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Emotions, Theology and Transcendence

Ladislav Kvasz

Abstract

There are different possibilities for understanding the relation between theology and emotions. In *The Nature of Doctrine* Georg Lindbeck identified three approaches to religious doctrines: the *propositional*, the *expressive*, and the *linguistic*. In the past doctrines were understood as propositions about objective reality; symbolic expressions of religious experience; or rules for religious discourse. In (Kvasz 2008) I suggested a further function, the *function of transcendence*, characterized as *the ability to detach human beings from immersion in their environment, to create a distance from it and thus to constitute humans as conscious beings*. In the present paper I argue that the function of transcendence is constitutive for emotions as conscious mental 'objects'. I distinguish emotions as mental experiences (by means of which we react to the external world), from emotions as 'objects' constituted in our consciousness (which we can put in opposition to external emotional experience, as *hope* against despair, *joy* against suffering, and other similar emotions constituted by religions practice). In the paper I defend the view that the main role of religion was this function of transcendence, by means of which *emotions* were constituted as 'objects' of our consciousness.

Keywords

Lindbeck, emotions, transcendence, consciousness, theology.

George Lindbeck in *The Nature of Doctrine* (Lindbeck 1984) described three approaches to religious doctrines: *the propositional approach* that regards religious doctrines as true propositions about objective reality, *the linguistic approach* that interprets doctrines not as propositions about the world, but rather as rules for religious discourse, and *the expressive approach* that is characteristic of theological currents in the nineteenth century, in which doctrines were viewed as symbolic expressions of an internal experience with the divine.

In most passages Lindbeck compares his post-liberal theology to a natural language and he suggests that religious doctrines be interpreted as rules governing the grammar of religious discourse. This can be illustrated by passages such as: *"... a religious system is more like a natural language than a formally organized set of explicit statements, and ... the right use of this lan-*

guage, unlike a mathematical one, cannot be detached from a particular way of behaving" (Lindbeck 1984, p. 64). Here religious doctrines are interpreted as rules, i.e. as something that forms our life rather than saying something about the world. Nevertheless, besides such passages we can find in Lindbeck also something different. First he quotes Sellars, according to whom *"the acquisition of a language is a jump which was the coming into being of man", and then he writes: "The Christian theological application of this view is that just as an individual becomes human by learning a language, so he or she begins to become a new creature through hearing and interiorizing the language that speaks of Christ"* (Lindbeck 1984, p. 62). If we put this last quotation among the other quotations, it may seem that they all speak about the same thing – about language as a system of interpretive schemes, rules of grammar, or second-order assertions. But *the coming into being of man* cannot be described using interpretative schemes or rules of grammar. When a child *jumps to consciousness*, this undoubtedly happens by help of language. The parents speak to the child in more or less articulated ways. But the idea that the use of interpretive schemes or rules of grammar has the power to initiate this jump is mistaken. I am not denying that by the birth of consciousness language plays a fundamental role. But this is not language understood as a system of interpretive schemes and rules of grammar.

All three approaches to doctrine described by Lindbeck are related to language. To enable us to pronounce *propositions* about the world is one of the functions of language, as is its capacity to offer us metaphors and parables for symbolic *expression* of our experience. Therefore not only the linguistic approach, but the whole classification is based on the analysis of different functions of language. We can interpret his classification as a *classification of the different levels of the language of theology*. The language of theology has several levels. We can discriminate a *propositional* level, a *normative* level (the level of the linguistic approach) and a *symbolic* level (on which the expressive approach is based). It is language that enables us to assert something about the world, to discuss the norms of our behavior, and to express our experience in a symbolic way.

