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Embodied religion's radicalisation of immanence and the consequent question of transcendence

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Transcendence has lost its metaphysical moorings and the tendency in postmodernity is the sublimation of transcendence within a conceptual framework of immanence. In other words, transcendence, in a postmetaphysical world, is fully and absolutely actualised or embodied. The consequent question arises: Is there still a need for the concept of transcendence and how should this transcendence be understood in the religious context, in particular? This question is explored by first analysing transcendence within the science-religion discourse. Secondly, Sally McFague's theology is discussed as an example of a theology of radical immanence, and lastly Gilles Deleuze's concept of radical immanence is explored. I argue that an understanding of embodied religion in a radical immanent way raises some intrusive questions concerning both the concept of transcendence and religion. A reinterpretation of transcendence might, however, make it possible to understand embodied religion not only in radical immanent terms.

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The term ‘transcendence’ is derived from the Latin *transcendere*, ‘to climb across, surmount, transcend’, and refers to the fact that certain boundaries are exceeded.¹ The transcendent is what lies beyond and stands over against the immanent, the indwelling that lies within reach in this instance.² The transcendence/immanence pair can be used in different contexts. Epistemologically, it distinguishes between the subject’s consciousness and whether objects of knowledge transcend it. Ontologically, it asks a similar question and, anthropologically, the question is how does the human subject transcend itself. In the context of this article, transcendence/immanence will be viewed existentially (metaphysically), as the crossing over from the sensorily observable (immanence) to the supersensory (transcendence). In this regard, the transcendence/immanence pair is a religious expression in which the immanent is imperfect (there is a yearning for salvation) and must be transcended in favour of the true world. Transcendence refers, in religious terms, to the supersensory, God, the divine, or the absolute of the “true world”.³

An immediate issue with such an understanding of the transcendent is that God (the transcendent) seems to be radically separated from the world (the immanent) and that a pre-modern two-world picture of heaven and earth is assumed. The historical rejection of this pre-modern world view – and of the Platonic view of religion – gives immanence, however, a different meaning. Transcendence is now rather understood within or together with immanence in connection with God – or moral values. In other words, transcendence (the transcendent, God) is to be found in this world, not in a separate world or heaven. For religion, and specifically the Christian religion as the main focus of this article, this means that it is essential to

1 This article was originally presented as a paper at the European Society for Philosophy of Religion’s conference on “Embodied Religion” at Soesterberg, The Netherlands, 30 August-2 September 2012.

2 Under transcendence, we normally understand that which is above the given. Transcendence indicates a “border experience” – we experience things as ending and limited, but sometimes as something that lies on the other side of this border. We call things on this side of the border “immanent” and things on the other side “transcendent” (Stoker 1990: 199).

3 See “transcendence” in the *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion* (Leiden, Brill) – currently in print (to be published in 2014).

reformulate or to gain a new understanding of God's transcendence in more immanent terms.

There are different ways of how this can take place, each with different issues. One way is to rethink the entire concept of religion itself and to move away from an ontological transcendence to the immanence of the human body. God is then not outside or above human beings or this world, but reduced to certain experiences within the human body – emotionally and rationally. This view will be discussed, in this instance, as 'humanly embodied religion' by highlighting some perspectives within the science-religion discourse.

Another way of rethinking the immanent transcendence of God is to motivate it theologically, as Sally McFague, for example, does.⁴ She views the world as the body of God – human beings are part then of the body of God (another form of embodied religion). Thus, we view transcendence in the everyday, on earth, and religion is 'embodied in everything'. The following question arises: Does transcendence not lose its power if transcendence virtually disappears into immanence in this pantheism? Further questions regarding this position are whether it is theologically and philosophically tenable and sustainable. These questions will be explored by analysing Gilles Deleuze's concept of the "plane of immanence".⁵

This article focuses mainly on the radicalisation of immanence – through embodied religion – and the ensuing issues of transcendence. I will argue that there exists a contemporary emphasis on immanence at the expense of transcendence, on the one hand, and that transcendence can also not be emphasised at the expense of immanence, on the other. This not only has philosophical and theological, but also political consequences. Theologically, the issue of pantheism as well as the definition of religion will be highlighted. Philosophically, the problem of Deleuze's "thought paradox" and his "transcendental illusion" will be indicated as symptomatic of a world view that rejects transcendence completely for the sake of immanence. Politically, the

4 McFague's theology is an example of similar recent theologies (such as Mark Taylor's) which opt for a more incarnational/bodily/immanent understanding of Christianity.

