
ECHOES OF TRANSCENDENCE IN A SECULAR AGE

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Abstract

This paper analyses transcendence in the secular age. In its origins, secular knowledge based on the model of the natural sciences seemed to have won the battle against religion and myth. This kind of all-knowing knowledge can be translated into physical or mathematical terms. In this scenario, the part of reality that cannot be translated into that language simply disappears. This is the case of transcendence understood as the basis of knowledge of the other-worldly (religion, myth, etc.). Modernity is identified with immanence, there is nothing beyond its limits. Recently, however, transcendence has returned to the public debate. It has abandoned its last religious form and adopted other forms such as the moral and the semiotic. This transformation in transcendence makes possible the construction of a field of analysis in which religions and cultures can recognize difference and put themselves in the place of others. In this transcendence there is no longer God alone, only the possibility of exploring and shaping different ways of being in the world.

Keywords: transcendence, modernity, religion, symbol, expression

1. Introduction

Modernity considers religion as a *vital option* in a social scenario in which it coexists and competes with many other vital options that populate contemporary life [1]. If for much of human history, religion has occupied the symbolic centre of the traditional social order, in modernity this complex order is fragmented into independent social sectors. One of these is religion (along with economics, Science, politics, art, among others). Specialized languages relating to distinct domains of immediate experience become the conceptual resources with which society confronts the challenges of its time. The prophets no longer have the last word. Church and state begin to differentiate (although religion and politics are still very close in the form of the confessional states that emerged from the Peace of Westphalia in 1648). Technical profiles in different areas of scientific knowledge become responsible for the proper management of social processes. All of them dispense with any suprasensory reference. The

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autonomy of modern society is put at stake from the moment in which the actors attempt to exercise a technical dominion over the world. This fact defines what is called the *secular era* [2]. It is dominated by *buffered or de-rooted identities* [2, p. 27] that address the world with affectivity neutralized by the intellectualism of technical reasoning. Measurement, calculation and concept represent the linguistic resources with which knowledge approaches the explanation of reality, with which we establish a narrative about reality. Thus, cognitive resources of a formalized character restrict the presence of other dimensions of human symbolism in which the limits of the world expand into the unknown.

But with the weakening of the role played by institutional religion (specially the Christianity in Europe, since other historical religions such as Islam have not only not weakened but have become stronger since the advent of modernity), other expressions of the human spirit such as myth, art, Philosophy, and so on, are also marginalized. The *subtle languages* of man [3], associated with the idea of the *ineffable*, do not fit into the academic debate because they call into question the cultural assumption on which the secular era rests: the *exhaustive knowledge of material reality*. These symbolic expressions, rooted in the cultural memory of the human species, run counter to the prevailing intellectualist course of modern civilization. Not for nothing do they suggest that man does not exhaust his capacity for knowledge in the use of concepts and abstractions. *Man's symbolic forms*, such as myth, language and concept, offer a variety of cognitive representations that shape and expand the expressive richness of the human spirit [4]. In contrast to the modern assumption of the hegemony of the concept as the royal road to scientific knowledge, these symbolic forms reveal man's different expressive potentialities. In a way, the ensemble of these semiotic resources makes up the integral system of human representation in which "the destiny of each is linked to that of others" [4, vol. II, p. 10]. Therefore, what happens to any one of them affects the whole of man's symbolic capacity.

As far as the dominant position of the intellect in modernity is concerned, there is no entelechy or historical reason in the course of human culture that justifies the superiority of formalized knowledge to the detriment of other forms of representation of the world. And when this happens in the realm of social facts, there is a spiritual impoverishment of man's experience of the world. A social horizon centred on the mythical gaze alone, devoid of conceptual elaboration, or, conversely, a cultural schema that is slanted towards conceptual formalization without contact with the semantic deposits of myth, exemplify the above-mentioned dangers. We think that only an integral and holistic view of human symbolism could counteract their threatening effects.

