intricate ritualism became the order of the day, and so a greater emphasis was placed on secrecy and esotericism to better preserve exclusive access to such powers; and so blood sacrifice reappeared; and so the aesthetic of the sacred returned to the earthy and the violent; and fierce warrior gods were exalted, and sexual activity celebrated.³³⁸ Note, also, however, that all this was hung from a Buddhist framework, transcendentalist desiderata retained an ultimate hegemony, and some highly complex intellectual manoeuvres were carried out in order to rationalise the result.

Buddhist traditions, particularly the Mahayana, have often been explicit about the coexistence of different levels of truth corresponding to different capacities of comprehension.³³⁹ Missionary observers, particularly as we shall see in Japan, noted that more difficult, radical, and abstract points of doctrine may be grasped by certain orders of monks or sections of the elite but were less digestible by the wider populace.³⁴⁰ In particular, the radical qualities of the doctrine of no-self and *nibbāna* as complete annihilation were liable to be elided by popular conceptions of selves reincarnating and attaining heavenly planes.³⁴¹ In other words, it was precisely the attribution of continuing personhood (to themselves) and metapersonhood (to the Buddha) that was often difficult to deny outright. If David Hume saw theism as subject to an entropic fall towards idolatry, the history of Buddhism shows an entropic tendency towards theism. Indeed, more generally, from the early first millennium there was a shift towards theist devotionalism (*bhakti* in Hinduism, strands of Mahayana Buddhism) among the Indic traditions that had previously held up the way of the renouncer, ethical rigour and philosophical wisdom. It is tempting to speculate that the popularisation of soteriological fervour lay behind this.³⁴²

³³⁸ Elverskog 2010: 79–86, 96. Tantrism has many strands (Gray 2016), and its actual origins are complex and debated. Note that some authors described the tantras as ‘the *vidyādbharasamvara*, the discipline of the sorcerer’: Ronald M. Davidson 2015. Compare developments in Japanese Buddhism: Teeuwen 2012: 82.

³³⁹ This is typical of ‘dialogical transcendence’: Duara 2015.

³⁴⁰ Forest 1998, III: 222–224. ³⁴¹ Spiro 1982: 66–91.

³⁴² See Williams 2009: 24–27, for some more careful comments.

In the past, some Buddhist traditions have appealed to a grand cyclical conception of cosmic time, according to which the Buddha's current dispensation was undergoing a period of decline. This is one way in which the equation of *kami* (deity) and Bodhisattva was rationalised in Japan: because the people of such a degraded age would find deity worship easier to comprehend.³⁴³ Teeuwen and Rambelli quote a fourteenth-century collection of shrine legends:

Sentient beings living in the corrupt world of the Final Age of the Dharma are not afraid of karmic retribution in their next life; their only concern is glory in this life, and for that purpose only do they visit Buddhist temples and perform rituals to the *kami*. They only believe what they see with their own eyes, and they are not concerned with the afterlife. For the benefit of such people [buddhas and bodhisattvas] dim the radiance of their original mind and transform into the dust [i.e. coarse material bodies of various different beings].³⁴⁴

One could not wish for a more conscious or explicit commentary on the way in which transcendentalist truths must become mingled with immanentist desires in order to maintain a foothold in the popular imagination.³⁴⁵

As transcendentalist traditions acquire cultural hegemony, they certainly do have the capacity to bring the masses into the soteriological vision, then – but as soon as this happens, ethically and ascetically severe modes of attainment simply become impractical: it is the arousal of (transcendentalist) hunger for salvation among the laity that drives the (immanentist) focus on ritual as the means of its satiation. This process reached a particularly striking form with the Pure Land Buddhist sects in Japan, in which the gravitational force of devotional theism pulled Buddhism as far as quasi-monotheism. These were genuinely popular movements that swept people from all social classes into worldviews with a strong ideological or 'offensive' implications. But this entailed the immanentisation of Buddhist soteriology in at least two senses: the ultimate end was conceived as a paradisaical afterlife akin to popular views of Christian heaven; and the means of attaining it were radically simplified and ritualised. For elements of the *Jōdo*

³⁴³ Teeuwen 2000: 206. ³⁴⁴ Rambelli and Teeuwen 2003a: 20.

