God Design: A Quick Guide to Transcendence

Multi-Atheism

One of my basic assumptions surrounding the theme of transcendence is that there are not only several forms of religion, but also several forms of atheism, some of which are disguised as religions (some sects, some churches in the US), and perhaps the opposite as well: religions disguised as atheisms (cultural institutions, the art world).

I speak of multi-atheism, because there is usually a one-dimensional notion of atheists as monotheistic atheists, that is, non-believers solely attached to their negation – the one God – while simultaneously referring to many other implicit beliefs. The realm of atheism does not resemble a grey, dull, or abstract entity as opposed to a seemingly colourful world of multi-religions, but it is itself colourful and multi-facetted.

Good Will and God's Will: Patchwork Religion

In earlier days, one asked oneself what to do to please God (obey laws, follow rituals). Nowadays, one reasons about how God has to be in order to please us. Muslim and Christian clerics, for instance, point out how loving their form of transcendence is. God's are not allowed to be merciless or unforgiving anymore (like the biblical Yahweh), and one will find the term love in every speech of almost any cardinal or mufti (*love* is the clue word in religion, similar to *freedom* as the clue word in politics). This is what the popular notion of patchwork religion or "Happy Believers" is about: create your own happiness, since no one will create it for you anymore. Design your God – not according to your image, but according to a tourist catalogue: pick out the service you like, but remain loyal to one corporation. Accordingly, there are many today who identify themselves as Christians, but hate crosses and liturgy, practice Zen meditation, read Lao Tze, travel to India meeting Hinduist Sadhus, believe in palm reading and so on in their own religious mix. These patchworkers will insist that their *coincidentia oppositorum* is concordant with Christianity or even with what they would call "real" Christianity, free of the burden of institutional churches and promoting the values of liberal democracy. However, this patchwork religion is not a religion but a permanent re-creation of the divine. It is a daily ritual combined with discourses on tolerance and plurality. To put it briefly: patchwork religion is what we would call reality – the experience of multiplicity. Happy believers are happy realists.[1]

Of course, this is nothing new. Since the beginning of Christian thought patchworkers and private gurus fought against canonisation. Think of Augustine of Hippo, who spent large parts of his intellectual life between Manichaeism, Christianity, neo-Platonism, scepticism, and paganism before turning to Christianity. Careful analysts will detect many non-

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1 The same applies to "patchwork identities", which are not identities either, because the concept of identity is understood here as a kind of 'property' of a person (that supposedly can be collected like stamps) whereas Derrida, for instance, interprets this notion as a process or a potentiality (in this sense, "I can" is more primary than "I am"). The will says more about a person than his/her properties. Consequently, nobody *has* an identity in the sense of a private property (I have, therefore I am), but instead the identity "has" me, "has" us, that is, the process of acquiring the property of identity – not identity as property. The transient English word *being* is therefore a better translation of what human identity is about than the German static word *sein* – which, for instance, in Heidegger's cosmos is frequently linked to notions of dwelling, but never nomadic notions.

Christian, even atheist references. For instance, in his famous eleventh book of his *Confessions,* Augustine implies that past, present, and future are instances of consciousness rather than instances of the divine. He keeps on asking God rhetorical questions in a Platonic dialogue-style (disguised as a monologue), which God cannot help but acknowledge in favour of Augustine. He uses the divine as a dummy for philosophical exploration.2

So, on one hand we can claim that patchworking has always been a vital part of religious development (cross references and adaptations of former religious cults form new religious systems etc.). On the other hand we can claim that patchworking is essentially atheist, because it does not stick to the rules of belief. But what are these rules? Do they exist and for whom? Is a God based on properties, dialogue, or good will, a real God, a real transcendence? Finally, does belief rely on these properties, or is belief solely an intrinsic, personal, psychological or physiological process of obscure desire?