Contemporary society dispenses with the subtle languages that attempt to approach the ineffable dimension of existence. But something more. It dispenses with their *condition of possibility*, with that which makes these languages possible, that is to say, with the cognitive and existential plane in which they are rooted: *transcendence*. At the moment of the historical emergence of modernity

“the secular was opposed, in the new sense, to claims of resources or allegiance made in the name of something transcendent to this world and its interests” [5]. For much of its history, the Western tradition has detected in transcendence the unfathomable dimensions of existence that go beyond modernity’s claim to conceptual exhaustiveness and open the door to a hermeneutic knowledge based on symbolic interpretation and the indirect (or unfolded) reference of language [6]. With the gradual advent of the secular era, what different authors such as Taylor [2, p. 144] or Reinhard [7] call the *affirmation of ordinary life* bursts in. A change of values takes place in which “the emancipation of the laity from the clergy” [7, p. 295] takes place. The social outlook descends from the lofty to the concrete. Activities that were irrelevant for the clerical authorities in traditional societies acquire an unknown value from then on: working, earning money and loving [7, p. 295]. What Daniel Bell defines as the *Great Profanation* [8] is consummated, alluding to the exhaustion of any form of transcendence that goes beyond the intra-mundane plane and questions the scope of scientific knowledge.

What Christian Smith calls the *secular revolution* takes place in which “religious matters were marginalized in favor of the ‘objective’, ‘a-religious’ and ‘irreligious’ pursuit and transmission of knowledge and the accreditation of new professions” [9]. While the secular may offer a version more akin to transcendence in which the temporal is spiritualized in elements such as the body, Science, the nation, and so on [10], the contemporary world asserts itself in the negation of everything that goes beyond the limits of conceptualization [11]. However, transcendence and its semantic contents refuse to disappear from the social agenda of the secular era. Religious experience manifests itself in multiple ways on this technologized planet, and not only in the private sphere, but also in the public sphere [12]. Not everything seems to be exhausted in *the language of reference*, which makes it possible to mention what is external to the communicative act and, thus, to expose reality in a concrete and objective way [6]. Subtle languages continue to demand attention because of the universal character of their contents (post-mortem life, love, well-being, evil, etc.). Their *recurrent* nature [8, p. 333] finds its way into any model of society. Also, in this one. This is why we are trying to give an account of the current state of transcendence in the debates in the Social sciences. In societies of acceleration, change does not only affect the level of technical innovation. They also affect human expressiveness.

The aim of this work is to assert the role of the different narratives of transcendence in the modernity and its relevance in a globalized and diverse social horizon that needs understanding and interpretation between the different socio-religious environments that coexist today. Social changes have transformed lifestyles and also models of interplanetary communication. Therefore, society needs cultural and expressive resources that allow actors and social groups to project themselves towards *the other* and the *other* [13], towards that which overflows the limits of our representations of the world, towards that which generates *fear through ignorance*. In a certain sense, they need to get out

of themselves and move towards a certain beyond, towards the transcendence that has been forgotten for a large part of modern life.

To this end, this paper will review, firstly, the inaugural approach of a secularized modernity based on the gradual decline of religious transcendence by the overwhelming triumph of reason; secondly, the philosophical-moral turn of a transcendence that returns after the emergence of a world devastated by World War II; thirdly, the recent linguistic (also called ‘semiotic’) approach to transcendence associated with an integral idea of human expressivity; subsequently, it will analyse the importance of transcendence in the secular model in need of supra-sensitive domains for planetary inter-communication. These three moments or stages through which transcendence has passed (or is passing) during modernity that we propose are articulated as categories that seek to offer a framework of theoretical analysis that facilitates the study of the different manifestations of transcendence that have coexisted and coexist in an era open to the plural and the new as modernity is; finally, it will offer a final synthesis of the overall journey made.

2. The decline of transcendence in the course of Western rationalization

At the beginning of modernity, Philosophy and Sociology see in transcendence the decline of a dimension of society that is overthrown by *the inexorable course of reason in the process of civilization*. This process of rationalization finds its beginning in Greek philosophy and Jewish prophecies [14]. It is the moment of the awakening of the *religions of the book* [15] in which the “reflexive transformation of the sacred” [16] takes place in the form of Summas and (teleological) Systems. The collective sacrificial experience is transformed into a process of religious interiorization. From now on, religious life consists in the discovery of the deep meaning of the Scriptures. Religion becomes intellectualized.