But besides the three levels that form the basis of Lindbeck's classification, language has a fourth level – the ability to detach humans from immersion in their environment, to create a distance from it and to constitute people

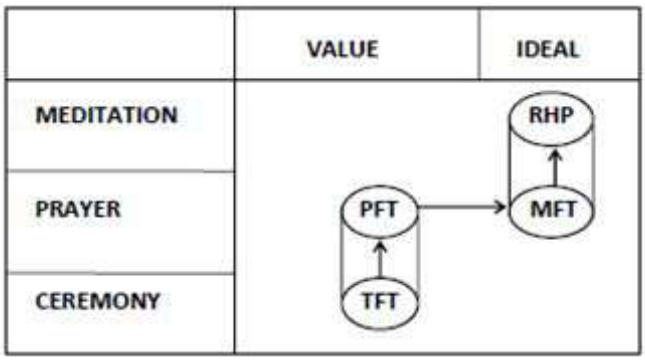
as conscious beings. This function of language I suggest calling the *function of transcendence*. When parents speak to their small infant, they are using this magical power of language that enables them to engage the attention of the child and liberate it from captivity in its momentary sensory perceptions. But this ability to engage and liberate, this ability to *transcend* the given, is bound neither on the propositional layer of language (the parents can address the infant with true as well as false propositions; it does not understand them anyway), nor to the normative layer (it does not matter whether they follow the rules of grammar or violate them) or the symbolic layer (they can use a language rich with metaphors or read the manual of a vacuum cleaner).

The function of transcendence is remarkable in that, after some time, it gets lost. The propositional aspect of language is the most common; normally we use language to say something. Similarly the normative aspect is always present even though it is not always visible; most often we simply follow the rules and do not question them. The symbolic aspect of language is even less visible. Combinations of words that convey strong and expressive metaphors tend to lose their power when we use them often. Nevertheless, the symbolic layer of language is still preserved in poetry. In contrast to all this, the function of transcendence is lost after the consciousness of the child is stabilized. Some encounter transcendence in exceptional mystical experiences. But ordinary life is ordinary precisely because the function of transcendence is lacking.

In this paper I defend the view that the main role of religion is this function of transcendence, by means of which the first *emotions*, the first *representations*, the first *values* and the first *ideals* were constituted as 'objects' of our consciousness. By this I mean *emotions* that can be in conflict with the external situation; *representations* that do not represent anything real; *values* that are in conflict with our natural tendencies; *ideals* that bring us into conflict with the world (i.e. religious emotions, religious representations, religious values, and religious ideals). I can now formulate a hypothesis according to which the main purpose of religion is *neither its propositional function* (to offer us a description of God), *nor its linguistic function* (to provide us with a framework for speaking about the things of ultimate concern), *nor its expressive function* (to offer symbols for the expression of the internal

experience with the divine). The main function of religion is to maintain continuity with the moment when we came into being as conscious beings. Religious rites, rituals, and ceremonies are symbolic recapitulations of this event, of the event of our coming into being. If we approach the existing forms of religion from this perspective and interpret them as forms of transcendence, there are two aspects to distinguish: first, the *type of transcending activity* (e.g. *ceremony*, or *prayer*) by means of which the transcendence is effected; and second, the *character of the transcendent object* (e.g. *value*, or *ideal*), which is introduced into consciousness. In addition to the function of transcendence, each religion fulfils a number of other functions. To avoid misunderstanding, I shall not speak of religions but of their *forms of transcendence*. Instead of a particular religion, such as *monotheism* or *polytheism*, I shall speak about the *monotheistic form of transcendence* (MFT) or the *polytheistic form of transcendence* (PFT).

There is another source of misunderstanding: the existing religions are complex systems using simultaneously different forms of transcendence. Thus monotheistic religions often preserve *polytheistic forms of transcendence* (bound to angels or saints). Under the form of transcendence of a religion (e.g. *monotheism*, or *polytheism*) I do not understand all activities adopted by practitioners of that religion. I introduce the 'form of transcendence' in a theoretical way in the following scheme:



The scheme expresses for each of the four basic forms of transcendence the *transcending activity* (ceremony, prayer, meditation) and the *transcendent object* that is becoming part of consciousness. Therefore the particular forms

of the transcendence could be defined as the combination of the particular activity and the particular object.