Rules of Belief: Real and Unreal Transcendence
In my view, the term belief makes sense *only* in connection with transcendence – e.g. the belief in a being that exists *beyond experience*. A god cannot be your neighbour or your father. Your belief makes him your father or your neighbour, but your belief is based on the notion that what you believe in is *essentially* transcendent (thus, "I believe that" in daily communication uses belief as metaphor; it is an estimation or expresses a certain expectation, whereas a believer in God does not estimate that "there could be a creature up there").3

But how are we supposed to conceive of this transcendence? If it is something that exists beyond experience it cannot have properties, and if it has properties it is not a real transcendence. What I refer to as real transcendence becomes translucent when one analyses Kant's notion of the 'thing in itself' ('*Ding an sich'),* Spinoza's pantheist ontology, or the modern scientific notion of singularity (eternal gravity). What is eternal gravity, what is an endless number of attributes of the divine, what is the thing in itself? The point is that any description would contain or use properties, which by definition would position the transcendence into the real world. Consequently, Kant claims that we are essentially unable to say anything about its being (or even not-being), which is what I call real transcendence, because it is as real as what we call the real world, *but not in terms of the real world.* A real transcendence is a reality whose existence is essentially in question, which means that there can be no potential answers to it. And in this context the realm of

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2 When referring to what we today would call "consciousness", Augustine writes "soul". "[I]t might be said rightly that there are three times: a time present of things past; a time present of things present; and a time present of things future. For these three do coexist somehow in the soul, for otherwise I could not see them. The time present of things past is memory; the time present of things present is direct experience; the time present of things future is expectation" (Book 11, Chapter 20). All of this is embellished by prayers, which make Augustine believe that he is a believer, where he instead reasons about the nature of reasoning. "How, O God, didst thou make the heaven and earth? For truly, neither in heaven nor on earth didst thou make heaven and earth. (...) And thou didst not hold anything in thy hand from which to fashion the heaven and the earth, for where couldst thou have gotten what thou hadst not made in order to make something with it?" (Book 11, Chapter 5).

3 This applies to other uses of belief in daily communication, as well. "I believe in you", for instance, is not an empirical notion but it addresses a transcendent "you" (vaguely in the sense of "I believe in your 'you'"). This belief transcends the actual person, that is it makes it independent of actual events or negative experiences with that person, analogous to, for instance, being still in love with someone that treats one terribly.

religion is precisely what describes the approach of answering and structuring, laying out the grounds for discourses of meaning in relation to something essentially in question. A real transcendence has no property whatsoever; nothing about it can be grasped, not even its existence, non-existence, or necessity can be postulated. It is an equation of everything with nothing, which reminds us on Andy Warhol's well-known "Platonic" dialogue:

– Okay, say I believe in nothing [...] How would I convince myself to become an actress [...] ?
– You can become a nothing actress, [...] and if you really believe in nothing you can write a book about it. [...] Everything is nothing.4

This casual equation points to Deleuze with his affinities to Spinoza and an "aleatoric" epistemology, which calls for equal distribution of "casualness". An event that is defined as "casual" or accidental is usually conceived as if it could have happened or not have happened that way. However, what makes us think that some events are "casual" but others not? Obviously a structuration (Kant) or habitualisation (Hume) of our cognitive apparatus. The equal distribution that Spinoza's panlogism proposes implies that all structuration or habitualisation accounts for a grand "dark" horizon (analogous in physical terms to an "event horizon" of a black hole), which is what I called a "real transcendence". You cannot provide sensible meaning beyond this horizon.
Concepts of the divine that have specific features and serve certain needs (e.g. "mercy") are based on unreal transcendence, as they provide answers to something that is essentially in question. They say "yes" where possibly no "no" exists, which makes the "yes" meaningless (probably one reason why the concept of (d)evil was invented). However, this applies to the "no" of the multi-atheists as well. Consequently, real transcendence is rooted rather in mysticism than among established religions.5 I argue that world-religions are based on unreal transcendence, and if they had not been based on unreal transcendence, they would have been no religion at all. Unreal transcendence has properties, has names or "no-names", has shapes, proposes rules of behaviour, produces books or documents in order to be "believable".6 But this does not exclude the possibility that the *origin* of any religion does indeed depart from real transcendence, something unnamed, hidden in the open, endlessly sublime, a notion that Jacques Derrida, for instance, detects in the concept of event. According to Derrida, an event can be an unconscious moment, it can include religious or aesthetic experience, shock, or revelation. When he claims that the originality of an event consists in its singularity and even "impossibility", then we sense how the horizon of real transcendence is targeted. Any singularity is extended to the endless sublime.7
Accordingly, if we took the origins of religions seriously, we would not end up with religions. Rather, we would remain in this endless "aiming position", referring to and claiming that any real religion is an impossible religion. This impossibility of the establishment of belief is the core of its departure – real transcendence.

