

## A semiotic notion of transcendence

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### *Abstract*

As the title indicates, this contribution explores a semiotic notion of transcendence. It is argued that experiences of transcendence are quite common and that notions of transcendence are highly significant since they provide a frame of reference that enables us to comprehend that which is immanent. The possibility of referring to that which transcends reality as such is contested, but all notions of a referent are elusive. On the basis of such observations various models of transcendence are identified before a semiotic notion is explored in more depth. It is suggested that the signified transcends the signifier by far and that some form of referent is necessary unless language is to become solipsistic. If so, there may be a need for clues to that which transcends reality as such.

### **Introduction**

Cornel du Toit has recognised the significance of the category of transcendence throughout his quite considerable oeuvre. In a number of recent essays, noting how different disciplines contribute to an understanding of transcendence (as one may expect from a scholar versed in science and religion discourse), he has explored notions such as horizontal transcendence and secular transcendence.<sup>1</sup> At the core of his understanding of transcendence is the notion of shifting frontiers. The experience of transcendence (which is always something immanent) is one of crossing existing frontiers, in the process shifting such frontiers, only to recognise that this creates new frontiers. Accordingly, crossing frontiers is a hallmark of human nature.

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<sup>1</sup> See Cornel W. du Toit, "Shifting frontiers of transcendence in theology, philosophy and science", *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 67(1), Art. #879, 10 pages. doi.10.4102/hts.v67i1.879. Du Toit also edited a volume entitled *Homo transcendentalis? Transcendence in science and religion: interdisciplinary perspectives* (Unisa: Research Institute for Theology and Religion, 2010). He contributed three essays to this volume, including the article cited above that appeared as the leading essay in this volume and one on "Self-transcendence and eros: the human condition between desire and the infinite" (pp. 77–102) and "Immanent transcendent angles on a post-reformation theology" (pp. 129–150).

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Du Toit also recognises that there are some frontiers that may never be crossed (like the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*). What may lie beyond such frontiers can never be known and may be called the “transcendent”, while the quite common experience of crossing frontiers may be described as one of transcendence (or, better, transcending). This should not be confused with a transcendental form of inquiry, especially associated with Immanuel Kant, where the very possibility of knowing anything (given that the *Ding-an-sich* is inaccessible), and not only the divine transcendent, is investigated.

In this contribution I will not engage directly with Du Toit’s own work on transcendence. Instead, I will focus on the category of the *transcendent* (as the elusive referent) and explore the possibilities of a semiotic notion of transcendence.<sup>2</sup>

#### **Transcendence and the transcendent**

Experiences of transcendence are far more common and unproblematic than is sometimes assumed in secular discourse. Whenever we recognise that something is faster, richer, stronger, more intelligent, more efficient, more exhilarating, more traumatic, more beautiful, or wiser, that constitutes some form of transcendence. Transcendence is also evident in human experiences of (erotic) desire (being dissatisfied with what you have), encountering the extreme (with an array of marketed opportunities), acceleration, immersion, being forgiven, the exceeding of one’s anticipation, being loved, finding empathy, solidarity and hospitality, and exuberant joy. Transcendence is best appreciated through experiences of crossing a particular frontier. Those men who have run 100 metres in fewer than ten seconds will realise far better than I would what it took for Usain Bolt to set his series of world records. Yet, like anyone else, I may also wonder whether it would ever be possible to run 100 metres flat in fewer than nine seconds without the help of a tailwind or performance-enhancing drugs.

One may add that it is only when one has reached a frontier and surmised what may lie beyond that frontier that one can appreciate what lies on this side of the frontier. Any act of gaining knowledge and insight constitutes an experience of transcendence and implies the transcendence of the known by the one who knows. On this basis one may even say that it requires some tentative notion of the infinite to grasp anything that is finite to identify its form against an encompassing background. This also applies to any recognition of the negation of something (recognised in apophatic theology

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<sup>2</sup> For a proposed typology and comprehensive discussion of contemporary notions of transcendence, see the recent volumes edited by Wessel Stoker and Willie van der Merwe, namely *Culture and transcendence: a typology of transcendence* (Louvain: Peeters, 2012) and *Looking beyond? Shifting views of transcendence in theology, art, and politics* (Amsterdam: Rudopi, 2012).