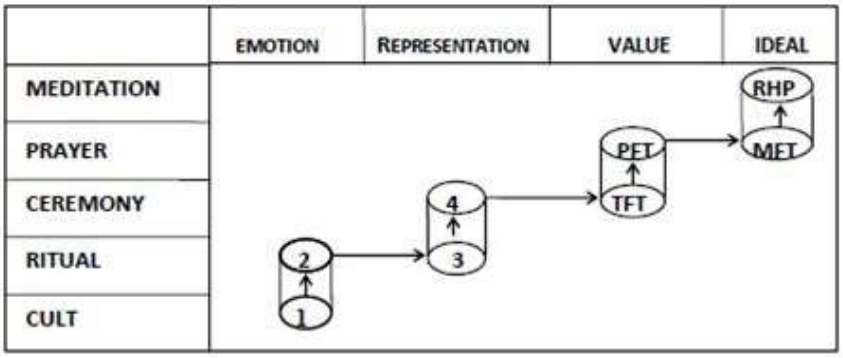
In the case of the *Tribal Form of Transcendence* (TFT) the transcending activity has the form of ceremonies, and the transcendent object is a value. The transition to the *Polytheistic Form of Transcendence* consists in the association of the transcendent reality with subjectivity and the emergence of prayers. The table indicates that the transition from the tribal to the polytheistic form of transcendence is smooth. In the tribal form of transcendence spirits start to emerge, to whom the members of the community turn with various pleas, from which prayer develops. On the other hand, in polytheism there are various ceremonies, which are remnants of the tribal form of transcendence. They are only re-interpreted and adapted to the needs of the new form of transcendence. Thus all liturgical ceremonies represent activities belonging to the tribal form of transcendence – they turn to the transcendent by means of performance, not dialogue.

The transition from the polytheistic to the *Monotheistic Form of Transcendence* consists in the change of the character of the transcendent object. An ideal becomes the content of transcendence instead of a value. For a further form of transcendence, which follows monotheism and occurs in Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and several other religions I propose to create an independent category, called *Religion of the Highest Principle* (RHP). Its birth consists in the transition from prayer to meditation.

Now I shall return to the thesis that *religion is a gate through which the first mental objects of each particular type (i.e. first values, first ideals, etc.) enter the mind.* This means that I regard religion as the place where the human mind is constituted. A feeling of transcendence is only how we subjectively experience the process of this self-constitution. It is the particular mental object of the new type, which is transcendent to the mind. As this new object is gradually integrated in the mind and becomes an ordinary part of mental life, the feeling of transcendence, with which this new object was originally connected, disappears. Thus it was religion, with its forms of transcendence, through which the objects of our mental life were constituted and stabilized in our consciousness. At first a *static value* was introduced in the *tribal form of transcendence.* Then, the static value was turned into a *dynamic value* system in the *polytheistic form of transcendence.* Then a *static ideal* emerged in

the *monotheistic form of transcendence*. Finally the static ideal was turned into a *dynamic system of ideals* within the *form of the transcendence of the religion of the highest principle*.

If we accept the thesis that *it is religion through which our mental life was constituted*, there emerges an important consequence. Our mental life contains, in addition to values and ideals, also representations and emotions. If we take seriously the constitutional role of religion for the consciousness, we must postulate further forms of transcendence, through which emotions and representations have been constituted in the mind. We come to the following scheme:



I do not restrict the concept of *representation* only to *visual images*, although this is perhaps the most common type of representation. Under "representation" I mean all that we are able to single out and isolate in our imagination. Thus there are *motor images, tactile images, acoustic images, smelling images*, etc. Everybody can imagine more or less clearly the smell of violets, a friend's voice, or motion of one's hand. A representation is everything we are able to separate from ourselves, place mentally in front of us, and analyse. In contrast, an *emotion* is something from which we are not distanced. It is something we find ourselves inside.

The *emotion, representation, value* and *ideal* are four types of transcendent objects, which can be the content of a religious experience. Each of these four types exists in two kinds: first in a *static kind*, and then in a *dynamic kind*. The notions cult, ritual, ceremony, prayer, and meditation represent the ways of contact with the transcendent. Since these concepts are commonly

used in the description of religious practices, and in order to avoid any misunderstanding, I shall try to define their meaning as I use them. My use is a narrowing of the common meaning of these terms consisting in the fact that *the particular activity is always defined merely in relation to the corresponding kind of transcendent object.* That means that, for example, in contrast to its common use, prayer is not regarded as a sort of ceremony because the ceremony is bound to a dynamic image or a static value, whereas prayer is bound to a dynamic value or a static ideal. One can even say that ceremony allowed transition from the dynamic image to the static value, and prayer enabled the transition from the dynamic value to the static ideal.