4   Andy Warhol, *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol,* New York, Hartcourt Brace & Company, 1977, pp. 182–83.
5   Ernst Tugendhat, *Egozentrizität u*nd Mystik, Munich, Beck, 2003, pp.111ff.
6   One may wonder, if a belief is more "real" when we consider something "unbelievable". That is, don't we believe only and truly in something when we believe that this something is essentially "unbelievable" (like a miracle)? Later in this text, this stance is called *credo quia absurdum.*
7   Jacques Derrida, *Eine gewisse unmögliche Möglichkeit, vom Ereignis zu sprechen,* Merve Verlag, Berlin, p.21ff.

Patchworkers and theists who display a structured or ritualized form of belief rely on unreal transcendence, that is, a distinguishable, uncompromising, and almighty God who is simultaneously embedded in a discourse of tolerance, multiculturalism, and liberal democracy. Or: self-proclaimed patchwork mystics stick to Eastern notions of meditation, but want to include it in the realm of Western Christianity.

The problem lies therein that patchwork believers never conceive of an *endless patchwork*. When they define their individual set of beliefs they refer to a distinguished set of practices and notions. Yet, only if they tried to conceive of an endless patchwork would they grasp what Ernst Tugendhat defines as mysticism. If we look closer, this notion of mysticism does not refer to what we would call religious experience, but rather resembles positions in philosophy and art.8

One could claim that art in particular – understood as a specific form of "mysticism" – takes the propositions of belief more seriously than religions, as it accepts a world that is essentially in question. To accept real transcendence, that is, to accept a world in question, means to accept the structural absurdity that makes up this world. One function of art is therefore to emphasize this absurdity by, for instance, producing even more absurdities. This does not imply, however, that absurdity is generally in opposition to belief.

Belief in the Believer

My other premise in regard to belief has to do with a certain historical development. During the fourteenth century an ideological shift occurred that Egon Friedell has called "the incubation period", a shift from contemplating the divine to contemplating the believer, and, as a first blow against the "mono" in "monotheism", the disbelief in the believer. This is accompanied by a shift from the scholastic *credo ut intelligam* to *credo quia absurdum*. In a period of the rise and the victory of nominalism against realism this principle becomes manifest particularly in William Ockham and his conception of the divine. According to Ockham, if the Christian God had liked to, he would have materialized as a donkey, not as a human. What appears as a blasphemy turns out to be the highest display of belief, as Ockham repeatedly comes up with absurdities to show that no imaginable claim can destroy his belief in God. On the contrary, all these absurdities only confirm the belief. This *credo quia absurdum* focuses on the believer rather than reasoning about concordant principles of human reason and the divine.

The pinnacle of the *credo quia absurdum* occurs in the political stratum as well. In 1409, after the Council of Pisa, the Christian world is led by three popes: The French Avignon-

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8   Tugendhat, *Egozentrizität und Mystik,* 125ff. One thinks perhaps of the nexuses of Hinduism with Arthur Schopenhauer, Zen Buddhism with John Cage, or certain aspects of Taoism with Roland Barthes. However, it is important to note, that these figures are not "influenced" by religions, but rather re-create and explain them within their own system. During a recent lecture in Berlin the philosopher Ernst Tugendhat vividly expressed his existential occupation with religious matters. His personal longing for religious experience leaves him dissatisfied as reason tells him that God is neither dead nor alive – God simply does not exist. Tugendhat wants to but he cannot believe in God. In my view, this existential "disappointment" points to a general human condition – the tragical nature of existence that longs for what Georg Simmel has called *Über-Leben* (super life) but simultaneously is aware that it never will reach it. This can either result in religious fatalism or in mystical respectively artistic nihilism/pantheism (in "Warhol-style"). However, there is one difference between art and mysticism. The mystic looses him or herself in the totality of all that is. On the contrary, the artist looses all that is within him or herself – total subjectivity combined with the striving towards total objectivity.