5 Deleuze's philosophy is chosen, in this instance, because he so explicitly defended the notion of immanence.

issue of human freedom arises, because there are inherent connections between politics and transcendence – throughout history, those in power have often referred to ‘higher’ instances to justify their authority. Contemporary politics is, however, regarded as a field of pure immanence (with the world that is autonomous and disenchanting), but human beings (or governments) now tend to become supreme with the consequent suffering of other human beings’ freedom. In all three instances, a more nuanced way of speaking about transcendence is thus needed.

I will show in this article that there might be other ways of considering the concept of transcendence that resist the strict dichotomy between transcendence and immanence, without forfeiting either one of them, and that might keep open the possibility for an embodied understanding of religion. An example is the concept of “transcendence as alterity”, as part of Wessel Stoker’s typology of transcendence.

1. Religion as humanly embodied

Embodied religion can be understood as the acknowledgement that religion is embodied in the human being as a matter of heart and mind. It is an awareness of the fact that the human body is always involved in the concepts and practices of religions, on the one hand, and that religion affects the body, on the other. In other words, religion is concerned with spiritual and emotional experiences, with cognitive processes in one’s body and with bodily matters such as sexuality, family, food, birth and death. This is apparent in the way in which religion expresses itself in various material ways (for instance, icons, prayers, sacraments, and in the way in which it disciplines the human body (for instance, celibacy, fasting, and exercise).

When religion is confined to the human body, a radicalisation of immanence takes place that leaves very little room for transcendence. This happens when the spiritual dimension of human nature is annihilated through a material explanation of human being – as is the case with some forms of neuroscience. The experience of the transcendent is then explained by means of mind processes, the immanent. Within this notion of embodied religion, there is no supernatural, no vertical transcendence, no absolute outside/

beyond reality left and God (the absolute) might only be a projection (Feuerbach) or an illusion (Freud) or a comfort/opium (Marx). Within this framework, God (or the transcendent) is only a function of this world (*aliquid mundi*) and s/he can act in any way or be independent of the world. However, transcendence *per se* is not necessarily denied, but it would rather be understood as “horizontal transcendence”.⁶ In a more extreme understanding of embodied religion, any concept of transcendence and notions of the supernatural would be rejected.⁷

In the science-religion discourse, particularly as discussed by Cornel du Toit, religion is understood as a product of normal evolutionary processes and is therefore natural, although most religions are characterised by faith in the supernatural (Du Toit 2012: 1-2).⁸ The supernatural can, however, be discarded, because human beings no longer need supernatural powers to explain the cosmos and to live meaningful lives.⁹ However, we still need religion, because, as Cupitt observes: “Religion is primarily not about belief, but about hope” (Leaves 2011: 181). In this sense, religion has thus not become redundant, but it must be redefined in a way that does not necessarily include or exclude a belief in the supernatural. Clifford Geertz gives an example of such a definition of religion: “Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting

- 6 Horizontal transcendence is a result of the fact that “in theology and philosophy the frontier of transcendence shifted from the metaphysical belief that the very essence of the Other of Truth or Transcendence can be known, to an openness to transcendence at the historical, immanent level” (Du Toit 2011: 9).
- 7 This is argued for on the basis that human beings are only able to conceive of transcendence via their biological equipment (Du Toit 2011: 2). Within the neurosciences, our most intimate experiences of God have, for example, been named, the moment of Absolute Unitary Being (AUB). AUB takes place when “human brain processes induce an experience of ineffable union with the deity” (Du Toit 2011: 8). See Van der Walt 2010.
- 8 My aim is not to analyse and discuss the science-religion discourse in depth, but to rather work with Cornel du Toit as a representative of this field. Du Toit is a South African philosopher/theologian whose work focuses specifically on the notions of transcendence and immanence. See the list of references for some of his relevant work in this regard.
- 9 Stoker’s book, *Is the Quest for Meaning the Quest for God?* (1996) specifically deals with this issue. Du Toit (2012: 3) uses humanism in Sweden and Denmark as an example of where people live in accordance with a non-supernatural, non-creedal humanism that has its origins in Christianity.

moods and motivation in people by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Grassie 2010: 45). The terms “moods and motivation”, in this definition, indicate an embodied understanding of religion – a move away from the supernatural to the natural.

