

CHAPTER 3

DIVINE TRANSCENDENCE:

A RELIGIO-HISTORICAL PORTRAYAL

3.1 INTRODUCTION

One expression of the relationship between God and the world is his transcendence. Transcendence in Christianity means that, “God is separate from and independent of nature and humanity. God is not simply attached to, or involved in, his creation. He is also superior to it in several significant ways” (Erickson 1985:312). However, Isaiah 57:15 indicates the paradox of transcendence, “For thus says the high and lofty one who inhabits eternity, whose name is Holy: I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit, to revive the spirit of the humble, and to revive the heart of the contrite.” Jeremiah 23:23 reads, “Am I only a God nearby, declares the LORD, and not a God far away?” These verses couple a statement of the transcendence of God with another expression of the relationship of God with his creation, namely his immanence. In contrast with transcendence, God’s immanence indicates, “God condescends to enter into personal fellowship and live with those who have repented of their sins and trusted His son for their salvation” (Enns 1989:637). Within this transcendent-immanent nature of God, the people of the Old Testament entered into a covenantal relationship with God (Ex 6:4; 24:7; 34:27).

The term “transcendence” in Arabic is *tanzih*. It is defined as the elimination of blemishes or of anthropomorphic traits, which is the assertion of God’s incomparability with the creation

(Glasse 2001:450). The opposite of *tanzih* is *tashbih*, the Arabic term for immanence. A literal translation of *tashbih* is “the making of comparisons or likeness” (Glasse 2001:452). It is understood as an expression of anthropomorphism, the assignment of physical attributes to God.

As seen from the descriptions of transcendence, the use of the terminology of transcendence differs from Christianity and Judaism to Islam. Furthermore, there is some disagreement in the definition of the term among scholars of the same religion. David Cairns (1967:25) expresses the problem in simple terms: “The concept of the transcendence of God is in danger of becoming as much of a wax nose which anyone can pull in any direction, or mould between warm finger and thumb, as is the concept of the supernatural—at present so much in disgrace among fashionable theologians.” Cairns well illustrates the ambiguous definition of the transcendence of God.

Furthermore, the essence of immanence as contrasted with the definition of transcendence extends complications to the variegated definitions of transcendence. Lawrence Fragg (2003:560) states conclusively, “Analogies in the case of transcendence are challenging to justify. This is in part because there seem to be a number of definitions of transcendence, each characterised by a slightly different nuance. The situation is further complicated by the problem of how to distinguish transcendence from immanence.” Fragg (2003:560) emphasises that a loose definition of transcendence is further weakened by clear definitions of transcendence and immanence. For him, the “two conceptions mutually endow each other with a sense of richness and completion that either alone would not have.” There seems to be no clear black and white duality in the definition of transcendence and immanence, according to Fragg.

One of the landmark studies of the transcendence of God by the Australian Association for the Study of Religions tries to unify diverse concepts of the transcendence of God. In the book, “Ways of Transcendence: Insights from Major Religions and Modern Thought,” edited by Edwin Dowdy (1982:1), the editor’s rationale for the book indicates the problem of the various implications of the transcendence of God:

In recent years transcendence has been a much-discussed topic. It has been prominent at conferences and in publications representing various areas in the study of world religions, philosophy and the social sciences. There are, however, big problems in the treatment of this topic. The words “transcendence”, “transcending” and “the Transcendent” occur in many contexts, and those who want to explore them come with a variety of interests from quite different fields of study.

With openness to other religious traditions and from a middle ground between the extremes of definition and no definition, each contributor makes an approach to transcendence through the medium of “Reality” and “Experience.” Dowdy (1982:2) says these two facets of the transcendence of God are “two principal perspectives, one that focuses upon the nature or ontology of transcendent reality, and one that is concerned with the realisation of some measure of transcendence by the human individual.” These two aspects will be the major underlying principle of the review and discussion of the transcendence of God in this chapter. As a major influential religion for both Christianity and Islam, the transcendence of God in Judaism (Zuesse’s view) is first presented as an inception to the understanding of the transcendence of God in Islam (Graham’s view) and Christianity (Crotty’s view) after a brief

overview of transcendence in other major religions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism, and other societies.