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and Hegel's dialectical philosophy alike). Any form of mimesis likewise constitutes a transcending of that which has been given. Interpretation not only involves a "fusion of horizons" (Gadamer), but also a breaking open of one's horizon. It is only when the boundary is reached that the journey to get there is understood. To develop a sense of being at home requires a journey of home-coming. The significance of the journey may become clear only by reaching the destination. The art of dying (*ars moriendi*), reaching that rather final frontier, is the key to the art of living, as many mystics have known, since death would otherwise always undermine the meaning of life. One's sense of identity, too, cannot be captured merely through introspection or self-reflection; it is best understood differentially by being confronted with the radical and irreducible otherness of the other (alterity). That, too, is a frontier experience – one that is addressed in a wide variety of recent hermeneutical (Ricoeur), phenomenological (Levinas), post-structuralist (Derrida) and feminist (Irigaray) philosophies.

On this basis one may argue that the possibility of experiences of transcendence should really not pose any obstacle in interdisciplinary dialogue as long as it is recognised that such experiences of transcendence form part of this world, of immanent reality. Such experiences will therefore register as brain functions and are accessible for studies in the cognitive and social sciences, in literature, art and religion alike. The more problematic question has to do with the possibility of knowing the transcendent referent. The question is not whether we can experience something that transcends us; we evidently can. The more significant question has to do with what it is that transcends us and whether there is any way of grasping that.

Of course the easy answer is that we cannot know that, simply because, by definition, it transcends us. Some may urge the rest of us on theological or quasi-religious grounds not even to seek to penetrate this Mystery. It has to be protected as sacred. Any speculation about the Ultimate Mystery may merely degrade and banalise an understanding of radical human finitude. Nevertheless, in almost all human cultures and in science, art and religion alike, people seem to rush in where the proverbial angels fear to tread. In my view the simple truth is that we can indeed talk about that which is transcendent since we can extrapolate this from previous experiences of transcendence, where we came to know something that we had not known before. On this basis we can surmise what may lie in the extension of the frontiers crossed previously. This is what Michael Polanyi would call tacit, implied but not expressed knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

If it is important to recognise that all experiences of transcendence are immanent, it is equally important to recognise that all notions of the

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<sup>3</sup> For a helpful discussion and appropriation of Polanyi's work in the context of Christian theology, see Lesslie Newbiggin, *The gospel in a pluralist society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), especially pp. 1–65.

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transcendent are socially constructed (and therefore also part of immanent reality). We really do not know what transcends us, but we can indeed construct it. Such experiences of the social construction of reality are equally common. This may be illustrated with the example of the University of the Western Cape where I am currently based:

Whenever the management, academic staff, students and their parents, workers, the press or outsiders use the word “UWC” (especially in the form “UWC is ...”), they necessarily make a construction of what this word means. We need such a construction whenever we wish to refer to the university. However, such a construction is incredibly presumptions. To understand what “UWC” actually means, one would need to know the whole history of turmoil at UWC, one needs to know all the staff, students (and their family situations), alumni and other role players, one needs to sit in on every class over a period of more than 50 years, read all the research outputs, follow all the sports activities, know all the buildings on campus and their history, listen to all the conversations on campus, have inside information on every financial transaction, read all emails directly or implicitly referring to UWC (I doubt that even God would want to do that), and have access to all the files on each computer on campus, be aware of community outreach projects and engage with conflicting perceptions of the university in the press and among outsiders.

It should be clear that whenever people use the abbreviation “UWC”, which is ordinarily done with the utmost ease, they do that on the basis of their own experiences, a minute fraction of what constitutes this “whole”. Indeed, it is quite remarkable that people can actually communicate with others in this way, when both conversation partners make their own constructions of what constitutes the whole on the basis of a recognisable common term (albeit pronounced differently and typed with distinct fonts). This is possible only on the basis of sufficiently overlapping connotations that are attached to the same term. Yet, the example also clarifies that any such constructions remain particular and unique. Given its history as a university, established on the basis of the South African race classification system in the 1960s, its initial control by academics selected by the Afrikaner Broederbond, the unrest on campus since 1976, its significant contribution to the struggle against apartheid, its leftist orientation in the 1980s, its role in conceptualising a new constitution during the transition to democracy, and its struggle to establish itself as a prominent university after 1994, this is hardly surprising. The perceptions of the university (for example of the quality of its academic programmes and research), especially among outsiders, are deeply conflicting. Such perceptions are quite evident whenever people speak or write about UWC, often already in their tone of voice. This is by no means trivial as applications from prospective students and the employment of graduates are deeply shaped by such perceptions.