Such a definition of religion suits contemporary spiritual groups that may be considered progressive, often anti-theistic, postmodern, secular and rational.¹⁰ For example, many religious progressives would like to remain true to their Christian tradition, but they conform their faith to present-day scientific ideas with the consequent rejection of a supernatural notion. This is an approach from below, from the ‘real/scientific’ world to a very limited notion of transcendence, namely transcendence as immanence. It is a continuous move away from radical transcendence where God, the transcendent, is considered to be “outside” or independent of the world, in the direction of bodily, immanent, experiences of ‘something more’. Immanent transcendence implies that the transcendent – not in the religious, but in the anthropological sense – is experienced through the immanent world – there is a relationship of dependence of transcendence on the immanence. This means that one first experiences this world as reality, as immanence, and then one may also experience transcendence. Transcendence then is the experience of reality as a subjective force (Being, God, the Other, fate, and so on) that “surpasses one’s expectations, demolishes one’s self-centred autonomy and descends on one from an open future” (Du Toit 2012: 12). This type of transcendence is merely self-transcendence in the anthropological sense.

Self-transcendence is a more acceptable notion of transcendence in our contemporary context, because it is an immanent transcendence. In other words, it locates the transcendent in the immanent, in the human experience. In religious terms, immanence is radicalised into embodied religion. Religion is thus based on an affective awareness of God (or the Other/absolute) that cannot be communicated

10 Progressive spiritual groups are not necessarily atheistic, but rather “a new breed of theists that is emerging in nearly every religion across the globe with the simple creed: Reality is our God, evidence is our scripture, and integrity is our religion” (Du Toit 2012: 6).

discursively – “a wonder that strikes us dumb, amazement absolute” (Du Toit 2012: 14). This awareness remains a human awareness – something tangible and observable – and it does not prove God's existence or necessarily implicate the supernatural. In addition, this awareness does not necessarily exclude thought. Mark Wynn (2005:133) mentions, for example, that “the affective complexes [...] will be unified states of mind, and will owe their intentionality in part to feeling”. Therefore, this awareness, or affective complexes, cannot merely be dismissed as feelings alone. It is part of a “unified state” of one's mind, part of one's body.

The possible “objects” of this awareness can include notions such as Heidegger's being, Levinas's Other, Sartre's *pour soi* and Caputo's event – all possibilities that are not dependent on the supernatural (Du Toit 2012: 16). Religion, therefore, as indicated in Geertz's definition, does not have to be supernatural in order to be inclusive of transcendence. In other words, God can be a fully natural God.¹¹ Stuart Kauffman (2008: 288) mentions, for example, that “such a natural God is not far from an old idea of God in nature, an immanent God, found in the unfolding of nature [...] a God with which we can live our lives forward into mystery”. Kauffman's remark indicates that embodied religion is not only limited to human bodies, but can entail possibly everything. Sally McFague argues for transcendence in this pantheistic sense.

A point of critique must, however, first be raised against Geertz's definition of religion. This definition accommodates a notion of embodied religion where transcendence is confined to the experiences of the human body, but this definition is in stark contrast to more traditional definitions of religion. For example, Marcel Gauchet categorises Christianity – with Judaism and Islam – as part of “higher-religions” that embrace a “deepening” of transcendence. He mentions that all higher religions require something really transcendent, something actually “other-worldly” or at least “beyond this world”,

11 Vattimo calls it secularisation, “... which means not the abandonment or dissolution of God, but the transcription of God into time and history (the saeculum), thus a successor form of death of God theology” (Robbins 2006: 74). Vattimo views nihilism and kenosis as parallels: “Nihilism is the emptying of Being into interpretive structure; kenosis is the becoming nothing of God as transcendent deity” (Robbins 2006: 74).

and when that is absent, we can no longer really talk about religion (Cloots 2012: 74). Within Geertz's understanding of religion, the absolute is no longer sought outside mundane reality, with the implication that religion is only about embodied notions (affect and effect), and not about something (radical or vertical) transcendent. Such an understanding of religion will be difficult to accept, for example, within the orthodox Christian tradition.¹² McFague's broader understanding of "embodied religion" is, however, an example of how to rethink immanent transcendence from within the Christian tradition.

2. Religion as embodied in everything

An example of how the Christian religion could be understood in more immanent terms – as "embodied in everything" – can be found in McFague's theology.¹³ She suggests that one should consider two habits of religious people, namely that of praising God and attempts to love others, as hints or traces of transcendence (McFague 2012: 243). How can these two religious habits be traces of transcendence? To bring these two habits together – the aesthetic (praise) and the ethical (compassion) – McFague mentions that one should imagine the world as God's body.¹⁴ Transcendence can then be found in and through the earth by paying attention to others: "the ethical rests on the aesthetic, which is the prior moment of realizing that something outside oneself is real" (McFague 2012: 256).¹⁵ Language of praise should, therefore, according to McFague, be taken seriously because we find in it an

12 See my article entitled 'How to do philosophy of religion: towards a possible speaking about the impossible' (Verhoef 2012), where I analyse the continued link between vertical transcendence and (the Christian) religion.