pope Benedict XIII, then Gregory XII, and Alexander V (who was elected by the council). One year later, three Germanic kings (Sigismund, Wenzeslaus, and Jobst of Moravia) simultaneously claim legitimacy (in a nominalist sense they all indeed had legitimacy). This historical detour is not to stand on its own. Nowadays, when considering belief systems, a re-appearance of the battle between the *credo ut intelligam* and *credo quia absurdum* can be noted. The latter refers to a reconstruction of a core-belief in religious or in non-religious environments. Nationalism is a modern example for the *credo quia absurdum*: although there is no reasonable way to prove national or cultural identity, many people insist believing that certain groups share specific primordial properties that categorically distinguish them from other groups. At the same time, in the arts the *credo quia absurdum* provides subversive potentials. The logic of the artistic profession consists in the conviction – against all odds – that the personal determination to persist with one's work justifies its existence. This is clearly absurd, but it shapes the psychic reality of art and describes what gallery owners and collectors love about artists: artists believe in something that gallery owners and collectors cannot believe in – if they believed it, they would start making art. Accordingly, what's learned at art school is that you've got to believe in yourself and your work no matter how absurd or anachronistic it may seem.9 The contrary principle of *credo ut intelligam* can be found, for instance, in debates about the American intelligent design movement and, more generally, in what I called monotheist atheism, for example in the documentary film *The God Who Wasn't There* by Brian Flemming (2005) that is so apodictically attached to the logical negation of God that it becomes more fundamentalist than any religious fundamentalism. A dogmatic anti-belief of this sort creates what could be called an "instant religion" founded by secular clerics.

**Art, Science, and Religion: Sets of Beliefs?**

Beliefs can be found outside traditional forms of religion, but the question is if they are comparable to religious beliefs, and a more general question is how notions are communicated to form a set of beliefs. One answer can be found in what Vilem Flusser calls the communication structure of a medium.10 First of all, Flusser distinguishes between dialogical and discursive media. The telephone or the Internet are dialogical media because in both cases two or more subjects are able to create new information by means of dialogue (thesis-antithesis-synthesis). A dialogical medium always accounts for the possibility of a reply. A discursive medium, on the other hand, does not create new information but establishes and develops given information without the possibility of a reply, like, for example, in churches, military structures, totalitarian states, or mass media.11 Religious discourses form a communication structure that starts with an original

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9   Unfortunately, economists have discovered this credo, too, to create an artistic movement which calls itself "Neoliberalism".

10 Vilém Flusser, *Kommunikologie,* Bollmann, Mannheim 1995.

11 Two remarks: (a) I interpret Vilém Flusser's diagrams freely, avoiding the terminology of information theory or cybernetics. (b) These descriptions are ideal types (in accordance with Max Weber). To clarify the rigidity of the proposed structures in Flusser's sense: The "enlightenment" of television history consists, for instance, in the adoption of dialogical structures within its hierarchy. But it can only be achieved by using dialogical media, for instance, the telephone, which enables the audience to directly call the show host. It is not possible to "enlighten" television as such. "Ideal-typically", mass media are, as Flusser puts it, "fascistic". They are centralist (the broadcasting transmitter); they are "anti-revolutionary" because they do not entail the possibility of critique – there is no "anti-television" and there is no subversive potential (which has been aimed at some points in the past, but never really succeeded). The

"source" or authorship and establishes itself by way of the transmission of information (for example, canonisation). In a diagram this communication structure resembles a "pyramid".

source / "author"

transmission 1

mediator / "authority"

transmission 2

(etc.)
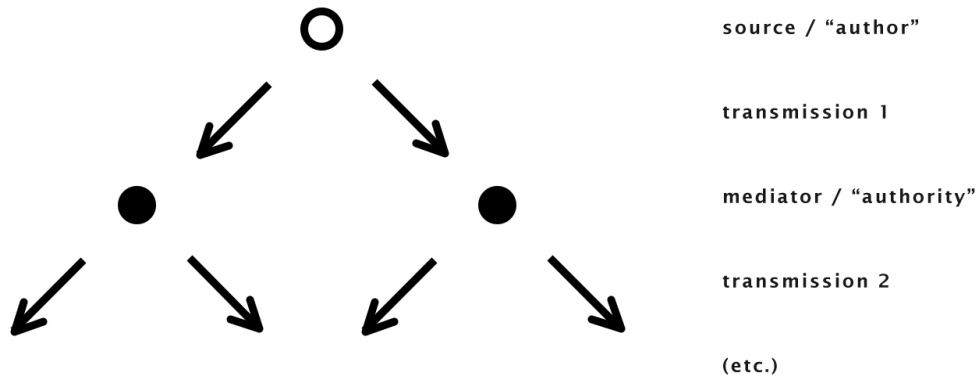
Scientific discourses rely on the original source, too, but are driven by dialogue (scientific exchange and debate) thus creating diverse networks and branches of knowledge. This resembles a tree-like structure.