As stated by the most authoritative voices in the early modern period (Hegel, Weber, Durkheim, Marx and so on), human history progresses from *simple* social models to *complex* social forms, from worldviews *centred* on religious knowledge and clerical authority to *decentred, differentiated* worldviews subject to specialized knowledge based on professional competence. This historical pattern, which goes by the name of *secularization* or *worldliness*, begins with the Greek *logos* and takes hold with the Protestant Reformation, secular humanism and the Enlightenment. In this historical sequence, reason and conceptual thought become autonomous. The mythical and mystical remnants of human consciousness are perceived as a source of error and superstition from the moment that reason guarantees man absolute control over nature. The triumphant scientific activity is based on the principle of identity ($A = A$). The infinite nuances of the concrete disappear from consciousness. Logic is the backbone of this mode of social representation. The idea of secularization is intended to explain the decline of institutional religion in social life and the gradual triumph of a speculative worldview in which reality is

expressed in terms of efficiency and calculation. This view of social change culminates in what Weber calls the process of *disenchantment of the world* (*die Entzauberung der Welt*), which suggests that “the world can follow its own laws and can develop its own worldly values which, although they can be attributed to an indirect divine power, contain within themselves the tendency to absolute autonomization” [7, p. 275]. The becoming of facts is part of a blind historical process, subject to empirical and predictable regularities in its further developments. The holistic version of *theory* is replaced by the *concrete* analysis of *Science*. The world becomes a rigid body. It loses depth and mystery. In a way, it becomes mechanized. Everything is susceptible to explanation on the basis of the scientific method. In this scenario, with this narrative, it could seem that transcendence and subtle languages enter into crisis. There are only facts. Descriptive language becomes the hegemonic model of human knowledge. In short, with the historical advance of secularization, the rational logos is dispossessed of transcendence, two dimensions which, in their axial origins [17], were profoundly and intimately united.

In the context of this narrative, the meaning of social actions is omitted. It belongs to the experience of the concrete which contravenes the generalist reasoning of Science. The concept overrides the dense expressiveness of *the hierophanies* [18] that evoke the presence of mystery in the foundations of religious life. These hierophanies are expressive resources that allow a myriad of incomplete and insufficient approximations to the fullness of the sacred. They contain the core values (meaning, well-being, salvation, and so on) of each social community in general and of each religious community in particular. The secular age deactivates their influence by reducing the real to the intra-mundane plane of the object-thing. The world loses its resonance because this view of the secular became hegemonic. This does not mean that hierophany disappeared, but rather that it was overshadowed by the impact of this way of articulating secularization. What Gilbert Durand calls *iconoclasm* [19] takes place in modernity, in which the polysemy of religious images is repressed by the referential and neutral language of the scientific concept. As Niklas Luhmann states, the *Symbolon* is defeated by the *Diabolon* [20]. The ability to fuse and relate different realities on the basis of the similarity of the symbolic is replaced in the course of modernity by the diabolical, which consists in separating and differentiating what the symbol claims to unite. This narrative of Modernity omits *meaning* (rooted in transcendence), understood by Max Weber as the capacity to “fuse logically heterogeneous motives into a unity, for it is not the logical sequence but the practical evaluations that dominate the conception” [21]. The fragmentary and unconnected experience of facts becomes a ‘reality principle’. But “signifying is different from representing” [6, p. 406]. If representation is based on the formula *being-this*, meaning is based on *being-as*. The essentialist concept wants to eliminate the *living metaphor* [6] which, because of its semantically inexhaustible character, reactivates in the course of time the meaning of religious narratives. The narrative of this secular culture

represses any non-referential language that questions the *logo-centric* relation of secular man to the world (i.e. to himself).

In this approach, transcendence and its subtle languages go into (almost definitive) decline because of the relevant role acquired by scientific knowledge and also because this narrative establishes an antinomian relationship between the religious and the secular. In this sense, the suprasensible religious dominance prevalent throughout history until the rise of modernity is weakened. This does not mean that certain social forms do not seek (or succeed) in obtaining their source of legitimacy through religion. What we are trying to note is that in societies that develop around this secular paradigm (narrative), political legitimization is normally articulated according to the principle of differentiation of secular and religious spheres. This means that we live in a scenario in which religious sources do not have the impact they had on other moments of the history and that they are forced to share space with other sources of legitimization. Modern life narrative corners religious forms and revels in an unlimited technical power situated on the intra-mundane plane. The reality of the world is at the mercy of the self-sacralisation of (all-powerful) man. The unlimited expansion of the intellectualistic vision of secularization of modernity went into crisis in the human horror of two World Wars and the suspension of cultural knowledge based on similarity and analogy.