³⁴⁵ Compare Valignano 1944: 160, where the equation of *kami* and Bodhisattva (*hotoke*) is presented as a deliberate way to boost the monks' authority over the people.

Shinshū school in Japan, the gates to heaven might now swing open to those merely willing to chant the name of Amida Buddha.³⁴⁶

The Immanentisation of Christianity

Having first explored a few of the ways in which Buddhism was subject to immanentisation, it may now be less controversial to extend that analysis to Christianity. At least the new anthropology of Christianity, unencumbered by the weight of generations of historiographical contention, has seen clearly that different varieties of Christianity found different ways of resolving the tensions between transcendentalism and immanentism.³⁴⁷ In truth, at almost every level Christianity was immanentised over the course of its establishment. This was partly a function of the expansion of the faith, as it inevitably took on the functions of the paganism it displaced.³⁴⁸ But it is in one sense unhelpful to think of this process as essentially a matter of pagan survival; instead it represents the universal salience of immanentist cognition and the inherent logic of its socialisation.³⁴⁹ Doctrinalism was obscured by the breach between vernacular tongues and the Latin of church services. Ritualism took its place. A form of fetishism flourished in the cult of relics. The most worldly of tokens – money – could be exchanged for soteriological assistance. Kinship suffused the religious imagination. Jesus' mother and grandmother were sanctified; God acquired his own family of sorts in the saints; the Church came to grace life-cycle rituals.³⁵⁰ If the cosmological dualism of Christianity had the distressing effect of sundering living humans from their ancestors, this was felt in medieval Europe too, where ways of bridging the divide with the dead were created so that the living could care for their ancestors who 'remained part of their kith and kin'.³⁵¹

One of the most visible markers of the incessant immanentisation to which Catholicism was subject is the variety of forms that

³⁴⁶ Alessandro Vagnano therefore presented *Jōdo Shinshū* as a deliberate act of popularisation: Orii 2015: 202. Equally, sutra recitation in China might lead to miracles: ter Haar 1992: 20.

³⁴⁷ Robbins 2012: 14. But see a clear statement in Eire 2016: 723.

³⁴⁸ See Chapter 4, and Reff 2005: 24; Rapp 1998: 217.

³⁴⁹ See Pina-Cabral 1992. Contemporary immanentism: Peter A. Jackson 2016: 838.

³⁵⁰ Even if marriage rites were rather late to develop. Bossy 1985: 10–23.

³⁵¹ Davis 1974: 327–328; Geary 1994; Markus 1990: 21–26.

thaumaturgical ritual took and the variety of metapersons with whom people interacted in medieval Europe.³⁵² God even in his most unified and abstracted form is still a prayer-answering being: was this enough? It was not: saints materialised who answered to more specific concerns in more specific contexts.³⁵³ Nor was this enough, for people continued to populate their environment with a multitude of sprites, ghosts, goblins, witches, demons, tree spirits, and so on.³⁵⁴ Catholicism developed rites and objects that could be used to hold and channel supernatural power. The sacrament of the host could be attributed with miraculous efficacy, as could sacramentals such as holy water, which only clung on to transcendentalism though the proviso that they needed faith to work.³⁵⁵ Was this enough? It was not: parasitic practices arose which aped, appropriated, and repurposed Church sacramentals, and beyond this a vast array of magical practices were deployed that stood entirely outside the teachings and often the toleration of the Church.³⁵⁶ Robin Briggs describes healers in the Lorraine region of France:

These men and women operated without setting any clear boundaries between natural and supernatural, because they conceived their world as one permeated by hidden forces which they believed themselves able to mobilize or counteract, while they made no real distinction between knowledge and personal power. . . ; for [their clients] an established reputation founded on previous cures was apparently what mattered.³⁵⁷

This could stand as an invocation of immanentism *per se*. In the witch hunts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, people believed to have such powers became vulnerable to being identified as witches involved in a diabolic pact – a transcendentalist reinterpretation of immanentist behaviour. Practices that always risked suspicion for their ability to cause harm as well as good to the local community now became subordinated to an absolutist morality by which they became an affront to the soteriological imperative, a sin with most grave and universal implications.

The tremendous profusion of practices and metapersons indicates that they were subject to empirical appraisal of their efficacy. If a single

³⁵² A vast literature, e.g., Thomas 1971.

³⁵³ For example, St. Urban, the patron saint of vintners: Scribner 1987: 13.

³⁵⁴ Cameron 2010. ³⁵⁵ Cameron 1991: 15; Zika 1988; Scribner 2001a.

³⁵⁶ Cameron 1991: 11; Gentilcore 1992. ³⁵⁷ Briggs 2007: 181.

means of obtaining worldly fortune (such as a prayer to God or a dose of holy water) was regarded as reliably effective – as a matter of illocutionary effect rather than perlocutionary venture – then the constant generation of diverse other means makes little sense. It was at least partly because metapersons could visibly fail to reciprocate and rites fail to work that people were driven to seek new ones.

The most visible dimension of profusion in an official register was the cult of the saints. And for much of their careers across much of Europe the saints became vaguely amoral metapersons who were assumed to be actually present in their statues and figurines.³⁵⁸ They were therefore subject to coercion in a manner that is immediately familiar from accounts of Inca lords whipping *huacas* or Chinese villagers burning their village deity for failing to protect them from the plague.³⁵⁹ Healers in Lorraine had to devise rituals for working out which saint had afflicted a sufferer with illness and would respond to propitiation with pilgrimages and offerings.³⁶⁰ Meanwhile ‘in Pamiers, the Catholic vicar might drop his Black Virgin of Foix when she failed to bring good weather; but then he tenderly repaired her broken neck with an iron pin.’³⁶¹ What one Italian missionary observed of Portuguese Asia was not necessarily a reflection of the recent conversion of these areas so much as a manifestation of a mentality with deep European roots too: the laity had developed ceremonies for forcing the hand of a saint, giving its effigy

a thousand rough handlings and sacrilegious treatments . . . for example they bite it indecently on the nose, the face, the ears, the hands etc and bind it with many chains, hang it outside a window in the sun and the rain, tie it with a rope and throw it into a well or a cistern, and similar things, and they say they do this to oblige the saint to intercede for them to gain that favour.³⁶²

Meanwhile, the capacity of saints for fractal subdivision allowed them to become local rather than universal protectors of worldly fortune – to become, for example, St. Tryphon of Kotor in the

³⁵⁸ Geary 2004: 95–124; and see Delumeau 1977: 162.

³⁵⁹ See the section ‘Metapersons (and their relations with persons) are defined by power rather than ethics’.

³⁶⁰ Briggs 2007: 215.

³⁶¹ Davis 1973: 77; see also Carroll 1992 for an immanentist religiosity of the Madonna in Italy.

³⁶² Alberts 2012: 29. Compare Thomas 1971: 29.

