

**Transcendence** (Entry for *New Dictionary of Christian Apologetics*)  
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The word *transcendence* comes from the Latin and means literally to climb across or go beyond. To transcend is thus to surpass or excel or move beyond the reach or grasp of something. Sometimes the term is used epistemologically, as when something is beyond the reach of human knowledge. But in reference to the Christian doctrine of God, divine transcendence is used ontologically, and refers to God being beyond anything that is other than God. In Christian theology what's other than God is, by definition, the creation.

It follows that divine transcendence needs to be understood in light of the Christian doctrine of creation. Historically, this has been a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. *Creatio ex nihilo* means that in the primal act of creation (i.e., in God bringing contingent being to existence, and therefore in contradistinction to God subsequently ordering or designing the creation), God did not depend on any preexisting entity separate from God—no preexisting stuff, no autonomous principles, no other gods. Indeed, for God to have employed such an entity in the primal act of creation would have meant that something outside of God had a separate existence from God. Orthodox Christian theology, by contrast, affirms that there is but one God, that this God is the source of all being, and that nothing exists self-sufficiently apart from this God.

*Creatio ex nihilo* presupposes two things: (1) God is a personal being and not a principle. (2) The world exists by a personal act, namely, an effected word spoken by God. The early theologians of the Christian Church (like Athanasius and the Cappadocian Fathers) were all too aware of Plato's cosmology. The problem, in their view, with Plato's cosmology was just that, namely, Plato's world was a *cosmos*. The *cosmos* of Plato, and of the ancient Greek philosophers more generally, was an ordered arrangement governed by principles that even the gods have to obey. The Christian God, by contrast, is absolutely free, and the world, as an absolutely free act by this absolutely free God, is not, at least in the first instance, a *cosmos*. Rather, it is a creation.

The logic here is inescapable and leads in either of two completely opposite directions. Either God is free, or God is bound. Unless God is absolutely free and the world is an absolutely free act of creation, there are principles that constrain God in creation (the issue of God being bound by his nature is not a problem here so long as God's nature is not set over and against God—Thomas Aquinas, for instance, identified God's essence or nature with God's existence). Any such principles of cosmic constraint, however, are logically prior to God. But in that case the ultimate reality is not God but those principles. One is therefore left with two mutually exclusive possibilities: either the ultimate reality is the one personal God or something else is the ultimate reality, like Plato's forms or Spinoza's Nature (writ large) or Alfred North Whitehead's process (cf. process theology). Only the first possibility is consistent with orthodox Christian theism. Transcendence provides the theological underpinnings for this first possibility. It is how Christian

theology justifies the first of the Ten Commandments: “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (Exod. 20:3).

Although transcendence is as important a Christian doctrine as one will find, there are two pitfalls connected with it that need to be avoided. The first is to forget that in the Christian doctrine of God, divine transcendence must always be balanced with divine immanence. Immanence denotes the ongoing presence and activity of God in creation. God both transcends creation and is immanent in it. As immanent in creation, God sustains and preserves the creation, providentially guiding it not only in broad strokes but also down to the smallest details (e.g., God the Father cares even for the sparrow that falls to the ground—Matt. 10:29). Without immanence, transcendence leads to deism. Deism views God’s relation to the world, after some initial act of creation, as an absentee landlord. Christian theism, by contrast, regards God as actively present and involved, moment by moment and from start to finish, in every aspect of creation.

The other pitfall connected with transcendence is to emphasize too much either God’s control of the world or the world’s autonomy from God. Because transcendence stresses the otherness of God from creation, the challenge facing a theology of transcendence is to understand the God-world relation in a way that gives proper due both to God and to the world. One faulty tendency is to exaggerate God’s control of the world, making God directly responsible as causative agent for everything that happens in it (cf. the theological determinism of hyper-Reformed theology, as in Huldreich Zwingli’s *On Providence*). On this view, the creation is a prosthesis or puppet theater of God. The other faulty tendency is to exaggerate the world’s autonomy from God. On this view, the creation can thwart God’s purposes, overrule God’s commands, and do things that God did not foresee (cf. open theism).

A proper understanding of transcendence therefore requires that God be a deity whose purposes cannot be frustrated, to whom the creation is subject in every detail, and for whom there are no surprises. At the same time, it requires a creation that is free to explore new possibilities, even to the point of rebellion against its Creator. This combination of divine sovereignty and created freedom is a great mystery. Unwillingness to live with this mystery leads to easy solutions that are no solution at all. In the worst case, God becomes either a tyrant or a milquetoast. The challenge for the Christian apologist is to show how divine transcendence is consonant with an all-powerful, loving creator God whose power is not arbitrary and whose love is not sentimental.