3. The philosophical-moral turn of transcendence

In the middle of the last century, transcendence timidly returned to academic and social debate on the basis of a reading that was close to *philosophical-moral enquiry* and sensitive to inter-religious and intercultural communication. It was no longer the religious transcendence from which the secular narrative had claimed to differentiate itself. It was another that we will try to analyse in this epigraph. Until then, the secular era had begun a process of *deconstruction of religious transcendence*. In Taylor's words, "the independence of immanence had been declared" [5]. Religious life and philosophical enquiry were relegated to the side-lines in the secular era as the diffuse remnants of a traditional world that had been superseded. However, the collateral effects of the secular ideal of unlimited progress of a man vain of his cognitive power provoked the emergence of a speculative and reflective debate rooted in the great problems of a society that had suffered two self-destructive World Wars and needed to rebuild the moral foundations of a bankrupt Western civilization. In this context, the work of K. Jaspers promotes a look at transcendence as a resource arising from historical evolution that can become a meeting point between religions and beliefs [17, p. 218-220]. A *dynamic* approach to transcendence appears, therefore, which moves away from its exclusive link with the religious prevailing in the first reading of modernity. If in that first phase its decline was heralded by the overflowing expansion of a hegemonic rationality, in the second phase transcendence claims a *philosophical-moral domain* to which institutional religions do not turn to reaffirm their ideologies,

but to seek points of understanding and convergence between them. The horror of war forces us to think not only about religions and civilizations, but also about the planet and the human species.

The emergence of the dynamic approach to transcendence marks the beginning of what Jaspers calls *the axial axis* [17, p. 1]. This expression resituates the analysis of modern society and its tensions in the historical episode in which the world transforms the monistic and compact vision of archaic societies [22] into the dual and complex representation of societies based on the Book [23]. The axial axis emerges at the moment when universal religions (Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, Confucianism and Islam) and Greek philosophy appear in human history to the detriment of pagan religious forms based on the mystery of the renewal of the cosmic order. Around 500 BC, man began to acquire a speculative notion of himself in a planetary environment in which the *salvation beyond the Earth* of the individual was established as a cultural value. This is the time of the emergence of transcendence (Schwartz [24], Eisenstadt [25], Bellah [26]) as the higher plane of reality and immanence as the lower, decadent, plane. A plane of existence emerges that overflows empirical immediacy and in which human universality resides, offering an abstract and decontextualized view of any human position in the world. In contrast to the ephemeral nature of the empirical flow, spiritual dimensions of existence that guide the moral behaviour of social actors and that are not accessible through the senses, take root in transcendence. It is a supreme reality that is only available to a few. Therefore, transcendence equals all societies: none of them is closer than the rest to accessing the unconditional.

In contrast to the plane of transcendence, in immanence social actors deal with the provisional character of experience. In it, the finiteness of everything real, including human existence, becomes apparent. Until the advent of modernity, immanence is conceived as an *episode of transit* to the higher level of higher knowledge. This is only possible if the actor succeeds in escaping the sensory and short-term temptations of the horizon of experience. In the intramundane realm, the echo of a transcendent perfection reflects, at the same time, the imperfections of immediacy. It is only possible to reach it through a life marked by renunciation, discipline and deprivation of earthly pleasures. It is the contribution of *the first intellectuals*, such as mystics, prophets, philosophers, etc., that makes man's path to salvation beyond the earth possible [27].

A relevant derivative of this tension between transcendence and immanence would be the emergence in the course of human consciousness of the *religions of redemption*. In these, the faithful aspire to transcend their biological birth. Spiritual salvation is played out in a reality that goes beyond the routine conditions of existence. Not everything is exhausted in the immediate reality. Man wants to be reborn and thus incorporate the full knowledge of existence into his partial and limited vision of his social time. This is why William James speaks of *the once-born* and *the twice-born* [28]. The former finds their bodily well-being within spatio-temporal coordinates. The latter situate true reality in a domain that transgresses the known. The search for a

state of bliss thus describes a *symbolic second birth* after which ordinary consciousness recognizes itself as limited and partial in the face of the surrounding infinitude. The archaic religions, the polytheism of Greece and Rome, the new American currents such as transcendentalism, are seen as beliefs of the once-born, which differ from “Brahmans, Buddhists, Christians, Mohammedans, twice-born people whose religion is non-naturalistic, get from their several creeds of mysticism and renunciation” [28, p. 115].