Adriatic – and therefore to enable the formation of local rather than universal allegiances.³⁶³

A Few Notes on Reform

However, the history of medieval Catholicism was no less punctuated by the impulses of reform, which could be as myriad and particular as the processes of immanentisation they fought against. Much of what scholars refer to when using the language of reform could happily be filed under the heading of ‘retranscendentalisation’.³⁶⁴ This is especially visible in – but by no means limited to – the cycles of encroaching worldliness and reestablished otherworldliness characterising the orders of monasticism and mendicancy. Their reform movements looked back to their founding figures such as St. Francis of Assisi, just as Christianity as a whole looked back to Christ: recapitulating within a microcosm the cyclical movements of the faith as a whole. Other kinds of reform might insist on the importance of access to scripture, or interiority, or salvation as a lay imperative, or self-sacrifice, or the inversion of worldly values, or the unity of God, and so on. Whenever these objectives were pursued in a way that pushed too vigorously against the established structure of compromise erected by the Church they were identified as heretical and persecuted.³⁶⁵ Where it could, the Church also tried to appropriate and harness their energies.

The Reformation, of course, was driven by movements that generated enough power to sweep aside the Church’s charges of heresy and develop their own structures of authority. It conveyed an urge to push apart the spiritual and temporal in certain ways, to reanimate an Augustinian vision of the relative worthlessness of man and the awesome majesty and otherness of God.³⁶⁶ Whatever else the Reformation was, then, it was surely, at bottom, an attempt to reassert many of the defining features of transcendentalism – as were, indeed, in quite distinct and less radical ways, the contemporary waves of Catholic

³⁶³ Grabačić 2010.

³⁶⁴ See Brown 1975: 134, on a surge of transcendence, the ‘disengagement of the sacred from the profane’, in 1000–1200 CE.

³⁶⁵ Cameron 2004.

³⁶⁶ Roper 2016: 206; Scribner 2001b: 352–353; MacCulloch 2003: 109–123.

reform and Counter-Reformation.³⁶⁷ This vision of it may be somewhat blurred by recent historiography suspicious of Protestantism's role in modernisation narratives and concerned to restore the supernaturalism and strangeness of the Protestant worldview.³⁶⁸ Much of this scholarship testifies to the inherent difficulties of inculcating certain features of transcendentalism such as doctrinal knowledge.³⁶⁹ Reformers working among rural parishes even close to major urban centres of Lutheranism in Germany could first report dismay at how little comprehension of Christianity was evinced by the peasantry and then how difficult it was to embed a reformed understanding of it amongst them.³⁷⁰ We have also learned how incomplete the Protestant project of 'disenchantment' was in itself, how early moves were somewhat blunted or reversed over time.³⁷¹ When Alexandra Walsham refers to the 'processes of adaptation that facilitated the rehabilitation of aspects of the medieval economy or system of the sacred in a distinctively Protestant guise', this may be taken as an expression of the fact that Protestantism was also of course moulded by the corrugations of the immanentist mind.³⁷² It too failed to shut the door of revelation.³⁷³ Just as Christianity attempted to clear away the crowded field of pagan metapersonhood only to repopulate it with saints, angels, and demons, so forms of Protestantism tried to sweep it clean

³⁶⁷ See Eire 2016: 744–754, for highly pertinent ideas of 'desacralization'; Cameron 2010: 207, on the transformed theology of miracles; Hendrix 2000 on this period as one of Christianisation or re-Christianisation; Nowakowska 2018: 222, on 'a paradigm shift in . . . the very concept of orthodoxy'.

³⁶⁸ Rublack 2005; Lotz-Heumann, 2017: 692–696. The work of Robert Scribner, who emphasised the immanentist qualities of life before and after the Reformation, was influential here. Scribner 1987: 13, referred to these qualities as 'crypto-materialism'.

³⁶⁹ Yet at the same time, the current consensus is that much of late medieval society was profoundly Christianised – and therefore in one sense, transcendentalised, characterised by salvific hunger, for example – even in rural areas (Kümin 2016; Moeller 1972: 25; Van Engen 1986). This, of course, is partly why the message of reformist thinkers made sense in some areas.

³⁷⁰ Parker 1992; Dixon 1996. Contrast with Scribner 1982: 4–5, on urban reception.

³⁷¹ Rublack 2005: 156.