3.2 TRANSCENDENCE IN RELIGIONS AND SOCIETIES

3.2.1 Transcendence in Hinduism

As Hinduism represents a complex religious system (Brück and Rajashekar 2001:546), there are different ways of achieving and defining transcendence. Hereafter, transcendence in the Hindu religious tradition refers to the “quality of those experiences which lie outside the course of normal everyday life and which are of such a nature that the experiencer tends to associate a sense of either ontological or axiological ultimacy with them” which fall into the experience of “routine-transcending, ego-transcending and mundane-transcending aspects” (Sharma 1982:81). As the spiritual goal of the Hindu is to attain *moksa*, or liberation, from bondage to this world, which is characterised by involvement in the process of rebirth in keeping with the widespread Hindu belief in reincarnation (Sharma 1982:90), transcendence in Hinduism is represented by a state of *moksa*.²⁸ Similar to Buddhism, Hinduism looks forward to a self-transcending experience of a better life which is in the next life through reincarnation. It is not God’s transcendence which is expressed and achieved but a self-focused transcendent state of better life, temporarily experienced through the worship of God and permanently achieved in the next life. In attaining the transcendent state of self, there are two levels in Hinduism, individual and communal in nature. The individual experience of

²⁸ Related to the Buddhist *nirvana*, *moksa* is the salvation of Hinduism that means liberation from the cycle of birth, death and rebirth by releasing one’s soul from the attachment to the material world (Hammer 1982:189).

transcendence is achieved in Hinduism through the practice of different types of Yoga²⁹ while the communal level experience of transcendence is through participation in sacred activities³⁰ (Sharma 1982:86-89).

3.2.2 Transcendence in Buddhism

Buddhist tradition prefers experiential rather than conceptual knowledge. Therefore, Buddhism upholds the taste of transcendence rather than thoughts about transcendence (Jensen 1982:63). Transcendence in Buddhism refers to the self transcending from this world to another. It is not that God is transcending from his subject and creation but humankind is transcending to another world to be more like God, rather than identifying with the same situation that humankind encounter. The transcendent experience of Buddhism is expressed as “crossing the stream” from “this shore” of bondage to the “other shore” of freedom (Jensen 1982:63). This self-effort of transcending experience is achieved by means of both “thoughts” and “experience” of way of life. Jensen (1982:64) explains: “Changing one’s conceptual map is a key to crossing the stream, yet this is not done simply by thinking. Instead, it means taking up a whole way of life which can involve “rules of training” covering everything from occupation to diet to ways of meditation. The question of psychological transcendence is not just how to think or how to feel, but how to be.” It is self-denial of one’s “reality” requiring self-disciplinary endeavours. The ultimate goal of the Buddhist path is to be released from the circle of phenomenal existence with its inherent suffering. To achieve

²⁹ Sharma (1982:87) lists the type of Yoga as: Hatha Yoga (body), Rāja Yoga (mind), Karma Yoga (the path of action), Jñāna Yoga (the path of knowledge), and Bhakti Yoga (the path of devotion).

³⁰ The sacred activities are expressed in contact with sacred images, visiting temples, or participating in festivals, etc. Sarma (1982:88) lists six models of sacred activities: temples, images, festivals, Kathās, Bhajans, and pilgrimages.

this goal is to attain salvation, *nirvana*,³¹ the purpose of self-transcending experience in Buddhism (Brow 1982:44). Kärkkäinen (2004:133) explains that the Christian concept of the kingdom of God—a social, political and personalistic symbol—concerned with establishing justice and peace is an equivalent term of *nirvana*, an ontological symbol. Therefore, the ultimate reality in Buddhism is not God but *nirvana*, where one can attain enduring happiness by transcending all suffering through self-effort.

3.2.3 Transcendence in tribal and industrial societies

In Edwin Dowdy's book, "Ways of Transcendence" (1982), the discussion of transcendence in societies is divided into two parts, tribal and industrial society. In the discussion of industrial society's transcendence, Dowdy (1982:112) defines that "transcendent experience is that aspect of behaviour in which an individual attempts to contemplate, comprehend, or become something quite different from what is given in normal daily routine; it is a search for some significance apart from the mundane." In the sense of searching for a higher experience, transcendence in industrial society corresponds to the Buddhist and Hindu experiences of transcendence. However, as Dowdy (1982:111) states, western society—which is an industrial society according to his argument—has been deeply impacted and influenced by the idea of religion, especially Christianity. The discussion of transcendence is linked towards thoughts of a Supreme Being, especially under the influence of Christianity.