This reflection sponsored by K. Jaspers appears at a time of doubt and confusion experienced by Europe and the planet as a whole. The cause of the two World Wars is to be found in the foundations of a Judeo-Christian civilization that had self-conceived itself as the dominant cultural model due to the (supposed) moral superiority of its idea of progress. Against this, Jaspers seeks to highlight the various axial religions and cultures around the world whose social projects and moral proposals have been subsumed by the Judeo-Christian tradition. To this end, Jaspers sees in the axial age the real possibility of reaching an universal understanding, that is, an interreligious and intercultural approach based on an idea of transcendence that forces social groups to distance themselves from themselves, from their own convictions and from the dangers of particularisms. Jaspers finds a common subsoil among axial cultures that allows them to go beyond themselves and ideally extend to other worldviews without achieving definitive certainties on the level of transcendence. Transcendence becomes a place of moral exploration in which possibilities for interreligious understanding open up, but devoid of a definitive and final character. In transcendence stripped of the old religious overtones, there is no longer any room for the tendency to essentialize faith or belief. It opens the way for a learning process between different religious symbolisms.

This philosophical-moral turn of transcendence consists in discovering a space for dialogue in which each religion and each civilization abandons the tendency to *self-referentiality*, i.e. to constitute itself as the centre of planetary existence. In this vision of transcendence, each religious ideology becomes aware of the infinitude of the world, of its own social reality and that of others. No belief, faith or religious ideology has direct and exhaustive access to the ultimate truth. They are all incomplete in reference to it. In this way, transcendence impels man to leave his horizon of everyday certainties to access that set of *limit situations* in which “man discovers the awareness of his place in the world” [18, p. 37]. What is called *second-order thinking* [29] arises, with which man thinks about the conditions of human thought. Self-reflection takes place. Alongside the universal religions and their beliefs about extra-worldly salvation, Philosophy and the metaphysical enquiry of human beings are the axial axis. Thus, “Consciousness became once conscious of itself, thinking became its own object. Spiritual conflicts arose, accompanied by attempts to convince others through the communication of thoughts, reasons and experiences” [17, p. 2]. In this sense, “the whole of humanity took a forward leap” [17, p. 4] because “longs for liberation and redemption and is able to attain to them already in this world - in soaring toward the idea, in the resignation of

ataraxia, in the absorption of mediation, in the knowledge of his self and the world as *atman*, in the experience of *nirvana*, in concord with the *tao*, or in surrender to the will of God” [17, p. 4]. In Jaspers’ case, transcendence understood as a moral plane of dialogue between cultures, religions and civilizations is incomprehensible without the help of Philosophy, which Jaspers considers as “an instance of mediation in the communication between believers” [16, p. 301]. As a consequence, the communicative dimension of Philosophy stressed by Jaspers reveals that “we are in a position to interpret other forms of belief as if they were our own, as attempts to articulate an experience of the divine that has never been fully articulated” [16, p. 301]. Habermas himself adds that Jaspers’ proposal was an attempt to seek a rationalist approach that does not seek to overcome and integrate faith into the concept, but “maintains towards religious traditions an attitude that is both critical and *ready to learn*” [30].

4. The presence of the symbol in the emergence of transcendence

This approach to transcendence as a space of moral reunion in axial cultures has been followed more recently by another in which the core of the discussion is the human particularity of *symbolic thought* “from which all fears, all hopes and their cultural fruits have emanated continuously for about a million and a half years, since *Homo erectus* has stood on the Earth” [19, p. 135]. Authors such as M. Donald [31], R. Bellah [26], M. Jung [32] and others find in the evolutionary emergence of the symbol the presence of transcendence in human life. The human capacity to think about *the conditions of possibility* of thought itself and of empirical reality evokes the existence of a speculative domain present in all modes of coexistence. Human symbolization in its reflective and interpretative aspect refers to an impersonal and deliberative dimension that returns lucidly to the emotional foundations of all cultural worldviews. It arises from the very evolutionary process of the species and the embryonic expressive resources of human consciousness actively survive in its formation.