It should be underlined that the first four forms of transcendence that I introduce as 1, 2, 3, 4 in the table, have not been documented and only their residues in higher types of religion can be found. If these four hypothetical forms of transcendence could be at least indirectly documented by empirical material, it would mean the confirmation of the central thesis of this essay. According to this thesis all *basic objects of human consciousness*, that is emotions, representations, values and ideals were constituted by religion, being gradually interiorized, detached from religious activities, and finally becoming autonomous components of our inner world. The first four forms of transcendence (1, 2, 3, 4) represent the earliest forms of religion and of the spiritual life of humans. I shall try to give a hypothetical outline of how they could have functioned.

Form of transcendence 1 represents in principle the separation of humans from nature, when humans became able to induce and stabilize a certain emotional state, which was independent of the actual state induced by their environment. Transition from form 1 to *form of transcendence 2* is, as all transitions from the static to the dynamic kind of the particular object, continuous and consists in a gradual transformation of the cult into a ritual. The ritual, probably having the form of a dance, makes it possible to modulate the emotional state, by varying the rhythm and intensity. Different sequences of emotional states are experienced repeatedly; they become stabilized, and thanks to them humans become able to emotionally distance themselves from their environment (thus feel *secure* in situations where all other animals perceive *anxiety*) and thanks to this stable internal emotional state they became able to differentiate their environment.

It seems that a crucial discovery takes place in the transition from form 2 to *form of transcendence 3*: the discovery of fire. The discovery of fire consists in the separation of the image of fire from the emotional state of animal fear evoked by fire in all wild animals, and thus with all probability also in our ancestors. This separation of the image of fire from the emotional state of fear, normally induced, was enabled by the fact that thanks to the ritual, humans acquired the ability to induce and maintain an autonomous emotional state and not to succumb to the pressure of the emotional state induced by the environment. The original function of ritual was to stabilize the emotional state. Gradually however, the ritual started to be used not only to stabilize the emotional state, but to open up the transcendence of a new type with a focus on representations.

The transition from form 3 to *form of transcendence 4* consists in a gradual change of the ritual into ceremony. The ceremony differs from a ritual by its focus on something symbolic. A ceremony uses the fact that in stage 3 the ritual-induced static representations and the ceremony start with a dynamization of these representations. It turns from one representation to another (in a similar way as a ritual was able to turn from one emotional state to another by the change of the rhythm and intensity). In this way sequences of representations were introduced. We usually characterize an activity through the aim which it serves, that is by the value it brings. This way of grasping activities is, however, relatively late. I believe that activity was originally mentally grasped as a sequence of motor images, as a dynamic motor shape, similar to when a piano player has been practising a composition and his hands play it themselves. The activity is fixed as a sequence of motions. After each motion, another motion is automatically associated. It is just the ability to follow such a thread that characterises the ability to use representations as dynamic mental qualities. This dynamic representation was the original content of a ceremony. The ceremony brought something new in comparison with the ritual: a new whole made up of single motions.

The transition from form of transcendence 4 to the tribal form of transcendence, which is the first form ethnographically and historically documented, consists again in separation, now in the separation of the activities from their goal. As the ceremony stabilizes the sequence of operations that form the particular complex activity by frequent repetition, the result of the

activity begins to be called to mind at the very beginning of the activity itself, or even before it is started. In this way the result is mentally separated from the sequence of operations and becomes a value. This enables people to conform the activity to this value, i.e. to act purposefully. The birth of the purposeful action is an important step forward in the process of human emancipation. This shift is manifested by the birth of the magic force with which the ceremony is associated.

I do not consider it useful to describe the further development of religion after reaching the first empirically supported stage. There is enough literature available and there are experts whose views would be much more relevant than mine. I only wish to present a view on religion that could contribute to our understanding of this fascinating phenomenon.

According to this view the doctrine of creation is not a true proposition about objective reality (as modern science has convincingly shown); neither is it an expression of our religious experience, or some rule for religious discourse. The doctrine of creation is the description, symbolic as it is, of the *process of creation of us as conscious beings*; it is the description of the creation of our internal world. Emotions were perhaps the first layer of our inner world thus constituted. If this view is correct, then religion played a crucial role in the process of constituting conscious emotions.

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