³⁷² Walsham 2008: 526, for whom Christianity was subject to 'cycles of desacralization and resacralization, disenchantment and re-enchantment.' Compare Martin 2005: 3, on Christianisations and recoils.

³⁷³ On Protestant prophets: Lotz-Heumann 2017: 694–695; popular stories of Luther as endowed with supernatural powers: Rublack, 2010: 151.

once more only to leave providence howling through the landscape and battling with the devil.

This story of reform and the immanentist digestion of reform could drop down a level to an analysis of certain sects of Protestantism. The most striking account here would concern Pentecostalism, now the fastest growing branch of Christianity in the world, in which the Holy Spirit takes the starring role in the drama of immanent power, making visible and real that which had been hidden, and the faith is once again returned to a mechanism for healing, exorcism, prophecy, and the bestowal of worldly fortune.³⁷⁴ Or the story could move up a level to consider Islam as a seizure and reassertion of transcendent monotheism, and Sikhism likewise.³⁷⁵ Contemporary Islamic reform may be seen as a reaction to the great compromises made with immanentism and other social realities during its journey of pre-modern expansion.³⁷⁶

In Buddhism, the impulse of reform is less visible before the modern period insofar as it less often took the form of politically explosive movements, and insofar as the whole area of immanentist relations was far less problematised to begin with.³⁷⁷ Nevertheless, it is discernible in the ceaseless imperative to purify the monastic orders, to hold them to their adherence to the ascetic principles and their knowledge and understanding of the canon. It is evident in the steps taken to reintroduce higher ordination from other regions, and to ensure that correct versions of the canonical texts are reproduced and circulated. It is revealed whenever a particularly ascetic new order of forest monks is created or acquires authority.³⁷⁸ And the elevation of the Mahāvihāra tradition in Sri Lanka and its establishment across the Theravada world may itself be seen as a project of reform reasserting the primacy of the Pali canon and a conservative text-oriented vision of truth.³⁷⁹ Indeed, in the flowering of Pali literature in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Alastair Gornall sees a reformist attempt to return to the 'essential meanings' (*sārattha*) of the canonical texts that later

³⁷⁴ Ellis and ter Haar 2007: 52–53; Peel 2016; Robbins 2004: 114.

³⁷⁵ Wiesner-Hanks 2015.

³⁷⁶ Kim 2007: chapter 6, on the ethicisation and problematisation of metapersons in a Yogyakarta village.

³⁷⁷ For 'Protestant Buddhism' in the nineteenth century, see Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988, but this was partially in response to Christian influence.

³⁷⁸ Charney 2006. ³⁷⁹ Collins 1990.

commentaries had obscured, a purified and systematised form of the *dhamma*.³⁸⁰ In late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Siam following the fall of Ayutthaya, ‘there was a radical shift in the interpretation of Buddhist thought, a process of reformation’ involving canonical fundamentalism and stripping out traditional practices that obscured ‘true Buddhism’ as King Mongkut referred to it.³⁸¹ This impulse – which appears to predate the impact of obvious Western intellectual influences – also shaped Lankan Buddhism through the importation of the Siam Nikaya, while the Sudhamma monks played a similar role in Burma.³⁸²

In Japan, a newly intense focus on salvation had emerged in the Kamakura schools of Buddhism (Pure Land, Nichiren, Zen) originating in the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries but attaining their peak influence in the fifteenth and sixteenth. The first two sects empowered lay society to pursue salvation in a more direct and single-minded manner, and thereby posed a challenge to the established ‘esoteric’ system of compromise with immanentist tradition. The new sects might even be repudiated for their disregard for the *kami* (gods).³⁸³ It was with some reason that the Jesuit Alessandro Valignano perceived the radical True Pure Land Buddhism (*Jōdo Shinshū*) as akin to Lutheranism.³⁸⁴

While engaged in the business of religious taxonomy, it may be in order to briefly reflect on the relationship between immanentism and discourses of philosophical monism that developed within certain transcendentalist religious fields. In the first place, the two must be seen as distinct, not least because the first is a form of religious behaviour and the second is the product of intellectual ratiocination. An Islamic example of the latter would be Ibn al-‘Arabi’s (d. 1240) pantheistic concept of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, the ‘oneness of being’ in the Islamic tradition, in which ‘there was no sharp separation between scripture and cosmos or self and divinity’.³⁸⁵ The Indic and East Asian

³⁸⁰ Gornall (forthcoming). ³⁸¹ Hallisey 1995: 48.