These researchers analyse the cognitive dispositions of the human species without relying on the schemes of classical evolutionism. It is “a cascade, or cumulative, model: previous adaptations are preserved following the principle of conservation of gains” [31, p. 54]. His approach is based on an idea of evolutionism in which “nothing is ever lost” [26, p. 267]. If in classical evolutionism only the most capable and the best adapted to a changing environment survive, in this *non-evolutionary evolutive* model, all cognitive competencies constitute a cultural inheritance of all historical present. We are never exclusively rational or logical. The set of cognitive competences prior to the emergence of consciousness endures in its deepest places. This is why Donald speaks of a human consciousness understood as a ‘hybrid organism’ made up of different cultural materials: *episodic culture, mimetic culture, mythical culture and theoretical culture* [31].

Episodic culture refers to the inaugural moment of human consciousness in which there has not yet been a break with the animal world. In it, man has no differentiated linguistic capacity and approaches the world with a very focused attention on concrete points of the surrounding horizon. Even without the capacity for abstraction, man offers a *modus operandi* that is “concrete and reactive, and bound to their sophisticated mastery of social and environmental events” [31, p. 56].

Mimetic culture refers to an evolutionary advance in which the human group discovers its capacity to express itself with the human body. It becomes “a plaything, something with which to experiment” [31, p. 58]. Society resembles a social stage in which the initial form of *distinctly* human culture is “theatrical, embodied and performance-oriented” [31, p. 56]. In a way, mimetic culture is a ‘missing link’ between the episodic culture of monkeys and the preliterate oral cultures of many literate societies.

On the other hand, mythical culture emerges when man’s linguistic capacity matures from the mimetic support. It becomes visible with the appearance of orality in human communication. On the threshold of the appearance of books and literate societies, myth constitutes the narrative ability with which culture designs a first organization of social behaviour based on qualitative identifications. The guiding element of this narrative orality is the semantic density of the world, organized through the *resemblance and similarity* between the natural elements of the environment and their cultural meaning. Uroboros = origin, dove = peace, stone = immutability, lion = fierceness, among others, are examples of mythical narrative. In archaic societies everything is in myth. Things are said through images participated in by the sacred. And here the emergence of rational consciousness is being heralded. Myth prepares the formation of reflexivity. Not in vain, “the importance of myth is that it signalled the first attempts at symbolic models of the human universe, and the first attempts at coherent historical reconstruction of the past” [33].

Finally, theoretical culture presupposes the emergence of symbolic thinking. In a way, it corresponds to what Jaspers calls *the process of spiritualization (Versgeistigung)* in which, from the axial age onwards, man distances himself from his routines and can think about his place in the world and his own actions within the infinitude of existence. Through it, man submits his normal and normalized behaviour to analysis. And he does so from a linguistic plane of *indirect references* that are not rooted in local contexts [32]. He observes it as a foreign reality from an instance outside the consciousness of his time. This is possible because theoretical culture brings with it the externalization of memory. Mathematical symbolism, the artistic figuration of sculptures, paintings, monuments, and especially writing, make it possible to fix and detain in time a knowledge that man can return to and correct in public debate. In Donald’s words, “with the wide use of visual symbolism and ritual, along with more sophisticated systems of writing, there were new opportunities, inherent in the radical display and retrieval properties afforded by the improved media of external symbolization to review and define ideas, and to list and

record the reflections of individual thinkers for later public examination” [31, p. 68]. Corresponding to symbolic thought, *transcendence* emerges in the evolutionary course. In it, the concrete is reintegrated as the embryo of man’s capacity for abstraction and as the birth of *universal thought*. It is a ‘linguistic transcendence’ [34] in which it is possible to discuss the qualitative (mythical and mimetic) experiences inscribed at the basis of all religious and cultural ideologies. Man is an expressive being who needs to self-interpret [35], ‘to make explicit the implicit’ [36], in order to understand the meanings of his acts and purposes. As Matthias Jung says, “experiences, unlike experiences, are in a position to be made explicit insofar as meaning is sought” [34, p. 82]. Political or clerical power always unilaterally fixes ‘the official view’ of the semantic background of culture that allows it to reproduce its dominant position. Meanwhile, with the help of man’s symbolic capacity, other readings and interpretations of transcendence emerge that compete with the strictly official one. Transcendence generates a public combat between readings that compete for the symbolic centrality of society.