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The same pattern would apply whenever we dare to use words such as Cape Town, South Africa, Africa, world, earth, cosmos or universe, which we seem to do with the utmost ease. Such general categories do not necessarily imply a form of distancing alienation, suggesting that we do not belong to the world and do not partake of its rhythms. It is our human way of situating ourselves, of using symbolic language for rapid communication, of answering life's ultimate questions. Evidently, we are hardwired to use symbols and this has given us an immense evolutionary advantage. We are a symbol-making and symbol-carrying species. We uncover our identity by discovering the otherness of the other. There is no need or possibility to abolish every alien other. We know the inside only by guessing about the outside. We discover limits only by reaching borders that we cannot cross and by surmising what lies beyond such frontiers. Admittedly, language about the whole and what transcends the whole can easily become a tool of domination and oppression, of colonial conquest and occupation, of building empires. This occurs especially when those who dare to speak of the whole and what transcends the whole does so with too much confidence. Instead of seeking to avoid such categories it may be better to acknowledge our totalising strategies than to pretend that we can avoid them. This is akin to the language of confession amidst a "cloud of 'unknowing'".

The social construction of aspects of reality is widely accepted, as far as I can see. In each case this implies the recognition and naming of some form of the transcendent, for example the three letters "UWC". The social construction of reality as a whole is probably as widely accepted in a variety of discourses, especially in sociology, cultural studies and religious studies. The concept "worldview" is typically used to describe the outcome of the social construction of reality. A worldview not only offers a view of the physical world (a cosmology); it also places the world within a comprehensive system of meaning that can account for the origin and destiny of the world, the forces that govern it, our human place in it and human questions about meaning, suffering and evil. The term worldview may also be used in the plural, worldviews, thus assuming the possibility of adopting some meta-position in order to compare different views of the world as such. Others may then recognise that meta-position as situated in another worldview that has not necessarily been self-evident to the one who offers the comparison. Either way, the most significant feature of a worldview is that one cannot view "the world". It is necessarily socially constructed from within a particular environmental embeddedness. While the referent, "world", is always elusive, it is clearly not meaningless to talk about such a transcendent referent.

Moreover, in the philosophy and sociology of religion the possibility of the social construction of Ultimate Reality is also recognised. Here the Transcendent may be spelled with a capital letter to refer to that which

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transcends or may transcend reality as a whole.<sup>4</sup> This is contested by those with naturalistic assumptions. As Klaus Nürnberger observes, “Naturalism translated the methodological restriction of the sciences into a metaphysical axiom. For naturalism, nature is all there is. There is nothing beyond. Transcendence beyond immanent reality is a concept without a referent.”<sup>5</sup> Although the possibility of a referent that transcends reality as such would be denied by some, the social construction of Ultimate Reality/Mystery itself forms part of immanent reality and could be widely acknowledged. The question is therefore, more precisely, whether it is possible to speak of and even know a referent (like a divine creator) that transcends reality as such (which is awkwardly termed vertical or radical transcendence by some). It is fair to say that there is a tendency towards the sublimation of such a notion of transcendence under the cultural conditions of modernity and postmodernity alike. Where such a form of transcendence is still recognised, it has lost its metaphysical moorings.<sup>6</sup>

My argument thus far is that *any notion of a referent is transcendent*. It is indeed possible to speak about a transcendent and to surmise what it may be that transcends us. I now wish to add that this matters, given the tendency to interpret something by framing it in terms of a larger whole (a *Gestalt*). Or, in the categories of the sociology of knowledge: the social construction of reality is shaped by the social construction of Ultimate Reality. It matters, therefore, how we talk about the transcendent (as the example of branding UWC illustrates). This too is widely recognised wherever the influence of religion, for better, but alas all too often also for worse, is discussed in public forums. If so, it may help us to explore the relative adequacy of different models of understanding the transcendent referent.