source 1 / "author" 1

transmission 1

dialogue

transmission 2

(etc.)
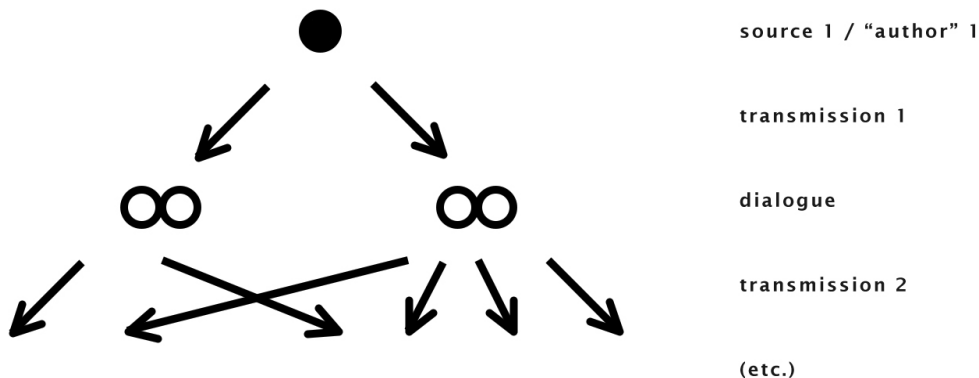
Although visually similar the main difference between a religious and a scientific discourse is that within the scientific distribution of knowledge new information is generated that one day may radically change the original point of reference (shifts of paradigms, scientific revolutions), whereas in religion it is unlikely that after intense debates, for instance, Christianity turns to polytheism. One can define science as a set of beliefs, but one must be aware that its "God" has potentially numberless faces.12

Internet is probably the most radical anti-conception to television, which is also the reason why any form of activism and subversive potential finds a forum in this medium.

12 One can certainly argue that the history of religion is marked by permanent revolutions and delineations – for instance, Christianity, a delineation from Judaism. Nevertheless, the set of principles that enable paradigmatic shifts differ from scientific principles. The difference lies, according to Flusser, in the notion of dialogue where the result is to be essentially open-ended in order to generate new information. It is not accidental that in the beginning of a new occidental philosophy the platonic dialogue stands as a leitmotif for a new method (dialectics) of rational enquiry. However, it is equally justified that critics of modern rationalism, like Paul Feyerabend, insist on exposing dogmatic

If one looks at the contemporary art world one finds aspects of both religious and scientific discourses. If you replace "curator/collector" for "mediator" and "artist" for "source/author" then we are in the realm of religion because in this realm it is not the task of a collector to revolt against or improve the artist's work. However, if the artist understands him/herself as an element in a dialogical structure (e.g. artist/audience, artist/artist, artist/ego), where art stands for shifting paradigms rather than confirming them, then it resembles a scientific discourse. I argue that either none or both discourses are necessary to establish the realm of the arts in modern societies.

It is evident that authoritarian structures can efficiently generate materialist or ideological value, which explains, for example, the horrendous prices for art works or the psychotic behaviour of audiences at exhibition openings. Simultaneously, dialogical aspects enable emancipation from hierarchical structures – if you will, the de-evaluation and emancipation of art from "art" – which in my view is one of the main driving forces of art making anyhow. This driving force could be depicted as a spiral (instead of a pyramid or a tree) that leads to the singularity of the (impossible) event, which is also the core of (impossible) belief. True to Warhol, it starts with nothing and ends with nothing.

Finally: My Personal Atheism

I do not believe that you believe, that is my atheism. If you were true believers you would be real transcendentalists. You would see nothing in life, but you also would see nothing in death. Any proof of yours would make me suspicious of you, and any lack of proof would deepen my distrust. My atheism is an "a-believerism". Before reasoning about the belief in God, the belief in the believer needs to be touched upon. The believer's belief would only be real if it was truly transcendent, which does not refer to a "higher" nor to a "lower" being but to no being or non-being, at all. Who dares to say that being contains all that is and non-being all that is not?

True happy believers are those whose belief destroys the God on which their belief is founded. It implies an *affirmative revolution* – a revolution of kings, believing their God away.

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principles in modern science that are religious in nature. So, caution is required in using these diagrams. They are not "authorities" but supplements for further dialogue.