This interpretative capacity for transcendence does not seek to oppose the suprasensible ideality of the symbol and the sensible materiality of corporeal mimesis and the qualitative pregnancy of the myth. Rather, it is the opposite, i.e. to seek the integration of the different expressive dimensions that constitute human representation. In this, the symbol would be *the sublimation of the subliminal*. It would integrate into its universal moulds the material pregnancy of the concrete. Here, with the help of transcendence, society would address itself to the unexpressed dimensions of the qualitative motivations of the episodic, mimetic and mythical in order to gain distance from its place in the world and to decide accordingly. It is not for nothing that “we are beings of reflexive distance in which their realities always appear in the light of alternative possibilities and in the light of an anticipation in their relation to the world” [34, p. 87]. In this respect, our society observes with concern a number of cases today in which religions, cultures and nation-states coercively seek to reduce the semantic richness of their cultural narratives to a single, definitive one. This latest linguistic turn of transcendence, now free of the religious debts of the past, makes it possible to symbolically question this contemporary danger of simplifying the polysemy of symbolic (and religious) images to the strictly official and standardized one.

5. The reflexive reintegration of transcendence into the life-world

The emergence of a type of reflective transcendence to the academic and social debates of our time is not a minor event. It is an episode that can play a relevant role in the attainment of autonomy as an inalienable value of modernity in a current scenario given over to the literalness of facts and images. We will call this type of transcendence ‘semiotic’. As Castoriadis says, autonomy consists in giving oneself the norm as opposed to the heteronomy that living with norms that come from outside the human consciousness entails [37]. Its

linguistic dimension constitutes an inexcusable resource for groups and individuals to be able to reflexively analyse the meanings of their beliefs and submit them to the criteria of other audiences. Fears between different worldviews that degenerate into violent confrontations can only be controlled by trying to understand other positions in the world. Well, after the different episodes experienced by transcendence throughout human history, all humans, the *symbolic animals* who need to give a name to their experiences, come together in it. In it, concrete and spontaneous experience is no longer undervalued; on the contrary, it is analysed, purified and studied: it is integrated into the critical mechanisms of the symbol in order to semantically revitalize its social uses. It would be a possibility of an universal encounter that is reached by social actors willing to distance themselves from themselves and to elevate the motivational content of their beliefs to a concept. In this transcendence, the actors' critical reencounter with their semantic schemes and beliefs received as a cultural inheritance takes place. The reflection of the plane of transcendence would make possible the conversion of *destiny into decision*. Individuals and groups dialogue with their imaginary assumptions about the interpretation of the cultural heritage and decide on their eventual institutional adjustments on the basis of certain social changes that arise in the present. Issues such as feminism, sustainability of the planet, poverty and others force all worldviews to catch up. Again, these tensions between tradition and the present are part of the uncertain course of modern society.

Transcendence is not opposed to the secular. Moreover, the reflexive thinking of the symbol does not subjugate or belittle everyday reality. Quite the contrary, once the meanings of its spontaneous movements have been purified and articulated in public debate, they are returned to the uncertain flow of the everyday. In this way, semiotic transcendence periodically would activate a process of interpretation of the motivational foundations of all belief that never ceases to renew itself and to renew the semantic narrative of social uses. It is part of a secular era in which nothing and no one is superfluous. If in the ordinary world of social life beliefs rule in their spontaneous immediacy, in their unquestionable veracity, semiotic transcendence allows the social actor to deconstruct the naturalization of the group's basic assumptions and open them up to the hermeneutic analysis of their meanings. In this way, transcendence would offer an additional horizon of action to the existing one, another kind of relationship between the actor and his beliefs. This approach corresponds to what Matthias Jung calls, from an anthropological point of view, *the holism of difference* [32, p. 89-91], understood as an integral vision of human reality in which the dynamic integration between primordial images rooted in the social context and reflective deliberation with the intervention of a universal public governs. This deliberative process is a contingent event. It may or may not occur. Just as there was no teleological imperative to explain the ultimate triumph of the ideal of scientific progress in the course of modernity, so there is no teleological imperative for the activation of the reconstructive role of transcendence today. Its actualization is part of the human capacity for decision.

And, in many cases of our present, this decision is omitted and closed by the official version of an essentialist and timeless type prevailing in certain social models of our time.