13 The focus, in this instance, is more on the metaphoric and ecological aspects of McFague's theology. She has worked on a great deal of other important theological issues such as feminism, God as mother, theological language, the economy, and so on, which unfortunately cannot be discussed in this article.

14 The notion of the world as God's body would allow one to perceive the beauty of God through the bodies of creation and to realise the greatest need of these bodies (McFague 2012: 243). For McFague, aesthetics and ethics join thus at the place where people praise God and serve the basic needs of others.

15 This notion of transcendence can be understood either as an anthropological or as an epistemological transcendence. For McFague, the world and others (the real outside oneself) converge into being the body of God, which implies that God

intimation of transcendence. Transcendence may also be found in compassion, the practice of love.¹⁶ McFague (2012: 245) suggests that love for the other, particularly the other in lower case, is the heart of religion as well as the primary intimation of transcendence.¹⁷

With McFague's understanding of praise and love as intimations of transcendence, the question is: Does transcendence include or imply anything non-immanent? Are praise and love (immanence) only activities that lead to self-transcendence for the sake of the ethical, or is a more religious (existential/metaphysical) transcendence possible? McFague's reply is to ask whether transcendence needs to mean "God's existence" – a being or being-itself that exists apart from the world and that is in control of the world (McFague 2012: 246). She argues that this type of transcendence is not necessary and that transcendence (or God) must be understood as radically immanent. The world as God's body suggests that there is one world, one reality, and that this world, this reality, is divine. Christian praise and doing in the ordinary, physical world, and not in a remote spiritual reality forms the basis of this understanding of the world. It suggests, according to McFague, that the conventional meaning of transcendence as other than, beyond and separate from this world is subverted into transcendence as radical immanence. In her opinion, incarnationism means that transcendence becomes radical immanence (McFague 2012: 247).

In this understanding of transcendence as radical immanence, there is not necessarily a denial of God's existence, but rather a denial of anything radically transcendental of God. God becomes radically immanent and nothing supernatural is left – as in the earlier discussion of the science-religion discourse. This view of God is in sharp contrast to the Barthian notion of radical transcendence whereby "God relates to the world only as a tangent touches a circle" (McFague 2012: 247).

is real outside oneself, as the world and others, but not as a radical transcendent God who is not part of this world.

16 McFague mentions that the language of love, of doing, is taken seriously by deconstruction and that this is a welcome direction after centuries of Christian obsession with belief in God as the primary issue. She agrees with the deconstructionists' saying that the "name of God is the name of a deed" (McFague 2012: 246), because by so doing, the central project of religion is centred in ethics, not in theology.

17 This transcendence is, however, not separate from the concrete world, but found in the others.

By contrast, McFague observes that we meet God in and through the world, if we are ever to meet God. God is concrete, immanent, s/he is not “out there or back there or yet to be, but hidden in the most ordinary things of our daily lives” (McFague 2012: 256).

Within the Christian tradition, there are several advantages of considering, with McFague, the world as God’s body. For example, this model suggests a creation theology of praise to God and compassion for the world, in contrast to Christian theologies of redemption that focus on sin and on escape from the world. The focus is thus no longer on a God outside this world, but on mediated experiences of divine transcendence. “Backside theology”¹⁸ finds the glory of God in the beauty of the earth and in service to the neighbour. It means finding transcendence in the earth, in the flesh, in the ordinary. In this context, McFague (2012:256) states that at the heart of Christian faith is “transcendence beyond transcendence which is radical immanence”.

There are also ecological and ethical reasons for the Christian tradition to prefer this model. Ethical, in that love is recognition of the other as other, whether it be God (the other as beauty) or the neighbour (the other as needy). McFague explains that the intimation of transcendence at the heart of Christian faith is the awakening to the needs and sufferings of others. To love God means to feed the suffering body of the world.¹⁹ The ecological reasons to prefer this model of the world as God’s body lies in its pantheistic connotation. Pantheism’s ethical calling is obvious, but the theological concerns with this position are also well known. McFague (2012:263) notes that she is not afraid of pantheism, because “the line between God and the world is fuzzy”; the body of God is all of creation, it is all that exists. To imagine the world this way means that there are no sharp lines between the world and God.²⁰ This should, according to her, not be a (theological) problem, because it is better to err on the side of the

18 An acknowledgement that one can only see God’s back, his/her traces, and not his/her face.

19 Loving God is, therefore, not a mystical immersion for McFague (2012: 259), but a mundane task - a “female, nurturing, caring task. It is lowly and basic, having to do first of all with physical needs ...”.