#### **Models of the transcendent**

There are different clues that one may follow to speak about that which may transcend reality as such. One model is of course to assume that there is simply nothing that transcends reality since that would almost by definition be understood as part of reality. Nevertheless, this denial of any possibility of the Transcendent does not seem to satisfy everyone. It crops up in religious notions of the divine, but also in questions asked by physicists and mystics alike: Where does the Big Bang come from? Why is there something

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<sup>4</sup> Klaus Nürnberger labels this “radical transcendence” and suggests that “God” is the name we use for the pivotal centre and transcendent referent of a system of meaning that covers the whole of reality as this is reflected in human consciousness. See Nürnberger’s *Regaining sanity for the earth* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster, 2011), p. 144 and also his essay “Immanent transcendence and radical transcendence: the pivotal issue between a Christian theology and a naturalistic metaphysic” in Du Toit (ed.): *Homo transcendentalis?*, pp. 103–127.

<sup>5</sup> Nürnberger, “Immanent transcendence and radical transcendence”, p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> See Van der Merwe in *Looking beyond?*, p. 508.

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and not nothing? Why is the universe so comprehensible? Why can reality be modeled mathematically? Why is it so incredibly large and so amazingly beautiful? Radical immanence is only possible if any notion of Ultimate Reality is denied in order to insist that only what is immanent is real.

Another model of transcendence widely explored in Western continental philosophy is that of self-transcendence (a tautology), usually understood in terms of the intentional agency, self-actualisation (or transascendance), innate desire or imagination of the human subject who is “hardwired” for such transcendence.<sup>7</sup> While this is helpful to account for the common experience of transcendence, on its own it would hardly suffice as an answer to the question “What is it that transcends reality as such?” Yes, we transcend ourselves, but at least such an understanding of the “Self” would need to be enlarged in a non-anthropocentric way to remain plausible – or otherwise it would become as solipsistic as radical forms of German idealism. Whether this implies the need for a “vertical” (Levinas) and not only a “horizontal” notion of transcendence (as Du Toit recommends) is contested.<sup>8</sup>

There are not that many other alternatives available. Consider the following:

Firstly, it is possible to seek answers to questions about the Ultimate Origin or Source or Cause of things. Even though that cannot be known, this has not prevented rampant speculation. Again not many answers are available and the answers that are available are not equally palatable: Is it a matter of deterministic law, random chance, inevitability (the three basic options explored by physicists), intelligent design or a wicked complot (assuming some intentional agency)? Or does an interplay between these offer a better solution? If the role of some deity could be entertained I would prefer one who did not first develop a blueprint, but one who would allow for the same mix that a couple’s decision to engage in sexual intercourse to have a baby would entail: a vague plan, allowing some chance followed by a fixed pattern for the development of the foetus and then an interplay between all of the above. A blueprint to determine the child’s IQ, musical ability, name,

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<sup>7</sup> See Du Toit, “Self-transcendence and Eros” (2010).

<sup>8</sup> See Wessel Stoker, *Is geloven redelijk?* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2004), p. 110f. See also the typology of notions of transcendence developed by Stoker in which he distinguishes between radical transcendence, immanent transcendence, radical immanence and transcendence as alterity. See Stoker, “Culture and Transcendence: A Typology” in *Culture and Transcendence*, p. 5-26. I am not following this proposed typology (discussing the possibility of “radical” transcendence), or the contrasts between horizontal and vertical transcendence (as Du Toit suggests), or radical and immanent transcendence (as Nürnberger suggests) here. Instead, my aim is to show how that experiences of transcendence are indeed very common, but that the referent of that which transcends us always remains elusive – whether in the form of knowledge of reality, knowledge of the other or of the world as such. This need not be contested. What is contested is whether it is meaningful to speak of a referent that transcends the whole of reality (i.e., Ultimate Reality).

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marriage partner, career, date of death and so forth from the outset would be diabolic.

Secondly, what transcends reality as such may be understood in terms of the Ultimate Destiny of history. This allows for ways in which the future seems to outweigh the present in ordinary human experience. If today is bad, tomorrow may be better. The question may be asked with narrower or wider frames of reference to include the meaning of my life and my career, the ubiquitous question about what will happen to me when I die, the destiny of institutions and corporations, of language and culture, of life on this planet and of the universe itself. Again, ultimately there seems to be very few options available. The scenarios for the universe in the far future suggest only two options and both are rather unpalatable: being “fried” or being “frozen”.