³⁸² Blackburn 2001; Charney 2006: 13, 28, 48, *passim*, also linking these movements to various ‘early modern’ developments.

³⁸³ A counter discourse of Japan as ‘the Land of the Gods’ developed partly in reaction: Kuroda 1996: 367–382.

³⁸⁴ Orii 2015: 202.

³⁸⁵ Moin [MS], noting Ibn Taymiyya’s criticism of this as ‘breaking from scriptural Islam in an attempt to conceive of the cosmos as the immanent divine’. Thanks to Azfar Moin and Francis Robinson for discussion.

traditions have a particular tendency to generate monistic concepts (such as Dao or Brahman). In Mahayana Buddhism, the notion of the supreme Buddha-body (*dharmakāya*) allowed the Buddha and his teachings to be conceived as a substratum of the cosmos.³⁸⁶ These may be attributed to the inventiveness of the rationalising mind when faced with the paradox of the transcendentalist–immanentist boundary, or the very yearning to attain that transcendent realm on the part of mystics and philosophers.³⁸⁷ A future project of comparative research might consider the extent to which the history of these intellectual developments proceeded essentially independent from de facto immanentism, or as post hoc rationalisations of it, or even helped to facilitate it.³⁸⁸

Supplementary Note: Christian Readings of Immanentism

How much of the distinction between transcendentalist and immanentist traditions was apparent to Christian missionaries? In their own faltering, often ignorant manner, missionaries did tend to register that there were some profound differences between the *kind* of thing that Christianity was and the relationships people had with supernatural beings and forces in parts of the world such as sub-Saharan Africa or Oceania. However, scholarship tends to consider the master concepts of the missionary, such as idolatry, superstition, and paganism, as obstacles to ethnological thought rather than as vehicles for genuine understanding. ‘Idolatry’, for example, may be taken to reduce cosmology to mere nullity, a spiritual void defined by what it lacks.³⁸⁹ The pejorative function seems essential to these terms but even once it has been excised there is no doubt that they flatten and coarsen cultural variety profoundly.

³⁸⁶ Rambelli and Reinders 2012: 8 (and note 16); Ooms 1985: 84–85, 94–104, on monistic dimensions to early modern Japanese thought.

³⁸⁷ Religious experiences and meditation/yogetic practices, help drive monistic apprehensions because so often the results are described as a dissolution of the boundaries between self/other, and matter/non-matter.

³⁸⁸ Hence, for the latter, Ibn al-‘Arabī as basis for Sufism.

³⁸⁹ Miller 1985: 40, analysing European discourse on idolatry as ‘nullity and an immanence in the religious realm, a violation of the transcendent nature of divinity’, as also Baum 1999: 9, Ranger 1975: 4–5. However, also see Landau 1999: 24, on missionaries producing ‘African religion(s)’ intent on finding rivals.