20 McFague (2012: 258) argues that “the dualism of deism and theism are gone; we are in the realm of panentheism, and perhaps pantheism”.

presence of God rather than on God's absence, and an incarnational, immanent theology opts for presence.

McFague (2012: 249) does, however, qualify her understanding of the world as God's body (and the consequent pantheism), by emphasising that she is using this model as a metaphor and that metaphor lies between nonsense and truth. According to the metaphor, the world is/is not God's body.²¹ With this metaphor, McFague moves away in her theology from a radical transcendence to a much more bodily understanding of transcendence. We meet God in and through other bodies.²² The emphasis is on the body, the material condition of bodies, the basics that all creatures need to live – “this is our intimation of transcendence, this is our call from God: Look and love; feed my world” (McFague 2012: 263).

This radical immanence of McFague's theology fits in well, as she acknowledges, with postmodernism and deconstruction, but it also has some affinity with the science-religion discourse on transcendence. There is no room left for any notion of radical transcendence or something supernatural in her theology. By identifying praise and love as imitations of transcendence, she makes transcendence something immanent and thereby observable and an object for scientific study. Christianity, in McFague's understanding, compares well with Geertz's definition of religion as a system of symbols which establishes moods and motivation in people – the mood of praise and the motivation to love. In McFague's incarnational interpretation of Christianity, there is, however, a stronger ethical emphasis than generally visible in religion in the science-religion discourse described earlier. McFague's incarnational theology and its inclination to pantheism compare well with the notion of horizontal transcendence, and her theology is a

21 For McFague (2012: 252), metaphor is what all theology is; it never “advances to concepts, to metaphysics, to certain or absolute claims”. In addition, she defends her model against pantheism with two subsidiary metaphors, namely that “as we are to our bodies, so God is to the world” and “the world is in God as a baby is in a womb” (McFague 2012: 258). She argues that these are metaphorical fragments which by no means give us an organic system of the relations of God and the world.

22 McFague (2012: 262) calls “the meeting of God through the needs of other bodies by putting one's own body on the line” an intimation of transcendence as radical immanence. The prophetic call is for all to lay down their own bodies for others, to live differently at the bodily level.

good example of the reinterpretation of Christianity within a notion of radical immanence.

McFague must be commended for taking the incarnation seriously in her theology, but the question can be raised concerning the relation between radical immanence and nihilism; pantheism and atheism.²³ In addition, her theology comes very close to Deleuze's "plane of immanence" – where transcendence is completely "flattened" to radical immanence, and the same critique to Deleuze's radical immanence might therefore be applicable to her position.

3. Deleuze's radical immanence

Deleuze defended the notion of immanence explicitly and passionately. Kristien Justaert, for example, explains that Deleuze considered immanence not as a concept but as the pre-philosophical horizon against which thinking can be creative and productive.²⁴ He calls this horizon the "plane of immanence". With his passionate acceptance of immanence, Deleuze rejects any form of transcendence, connecting it with "the poisonous logic of representation" (Deleuze & Guattari 1991: 35). With his notion of pure immanence, he wishes to move beyond the dualism of form-matter that brings with it a transcendent judgement of mind over matter.²⁵ He rejects (although this is Deleuze's point of departure) not only epistemological transcendence, but also all types of transcendence – the metaphysical, in particular.

Deleuze believes that Being should be liberated from the chains of representation and that we must relocate ourselves on the plane of immanence where we will discover that "Being necessarily only expresses Itself in all beings, because Being is all there is" (Justaert 2012: 98). Because Being is all there is, Deleuze argues that there is no

23 Some philosophers argue that radical immanence is basically similar to atheism and that it is philosophically a move to nihilism. See, for example, Jonkers's (2012: 33) analyses of Jacobi's critique of philosophy's annihilation of transcendence in the wake of the pantheism controversy of 1785 and the atheism controversy of 1799. Jonkers discusses these two controversies in detail.

24 In the discussion of Deleuze, I mainly follow the work of Justaert, *Gilles Deleuze and the Transcendence of Immanence* (2012).

25 For Deleuze, transcendence implies a superiority of thinking over Being and he wants to unify these two poles and "let Being speak loudly and clearly through thought and life once more" (Justaert 2012: 97).

antonym (like transcendence) for immanence and that immanence should be thought of independently: "Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in anything, nor can it be attributed to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. [...] Only when immanence is immanent to nothing except itself, can we speak of a plane of immanence" (Deleuze 2007: 389). In other words, for Deleuze, the world of representation is "a site of transcendental illusion" (Deleuze 2004: 334); it is "a fake dualism, albeit a very persistent one" (Justaert 2012: 102).