Thirdly, one may seek to capture the elusive centre of something. This is a question that is raised when an individual subject, family, organisation or government seeks to describe its own identity. This cannot be done – as the critique of essentialism clearly suggests – but nevertheless has to be done precisely in order to distinguish the one from the other. The quest for identity, for the elusive centre of subjectivity,<sup>9</sup> can also be associated with larger wholes. This is evident, for example, when questions about the meaning of this very moment, the meaning of life, the meaning of history and the meaning of the universe are raised. This is not so much a question about origins and destinies but about the elusive present. It may be that there is no such meaning, that the universe is pointless, but like the infamous comment by Stephen Weinberg, most of us would tend to regret having dared to say something like that.

Fourthly, attempts to surmise what may transcend reality as such could focus on what constitutes “the whole”. If one knows something partially one may wonder what the whole looks like. In what way is the whole bigger than the sum of its parts? In the well-known parable of the blind men and the elephant the men may eventually feel their way around to recognise the elephant as a whole. Yet such a holistic approach is rather more elusive and presumptuous than is often admitted. The blind men may not be able to see the whole elephant, but no one else can do that either. What constitutes the whole cannot be captured – as the example of UWC above illustrates – since we know only tiny fragments of that whole. Yet we seem perfectly able to talk about that whole. Physicists may hope to be able to come up eventually with a “theory of everything” and thus “to know the mind of God”, but that would never mean that they would know everything.

The difficulties around the question “What constitutes the whole?” are radicalised in the life sciences and the social sciences, given the need to recognise levels of complexity and emergence. Here the term “dimensions”

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<sup>9</sup> See Du Toit, “Self-transcendence and eros”, p. 92f.



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may be used as a metaphor to describe such levels of complexity. Following the work of George Ellis, one may speak of a hierarchy of increasing complexity where social systems such as languages, the economy and forms of governance are recognised to be part of the ever more elusive whole of reality. In more traditional categories the need to distinguish between the visible and the invisible has been recognised in Greek philosophy, in the biblical texts, in Patristic Christianity and in traditional African culture alike. Not everything can be seen. The connections between visible things require deeper insight. Love may be evident and even palpably “in the air tonight”, but it cannot be seen. One needs to “see”, but not with one’s eyes only. Multiple levels of “seeing” are required, namely seeing and appreciating forms at the surface level, perceiving (seeing by filling in some missing details), seeing connections between events, developing deeper insight and having some foresight. Who, then, can fathom what constitutes the whole, not to mention what transcends that whole in space, time and complexity? Yet we seem perfectly able to talk about that Transcendent, and how that is socially constructed affects how everything else is done.

A fifth model to speak about that which transcends reality as such is born from the tension between seeing what something is and sensing what it should be. This is witnessed in the “ethical turn” to transcendence as alterity. In English this ambiguity is inscribed in the concept “vision”. It captures what is visible, seeing that in a wider perspective and an attractive moral vision for the future. Likewise, there may well be tension because reality is seen from different perspectives. There is a world of difference between seeing a piece of land as nothing but a rubbish dump and seeing it as God’s own garden; between seeing someone as a hardened gangster and seeing him as a child loved by his parents. In the inimitable words of Desmond Tutu:

People really are wonderful. This does not mean that people cannot be awful and do real evil. They can. Yet as you begin to see with the eyes of God, you start to realize that people’s anger and hatred and cruelty come from their own pain and suffering. As we begin to see their words and behaviour as simply the acting out of their suffering, we can have compassion for them.<sup>10</sup>

It is possible to say that “a different world is possible”, to speak prophetically about a society that has never been. This ability to see what others do not see distinguishes persons such as Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King (jr), Mother Theresa and Nelson Mandela. In fact, they are rightly famous for

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<sup>10</sup> Desmond M. Tutu, *God has a dream: a vision of hope for our time* (New York: Double Day, 2005, 97).

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that; their faces are instantly recognised by UWC first-year Ethics students that was asked to identify them.

Questions about ultimate meaning offer another route for recognising transcendence: Why is there something? Why can reality be modelled mathematically? Why is it comprehensible? What is the purpose of life? Where do we as humans belong and where can we find a home? Are we damned by the guilt of the past, or are we ultimately forgiven sinners free to create a new future? What convictions can guide us in a world that is far too complex to establish the truth of everything we may come across?