In this journey towards transcendence, today's world hopes to elevate the implicit to the explicit and then to reintegrate it, now validated, from the universal plane into the everyday course of social life. Semiotic transcendence would not be a point of arrival. It would not be a new version of the end of history. It would be, on the contrary, a passing zone behind which to articulate the variety of pieces that make up the unity of the human being in each social model. Without linguistic resources (without symbols) that allow contemporary man to communicate and understand in terms of a universal understanding, a collegiate and shared response to the irreplaceable challenges of our time, which require the sum of individual wills, the exercise of cultural translation and the interpretation of planetary suffering, is unthinkable.

Transcendence is seen in this reflection from the *semiotic* approach. But it brings together the communication between worldviews of Jaspers [17] and the commitment to universality of Donald [31], Bellah [26], Jung [32], and others. It would allow societies and individuals to overflow the normative rigidities that emerge in every world picture over the course of time. In the face of cultural episodes in which a timeless, otherworldly vision of transcendence undermines the motivational dimensions of cultural life, transcendence now offers the interpretative opportunity in which actors submit their ideals and the powers that represent them to their own and others' reflections. It would be a product of cultural evolution. It would be to understand as a substantial part of human life in this world. And it would contribute to making it more intelligible and understandable to its inhabitants.

The symbolism of transcendence would correspond to a semiotic dimension in which primordial languages rooted in contexts are subjected to interpretative deliberation. Everything emerges from the spontaneous fibre of everyday life. Religious liturgies and figurative contents of cultures are open to semantic reworking by other worldviews, by a wider public. Here there is no room for local narratives rooted in a specific context, but rather neutral and impersonal languages that allow for a debate *with* the unknown *about* the unknown. No one has a privileged place from which to undertake the definitive interpretation.

In this sense, from this narrative of semiotic transcendence, a possible symbolic ecumenism that avoids the separation and systematic lack of communication between the religious sphere and the secular sphere present in modernity could be considered. This ecumenism could promote processes of reciprocal approximation between different symbolic sensibilities in the world. Not in vain, their semantic contents may vary, but they all share something previously pointed out by the axial tradition: the symbolic resource with which man distances himself from what is closest to him in order to understand the unknown: the otherness within the human community. This symbolic ecumenism is the opportunity to influence the shared elements of the human

community (unity) independently of the vital options of each individual or social group (difference). Its value lies in revealing the existing continuity in the diversity of the human race, and also in the respect that this universal implication of man offers to the different ways of being and expressing it.

6. Conclusions

Religions are not bodies fossilized in time. Despite the apparent immobility of its institutional structures, religion is spiritual effervescence and cultural projection. It is eternal movement. When we talk about religion (and politics, culture, and so on) we scientists also have the tendency to essentialize the reality under study because we forget that “we are talking about people, their actions, experiences and social interrelations and not about ‘factors’ or ‘systems’” [38, p. 264]. In this sense, despite the resistance to change of their narratives and institutions throughout history, those who decide their future (in terms of tradition or change) are social actors. Contingency therefore presides over the course of social and religious change, even if it is often masked in modernity under the idea of *historical necessity*. Therefore, actors, all actors, and not only specialists and researchers, are in a position to discuss the semantic bases of religion today.

As stated at the beginning of this work, the participation of (semiotic) transcendence as a substantive part of the secular age would mean that in this era each social actor lives his or her religious experience as *one vital option* among others. The religious and cultural pluralism of our time makes visible the great problem of the relationship between different semantic positions, whether religious or secular. It is a question for avoiding the predominance of relations of a specific type that undermine transcendence and its capacity to elaborate universal and inclusive schemes of thought, such as, for example, those of universal religions and, in a secular key, the sacralisation of the person and human rights [39]. In this case, an antagonism emerges in our societies that runs through everything: either a fratricidal struggle is imposed between religious visions tending towards exclusionary particularism and very jealous of their foundational narratives, or else spaces of transcendence come into play in which the semantic substratum of religions and cultures can be translated into terms of inclusive argumentation. This step is only possible through the reflexive reintegration of transcendence into the heart of the secular. As Joas says about the future of Christianity, the contemporary problem is not so much the uncertain future development of a given religion, but the simple fact of a world given over to self-affirming particularisms and devoid of bridges of communication and interreligious translation, i.e. transcendence [39, p. 185-198].

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