Deleuze connects the absolute/infinite with pure immanence, and this immanence, according to him, allows or calls one to be creatively ethical and not to be bound to a prescribed morality (Smith 2001: 178). In order to do so, one must discover the true power and beauty in immanence, in Being, and live a life not divided in categories or hierarchies.²⁶ For Deleuze, this immanent life is impersonal – "life is Being itself, a power that runs through every being" (Justaert 2012: 97); not divided into categories – "a human being's life is literally equal to a life of a rock" (Pearson 2001: 141), and has the state of mind of beatitude – the realisation that it is not we who think, but "Being (God) who thinks through us; Being has absorbed us as it were: our life has become a Life, an expression of Being" (Justaert 2012: 97).

To live on this plane of immanence sounds liberating (free from the illusion of transcendence, hierarchy and dualism, free to be truly creative and ethical), but the question is whether this position is philosophically tenable. Justaert hints at a paradox in Deleuze's philosophy in that his plane of immanence somehow transcends the world of representation. The plane of immanence is indeed wholly other than this world: "The radically immanent can be understood as transcending our lives, because the whole interpretation of the plane of immanence as a goal to strive for, away from the world of representation, pictures this form of immanence as quasi unattainable. To reach it, we have to transcend our own ego, give up our own personality" (Justaert 2012: 102). Deleuze hereby creates a new dualism between the "old" world of representation and the new world of the creative plane of immanence. Deleuze's philosophy is still an "affair of transcendence"

26 Such hierarchies are, for Deleuze, part of a transcendent scheme which represses creativity and thereby leads to death.

(Pearson 2001: 141), because it entails not only a self-transcendence (a transcendence of one's own ego) in the anthropological sense, but also a metaphysical transcendence (to a new world of the plane of immanence). The paradox in Deleuze's philosophy is that the plane of immanence becomes the "transcendent".

Transcendence does have a meaning in Deleuze's philosophy, but it is the dynamic meaning of transcending as an act of human beings [...] Their static form transcends towards a more dynamic constellation in which they can be creative, in which they can produce again. This is what happens on the plane of immanence: all these moving lines produce different intensities of Being (Justaert 2012: 102).

Even in this radical plane of immanence there is no denial of transcendence, but rather a notion that the absolute empties itself in the mundane reality. "God" is now the impersonal Being of the plane of immanence (Life itself). With this concept of Being, Deleuze wants to move away from hierarchy and dualism to creative life, but its weakness lies in the impersonal nature of a life of pure immanence. Life itself seems to get meaning/value on this plane, but not the personal life. The human being's life is literally like that of a rock, something completely physical, a body. Any value that is given on such an immanent plane is ultimately subject to scepticism, because it will still be value given by human beings, with the possibility of nihilism.²⁷

Like McFague's, Deleuze's notion of radical immanence has an affinity with the horizontal transcendence of the science-religion discourse. It is also clear that McFague's concept of transcendence as radical immanence (the world as body of God) correlates with Deleuze's plane of immanence (where Being is all that is left on this plane). This is emphasised in Deleuze's concept of beatitude as the state of mind of an immanent life – when the mind is filled with joy, when it realises Being (God) thinks through us. This concept of beatitude is very similar to McFague's notion of praise, "an aesthetic

27 Nietzsche (1974: 286) articulated the scepticism: "the whole pose of [...] man as the measure of the value of things, as judge of the world who in the end places existence itself upon his scales and finds it wanting – the monstrous insipidity of this pose has finally come home to us and we are sick of it". On the other hand, Nietzsche also criticised the binary scheme of two realms of reality as nihilistic – see, for example, Paul Van Tongeren's (2012: 152-63) discussion about Nietzsche and the relation between nihilism and transcendence.

which is the prior moment of realizing that something outside oneself is real" (McFague 2012: 256). Deleuze's ontology as ethics also has parallels with McFague's pantheism and its consequent ethical notion of love – not primarily for a transcendent God, but for the bodily other – on a plane of immanence without hierarchy or dualism. Both Deleuze (philosophically) and McFague (theologically) radicalise immanence, and consequently emphasise the bodily and the ethical. One can thus speak, in line with the science-religion discourse, of embodied religion's radicalisation of immanence.²⁸

4. Embodied religion's radicalisation of immanence

Embodied religion's radicalisation of immanence is motivated by our post-metaphysical, post-transcendental and postmodern context.²⁹ In our present-day culture (philosophy, politics, art, and even theology), the default position is "not radical transcendence or even immanent transcendence, but radical immanence" (Van der Merwe 2012: 509). The advantages of this position are that it takes account of postmodern critiques and that it has a strong ethical (this worldly) focus. However, the concept of radical immanence (especially as embodied religion) raises some intrusive questions regarding the concept of transcendence and vice versa.