Yet, from a rather distant comparative perspective, we may concede that missionaries in nineteenth-century Oceania were not wrong to conclude that the sincerity with which people related to their 'idols' did not entail a love of them in the Christian vision of worship, nor a counsel of morality in the Christian manner of rectitude.³⁹⁰ And when earlier missionaries and travellers in West and Central Africa commented in confusion that they couldn't find 'religion'; that they weren't sure if the natives had religion as opposed to sorcery; that locals did not have notion of an afterlife or of sin; that their notions of deities seemed inextricable from actual objects or places; that people could be treated with the kind of awe which seemed fit only for a god; these observers were not only repeating prejudices but were also expressing an encounter with discomfiting realities.³⁹¹ None of this absolves the historian from the usual responsibility of source criticism.³⁹² Naturally, missionaries were influenced by a weighty discursive tradition about paganism that derived from the polemics of early Christian writers. But this was not necessarily inapposite: a core feature of 'paganism' is its orientation towards the elicitation of earthly benefits.³⁹³

Consider Sheldon Dibble's long discussion of the difficulties besetting the translation of the Christian message into the vernacular in Hawaii:

To these gods, of course, they attach the same attributes which pertain to them here on earth. If a missionary then wishes to speak of the high and holy God, what terms shall he use? There is no term in the language . . . He wishes to say – self-existent and eternal: – the Sandwich Islanders . . . had no such ideas and no such terms. He wishes to say holy: – the Sandwich Islanders had no notion of holiness and no word for it. He wishes to express God's justice, - they had some idea of justice but exceedingly inadequate, and their word for it was equally inexpressive.³⁹⁴

³⁹⁰ See Davies 1961: 65, on Pomare.

³⁹¹ Ribeiro, 1 August 1548, Kongo, MMA XV: 163; de Marees (1987) [1602]: 72; d' Elbée (1671) II: 441–442. See Hastings 1994: 325–326 (also noting, however, another missionary tendency to perceive theism). Compare Chirino 2000 [1696]: 233, on the Philippines: 'And so they do not make sacrifices for devotion or religion, but rather for curiosity of knowing the outcome and as a way to see if they will have good health.' (Thanks to Natalie Cobo.)

³⁹² For example, on Dibble 1839: 113–130, see Weir 1998: 161–163.

³⁹³ Bartlett 2007: 68; Gunson 1978: 210; Ryan 1981: 519–538. For attempts to retrieve the concept of paganism, see Fuglestad 2006; Auge 1982.

³⁹⁴ Dibble 1839: 136, and 140–142.

Stripped of its judgementalism, this conveys an intimation of how unprecedented notions of eternity, ineffability, ethical assessment, salvation, and all the other hallmarks of transcendentalist religiosity were in the pre-existing cultural imagination. Indeed, as they reveal how much the old mentality persisted underneath the layering of Christian education (why did these converts feel so lightly the great burden of guilt?), such comments underline one of the central contentions of this book: that even the transcendentalist religions had first to obtain victory within the terms set by immanentist worldview.

In 1625, the Cape Verdean-Portuguese merchant, André Donelha described the Manes of the Sierra Leone region as having no religion or faith:

They make idols for war, rain, sunshine, for famine or for whatever else they wish to undertake; and if things do not turn out as successfully as they hope, they throw the idols down and beat them and make new ones, or else they take up the original ones and implore them, caressing them and placing roasted and boiled meat, rice, wine and fruit before them in order to make them happy. . . .³⁹⁵

This was written close to the beginning of a long European tradition of discourse about the ‘fetish’, which tends now to be analysed for what it says about Europeans themselves (indeed it has been ascribed to a Protestant preoccupation, which the testimony of Donelha, as a Catholic certainly complicates).³⁹⁶ But it clearly reflects something germane to parts of West and Central Africa in the importance given to the concrete effects produced by man-made items as repositories of immanent power. It also tells us something germane about immanentism per se – that is, if historians are willing to follow anthropologists in taking seriously Alfred Gell’s resurrection of the concept of idolatry.

³⁹⁵ Cited in Newitt 2010: 81. Compare d’Elbée 1671, II: 441; de Marees 1987 [1602]: 71.

³⁹⁶ Pietz 1985, 1987; MacGaffey 1994: 264–266. It is reminiscent of the more famous report of Willelm Bosman 1705: 368 (see Sansi 2011: 31).