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I have argued above that the possibility of speaking about experiences of transcendence and the transcendent referent is more widely recognised than is sometimes admitted. It is not the domain of religion or theology alone. It should be noted that reference to any divine Transcendent would be appropriate, but not necessary, in order to recognise the legitimacy of speaking about the transcendent. I have outlined various models of speaking about the transcendent and suggested that the way in which this is done is by no means trivial. Even though the transcendent is necessarily elusive (because it transcends us), it influences how we think, speak and act, how we form habits and cultures, how we shape civilisations. In what follows below I will identify and describe one further model of speaking about transcendence, namely a semiotic notion of the transcendent.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the human species is its ability to use signs to refer to something that is not immediately present. *Homo sapiens*, it is often said, is a symbol-carrying species. This ability to communicate through the use of symbols has given us an evolutionary advantage over other primates and hominids. One may even argue that the distinctiveness of human existence lies here: that we as a symbol-carrying species participate in a journey of discovery in which we understand ourselves only in terms of that which, we surmise, lies beyond ourselves.

Signs may carry a rich set of connotations (the so-called signified) that are not fully captured by the material signifier, but which the signifier connotes. Signs do not necessarily participate in that which they signify. Thus a road sign “Cape Town 1000 km” (with only 14 characters) outside Bloemfontein refers to Cape Town – including connotations with Table Mountain, Cape Point, Robben Island, the ocean and peninsula, District Six, the Cape Flats, the surrounding vineyards, numerous buildings, neighbourhoods, inhabitants, family members and friends living there, history, politics, arts and sports that are attached to that sign. However, the sign itself is not part of Cape Town.

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By contrast, symbols do participate in that which they symbolise. The South African flag, for example, represents everything that being a South African supporter entails at a major sports event, even if the flag is hoisted on foreign soil. Symbols can carry multiple layers of meaning. In the case of the flag it captures something of the geology, geography, topography and demography of the nation state (which is admittedly contested), but also something of its social fabric, its many languages, cultures and contested histories. It also carries with it the values and visions embedded in the current South African constitution, which are immediately recognised, emotionally and otherwise, when contrasted with the previous South African flag.

Metaphors are also signs that are employed to highlight (or create) connotations by seeing something in the light of something else. Some philosophers would argue that all forms of language are rooted in metaphors. They invite us to see the world “as if” (Sallie McFague). Through human imagination signs may also refer to a vision for the future, to a society that does not exist yet, but which may come about through dreaming that “a different world is possible”. Indeed, this role of the imagination is crucial in planning for the future, individually and collectively. Consider signs that refer to a house to be built, a degree to be obtained, a company to be established or a policy to be introduced. In each case the meaning of the sign (the signified) transcends the materiality of the sign exponentially, but the material signifier is the only access that we have to such meaning.

In the classic structuralism of De Saussure the relation between a signifier and the signified is understood as being defined differentially. In post-structuralist theories this relation became destabilised in terms of the play of signifiers that Derrida famously described with the term *différance*. He speaks of an ongoing trace where signs are in constant movement and vanishes like footprints in the sand without an indication of an original or “true” meaning. However, if language is indeed discourse (Ricoeur), and thus communication, some notion of the signified would need to be maintained.<sup>11</sup> The signified clearly includes a set of connotations attached to a signifier that is socially constructed, but include allusions to “the world” out there. What about the possibility of a referent, however? Does a sign refer to something outside itself? This has been a long-standing problem in semiotic and hermeneutical theories, also in biblical exegesis.<sup>12</sup> It may be true that our only access to the world is mediated through language (a set of signifiers). However, to say that there is nothing outside language seems counter-intuitive, especially if cosmic and evolutionary history is factored in. Can language

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<sup>11</sup> This is Ricoeur’s famous argument in *Interpretation theory: discourse and the surplus of meaning* (Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1976). Language is in the first place a form of communicative discourse, not only a system of signs.

<sup>12</sup> See Bernard C. Lategan and Willem S. Vorster, *Text and reality: aspects of reference in biblical texts* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

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enable us to refer to that which presumably exists outside of language? This is as elusive as the Kantian *Ding-an-sich*. Short of solipsism it seems to make sense to speak about such a referent, but it is not something that can be known. The referent (also the world of possibilities entertained in fiction) is socially constructed, but that does not and cannot mean that the world, including the physical universe, exists purely because it is constructed by us. The paradox is that we human beings are, but at the same time cannot be, our own makers.