The first question concerns transcendence and religion. If religion is defined (as Geertz does) as embodied notions (affect and effect), the concept of transcendence is reduced to an anthropological one. A

28 This corresponds with Du Toit's (2010b: 132) statement that "we live in the era of what I would call the bodily turn, in which new insights help us to understand the bodily, biological roots of mind, language and cognition in new ways. This has a ripple effect, triggering reflection on spirituality in a post-secularisation, techno-scientific context, which has implications for our present-day understanding of God".

29 In our contemporary context, it appears that "transcendence has lost its metaphysical moorings in the transition from modernity to postmodernity" (Van der Merwe 2012: 508). Meylahn (2012: 1) explains that the "turn to language, or the linguistic turn, makes traditional ontological interpretations of transcendence impossible as 'there is nothing outside of the text'". Du Toit (2010c: 77) agrees: "Ours is a post-transcendent era. Human dogma has unravelled God; meta-physics has unravelled existence; and science has unravelled the cosmos".

“deepening” of transcendence (as Gauchet explains) is, however, part of ‘higher religions’ such as Christianity and when this is absent we can no longer talk about religion within this definition. McFague’s reinterpretation of transcendence in immanent terms might seem to be an outcome, but her interpretation of Christianity within these narrow limits of immanence is problematic – it moves too far away from Gauchet’s definition of higher religions to be regarded as such; its pantheism moves too far away from orthodox Christianity (with the possibility of atheism and nihilism), and it is liable to the same critique as that of Deleuze’s plane of immanence. Therefore, Christianity (or other higher religions) should perhaps not be reinterpreted to fit into the radical immanent definition of religion, but transcendence should be reinterpreted to accommodate these traditional notions of religion.

A second question concerns the philosophical and existential sustainability of radical immanence. The problem is that “the valuation of radical immanence as the only, and thus ‘ultimate’, value cannot escape the positing of some immanence transcending ideal or norm” (Van der Merwe 2012: 509). Consequently, from which vantage point will radical immanence posit the ideal or norm? There seems to be no answer, because “a valuation of radical immanence as the only and ultimate reality is either circular (what is ultimate is immanent because what is immanent is ultimate), and thus self-refuting, or clandestine” (Van der Merwe 2012: 509). This is true of Deleuze’s thought paradox where the plane of immanence becomes the transcendent. Radical immanence is indeed radical, because it “represents the most radical attempt by modernism to mediate desire purely on the basis of *internal points of reference*” (Goosen 2012: 59); however, this is also its philosophical Achilles heel.

A third problem with radical immanence is that it does not do justice to the transcending activity of immanence itself. Van Tongeren (2012: 159) mentions, for example, that radical immanence “threatens to deprive the immanent world of an essential human characteristic that philosophy wants to account for: we humans cannot but transcend the world – simply because we are compelled to speak about it and value it”. Du Toit (2011: 1) makes the same point to some extent, stating that human beings are self-transcending and “wired

for transcendence” – we cannot exist without it.³⁰ We cannot merely deny or try to annihilate transcendence, without changing or denying human nature – “the desire to cultivate a sense of transcendence may be the defining human characteristic” (Armstrong 2009: 19). Although transcendence is not denied in the examples of radical immanence discussed earlier (science-religion, McFague, Deleuze), it is mainly a type of (horizontal) self-transcendence in the anthropological sense. A more metaphysical or existential (vertical) transcendence is lacking and that may lead to a reductionist view of not only religion,³¹ but also human beings.³²

5. A reinterpretation of transcendence

The above questions indicate that embodied religion's radicalisation of immanence cannot simply reject or part company with transcendence. As a metaphysical or existential concept (as normally understood within religion) transcendence is, however, also problematic. A possible outcome, in this instance, as suggested in the discussion of McFague, is rather to reinterpret the concept of transcendence. Wessel