The least we can say is that a sign (or a set of signifiers) can provide us with some pointers to both a possible world of connotations (the signified) and even to the elusive referent. Again, the connotations exceed the signifier exponentially so that this is a particularly powerful form of transcendence. With three simple letters we can refer to every connotation that may be attached to “UWC” and everything that UWC stands for. The referent transcends the signifier by far, to put it mildly. This is extended even further by the possibility of split references, for example through the use of metaphors, so that references can function simultaneously at multiple levels.

Given such a semiotic notion of transcendence one may also employ the word “transparence” (derived from Teilhard de Chardin<sup>13</sup>) to overcome the sometimes arid tension between immanence and transcendence. The symbol opens up new horizons of meaning if one would dare to look through the “window” of such symbols. The physicality and “literality” of the sign have to be taken seriously, but only in order to be guided by the sign to the signified and the referent. It would be a shame to confuse the sign, “Cape Town 1000 km” (or the signpost when entering the city) with the city of Cape Town itself.

### **Some theological considerations**

In a secularised context God-talk has often been discredited as escapist because a particular model of transcendence has become outdated. This is the cosmological understanding of transcendence associated with a more or less flat earth, with the heavenly firmament above and the underworld below. Although the Bible was largely written in the frame of reference provided by such an understanding of the world, such a spatial model of transcendence is no longer tenable following the work of Copernicus, Galileo, Newton, Einstein and various more recent physicists. Of course the biblical authors were not as naïve as is sometimes assumed. They recognised the distinction between the visible and the invisible as readily as we might speak about complexity. They probably used the term “heaven” anagogically as the most

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<sup>13</sup> See Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Divine Milieu* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1960), pp. 130–131.

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readily available clue for what transcends us. This clue is still instantly recognised by children and astrophysicists alike when they gaze in wonder at the stars on a clear night in the vast Karoo. To look “up” is to shrink in size.

On the basis of a semiotic notion of transcendence one may argue that almost anything could be or become a locus where some form of transcendence could be recognised and traced. In each case such an awareness of transcendence evokes notions of the transcendent. Yet, in each case our metaphors, images, concepts and models of the transcendent cannot be equated with what is transcendent. Such concepts necessarily remain part of the world in which we live. This applies especially, but not only, to the role of symbols. What is transcendent is necessarily elusive – as philosophic reflection on the (im)possibility of identifying the referent of a sign illustrates.

John Calvin recognised the role played by symbols and developed a highly sophisticated (at least for this time) understanding of signification. He employed that in his views on exegesis, on the sacraments, on the incarnation and so forth. He recognised the importance of the materiality of signs and therefore emphasised the role played by the human senses. His emphasis on the ear as the vehicle through which God’s Word may be heard is well known, but he equally emphasised visual metaphors (Scripture as spectacles, the role of mirrors, illumination by a flash of lightning and the theatre of God’s glory) and did not exclude the other senses (smell, taste, feeling and even intuition).<sup>14</sup> Symbols are indeed palpable, tangible and accessible to human experience. They are material, bodily and earthly, perhaps also monetary.

Calvin recognised that symbols are more than signs since they participate in that which they symbolise. He understood that an image will remain dead without the word. However, the word does not necessarily come first, only to be illustrated by the image. As Randall Zachman points out, the word elucidates and accompanies the image in all its materiality and palpability. The word guides us to sense the direction in which the sign is pointing in order to gather the fuller meaning of the symbol.<sup>15</sup> The word is not concretised by the sacrament. The word is spoken *at the table* primarily to build the fellowship of the household, but also to reveal and thus to heal the brokenness, to identify Judas the traitor more clearly, to reveal our consumerist idolatries and dependencies in the act of consuming the bread and the wine.

Following in the footsteps of Calvin, two crucial aspects have to be emphasised. These may be illustrated with the example of biblical exegesis

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<sup>14</sup> See the study by Cornelis van der Kooi, *Als in een Spiegel: God Kennen volgens Calvin en Barth* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 2002).

<sup>15</sup> See the study by Randall Zachman, *Image and Word in the Theology of John Calvin* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

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(or of the sacraments). On the one hand: In reading the biblical texts it is important not to reduce the meaning of the text to the letters of the text. It is necessary to capture the “spirit” of the text, that is, what it communicates and conveys, what it reveals to us about God, its meaning for us today (the city of Cape Town entails far more than the signpost outside Bloemfontein). On the other hand: We can only have access to the spirit of the text through the “letter”, that is, by engaging in the hard work of detailed, disciplined and, where required, scientific exegesis (since we cannot know everything that Cape Town stands for, only small fragments of it). Any short cut to the spiritual meaning, for example through the use of allegories or direct illumination, therefore ought to be avoided. Perhaps what is needed here is a pneumatological approach to the meaning of symbols that can detect the inhabitation of the Spirit both in the materiality of a symbol and in the fullness of what it symbolises. It is the Spirit who installs in such symbols an ability to signify God.

This is of crucial significance for entertaining the question “Who is God?” We do not have any direct access to God. Any knowledge of God cannot come straight from “above”, but can only come from below, from within the world in which we live, from that which is material, bodily and earthly. Also, if we claim that such knowledge was revealed by God, we would only know that through our human experience and not in any direct way. Any claim of divine intervention, of the occurrence of “miracles” could only be recognised as such from within our world. Again, we do not have any direct access to God. For anyone to claim that we do would be to reduce God to something in our world. It would be to create our own idols, to read our own views into symbols or to claim authority for private, so-called immediate illumination. To prevent and discipline such claims we have to recognise the path through which knowledge of God may be discerned, namely through the use of symbols. Again, the meaning of the symbol can only be discerned on the basis of the materiality of the symbol – also because the symbol itself participates in that which it symbolises.

At the same time, the meaning of the symbols transcends its materiality by far. When we employ metaphors for God (rock, anchor, wind, hen or father) we have to recognise that we cannot grasp such connotations fully. We cannot capture or contain God through the metaphors and symbols we employ. If we do, we would only create idols. Every metaphor illuminates some aspects that may have remained hidden previously. However, every metaphor also remains limited. God may in some ways be like a rock or a father, but there are even more ways in which God is not like a rock or a human father. This requires a sense of theological humility and a recognition that we are at best nothing more than witnesses to God’s elusive presence in our midst. In speaking about God (or to God), we need to recognise that our language would always remain inadequate to express the inexpressible, but

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that we could and should search for relative adequacy. It matters! To use an analogy: There is no perfect way to declare one's love, but it does matter how this is done. *It can be messed up disastrously.*

On this basis one may recognise numerous manifestations of God's presence in our world. Almost everything may function as a symbol. In the well-known words of the non-Christian poet Rabindranath Tagore, "I asked the tree, speak to me about God, and it blossomed." One may find traces of the Holy Spirit at work in the world almost anywhere, indeed everywhere, also in the history of the human species, in other religious traditions, in non-human nature and in the story of the universe itself. However, these traces are not always equally clear. In terms of a famous image that Calvin used, these traces may provide a flash of lightning during the dark of night, but the moment of light is not enough to assist one in finding the way home, if one is hopelessly lost in a stormy night. Or, to use another image, the detective on the crime scene may find numerous traces, perhaps too many to follow up, but would need to recognise the most significant traces as potential clues and follow those leads further in order to identify the culprit. Only on this basis may the significance of several less evident clues be recognised retrospectively and employed to build up a strong case.

Which clues will help us to fathom the mystery? According to the Christian confession, the triune God is the deepest secret, the Mystery, the *Geheimnis* of the world. Christians find the best available clue to this Ultimate Mystery in the person and work of Jesus Christ and through the transformative presence of the Holy Spirit. This witness suggests that in Jesus Christ one may find a far clearer picture, the best available clue, of the identity and character of this God. Indeed, here one may find a manifestation of God's presence among human beings. In fact, one may declare doxologically that he is indeed truly God (*vere Deus*), although it should be noted that the inverse, that God is Jesus, is typically not claimed (although Thomas Altizer is a notable exception). In this way the Christian confession offers a specifically Christian interpretation of the world (of nature and of life) in conversation with other disciplines and perspectives. This witness remains nothing more than a clue to help us fathom a mystery that cannot be fathomed. Yet, at least for some of us, it remains the best available clue, one that offers us some comfort in matters of life and death.

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