- 30 Du Toit (2010c: 78) mentions, for example, that transcendence is “integrally human, hence religion, imagination, inventiveness, fantasy, constant flux are permanent features in our history. Immanent transcendence is an anthropological datum”.
- 31 William Desmond (1995: 201) argues for the retaining of both vertical and horizontal transcendence in religion. He observes that God is the depth of the world as its immanent (though different), intimate (though reserved), originating ground, on the one hand, and that God is described in terms of height, as a ‘vertical transcendence’ – an infinitude that is huper, ‘beyond’ all finite being, on the other. This vertical divine transcendence is a superior transcendence – an absolutely superior otherness (Desmond 1995: 256). God as the agapeic origin is in contrast to this vertical transcendence not an empty transcendent beyond (as with Caputo), but the original power of being that is the sustaining (and thus relationally immanent) ground of being (Verhoef 2012: 382).
- 32 Human beings have “an existential longing for and experiential claim about an ultimate sense of life breaking in from beyond human relations and history” (Van der Merwe 2012: 509). The problem is that “immanent being is fully enclosed within itself, locked in an endless repetition of the same. To speak of the transcendent in this context is to enter the space of the anomalous” (Goosen 2012: 61).

Stoker does so by developing a heuristic typology of transcendence.³³ Stoker (2012: 5-24) describes four types of transcendence, namely immanent transcendence – where the absolute (God) and the human being are directly connected and the absolute is experienced in and through mundane reality; radical transcendence – where the absolute is the wholly other and thus sharply distinguished from mundane reality; radical immanence – the absolute is no longer sought outside mundane reality, and transcendence as alterity – which rejects the opposition between transcendence and immanence and, therefore, the wholly other can appear in every other.

Embodied religion's radicalisation of immanence can be identified as the third type of transcendence, namely radical immanence. The issues regarding this position have been discussed. The second type, radical transcendence, is also difficult to maintain philosophically and theologically – although there are efforts such as those of William Desmond and Karl Barth to do so. In my view, a consideration of the other two types of transcendence is preferable, in as far as it allows us to move away from the dichotomy between immanence and transcendence. In Christianity, for example, two types of transcendence might be found (unlike Gauchet's description thereof), namely radical transcendence and immanent transcendence (the first type identified by Stoker).

In immanent transcendence, the absolute is experienced in, and through, earthly reality and the here and beyond are closely connected. This is a better option than radical immanence (Geertz's definition of religion is typical) where the absolute is no longer sought outside earthly reality and where both realities coincide so that there is hardly any room left for transcendence. Immanent transcendence should, however, be understood not only in an anthropological sense ("religion as humanly embodied"), but also in a more metaphysical sense. This might again be problematic and thus Stoker's fourth type of transcendence might be a viable alternative.

In Stoker's transcendence as alterity, the relation between transcendence and immanence is no longer viewed as an opposition. Rather, the wholly other can appear not only in God, but also in

33 See, for example, the two recent works by Stoker & Van der Merwe 2012a and 2012b.

every other. Briefly, transcendence as absolute alterity does not necessarily implicate a transcendent God, but rather a “God” or a transcendence who is everywhere where the wholly other is, especially in the ethical situation. This type of transcendence is a correction on radical transcendence which hardly emphasises the wholly other in mundane reality. It is also a correction on radical immanence, which accepts the world as it is by denying the wholly other.

6. Conclusion

An embodied understanding of religion makes some important and much needed correctives about religion by emphasising its bodily nature. In addition, it emphasises the ethical and the ecological (McFague) aspects of religion rather than focusing on a spiritual or ‘other’ world. An understanding of religion as only embodied leads to a radicalisation of immanence and a rejection of traditional transcendence. In other words, transcendence in embodied religion is understood as radical immanence. Several philosophical and theological issues in understanding transcendence only as radical immanence have been discussed in this article.

However, one can approach the concept of transcendence from perspectives that resist the dichotomy between transcendence and immanence. The concepts of immanent transcendence or transcendence as alterity, as part of Wessel Stoker’s typology of transcendence, are such examples. These types of transcendence have a strong similarity to “horizontal” transcendence and seek not to forfeit either immanence or transcendence. Theologically, it might keep open the possibility of an embodied understanding of religion without the immediate equalisation to pantheism. Philosophically, it gives an alternative, for example, to the kind of paradox one finds in Deleuze’s plane of immanence. Politically, it moves away from a radical vertical transcendence which entails a “belief in a completely transcendent, often violent concept of God and in a hierarchical concept of humankind and society” to a more horizontal transcendence where one can “speak of a secularized culture with its belief in an egalitarian concept of humankind and society”.³⁴

34 Charles Taylor (in following René Girard) makes this distinction between vertical and horizontal transcendence – see Vanheeswijk (2012: 78).

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