Hilton Deakin (1982:95-109) presents some thoughts on transcendence in tribal societies, where he defines "tribal" to be "those people whose social life is characterised by a wide-spread dependence on the operation of the principle of reciprocity." The underlining key

³¹ *Nirvana* is commonly described as 'nothingness' which is the state of complete absence of sensation including but not limited to earth, fire, air, sun, moon, foundation, and suffering (Metz 1982:234).

principle of Deakin's argument of transcendence in tribal societies is that there is no sharp distinction between "physical" and "spiritual" among primal people's life. "The world of the spirit imbues the natural or immediate world, and one can reach out and grasp the one with the elements of the other" (Deakin 1982:97). This "reaching out to other" is the basic meaning of transcendence according to Deakin (1982:98), for he defines the term transcendence as: "to mean or refer to the quality of those experiences which are outside normal living, and to which people attach deep meanings of purpose and being. Those experiencing such transcendence describe the experiences as not only 'release-from' but 'reaching-up to.'" Transcendence is expressed with the idea of "reaching out" to experience the oneness with people's ancestors that gives rise to feelings and experiences of well-being; this is the transcendent experience of tribal people according to Deakin's argument. The medium of the transcendence experience among tribal people is the work of the shaman or medicine-man who provides occasions for an experience with spirits. As long as the transcendent experience in tribal society looks forward to the experience of one's well-being, the experience is self-focused as in the case of other religions, except for the following three major religions discussed in the chapter, namely Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

3.2.4 Concluding reflection

Richard Campbell (1982:148) remarks philosophically on the nature of transcendence:

To transcend, so the dictionary records, is to be beyond the range or domain or grasp (of human experience, reason, description, belief, etc.); to excel, surpass. From this it can immediately be seen that transcendence is a highly paradoxical notion. For if something is really beyond the range of human description, how can that very fact even be stated? Is not the statement a form of description? And if it is, then we do not have a case of transcendence at all.

Campbell's comment on the paradoxical notion of transcendence is a philosophical question of transcendence which I agree is impossible to answer within the realm of philosophy. Yet, in theology, the question is answerable with God's transcendence, for he is "ultimate reality." God is, in fact, transcendent in societies and religions so that people long for the experience of transcendence to achieve the state where the union of God and man is possible. This, in Hinduism, Buddhism, and tribal societies, is expressed by the desire to escape the current life to a better life. If God were known to the adherents of the mentioned groups, they would look forward to experiencing the presence of God where the superior experience of reality is present. However, the aim of the transcendent experience is seen by them as an escape of current reality in order to achieve the transcendent experience from this life to another spiritual realm. If God, the supreme and ultimate reality, is known, the question of transcendence is answered through God. By knowing God, one achieves a state of transcendent reality, for God is the ultimate transcendent reality. On the other hand, in a situation where God is not known, transcendence shifts its axis to the self with the purpose of experiencing superior life by transcending from the current life situation to something better.

3.3 TRANSCENDENCE IN JUDAISM

Evan Zuesse's (1982) study of the transcendence of God reflects a foundational argument for the transcendence of God, not only in Judaism, but also in both Islam and Christianity. Zuesse (1982:25) approaches the study of the transcendence of God through the human experience of God. By rituals included in the Torah Jews can achieve and experience the transcendent God by different processes. The processes are discussed in the core belief of Judaism that extends to a monotheistic God; this is centred on the two poles of transcendental experience, "Wholly Other" and "Wholly the Same."

The two major terms, “Wholly Other” and “Wholly the Same” are articulated in his argument and can be summarised as the “Wholly Other” referring to the complete separation of God from mortals while the same God is present among mortals (“Wholly the Same”). He reasons that God became “Wholly Other” through Adam’s failure to bring about God’s desired result of holy and spiritual life but humankind, “repeat[ed] and confirm[ed] the primal sin and rebellion of Adam, making the material human world unspiritual by our denial of God. After so many generations of this denial, the world has become entirely opaque, dark, and filled with evil” (Zuesse 1982:28). The result of man’s sinfulness and lack of spirituality is that God is “Wholly Other.” God therefore sent the Torah to “provide in his mercy a way to heal the divisions wounding the world, to make all things transparent to God” (Zuesse 1982:28). Consequently, believers can experience the “Wholly Other” God through the Torah’s ritual.³² This involves experiencing God through the guideline of worship that transcends oneself to the presence of God, for God prescribed the Torah ritual for this purpose. On the other hand, the “Wholly the Same” God has been revealed in the history of the human race, and he can be experienced through the same Torah ritual. Based on the argument of the two poles of transcendental experience of God, Zuesse (1982:26) asserts that the task of the Jew is to make God ‘One’ throughout his everyday life, engaging and not annihilating the ego and the intellect of humankind while on this earth. Zuesse therefore sees this task of making God “One” possible through the Torah ritual.

³² The Torah ritual is the foundation for the mysticism of Judaism. Zuesse (1982:28, 30) defines the Torah as “the substance and form of repentance, and the re-opening of the heart to God’s universe. The Torah dynamic also expresses itself in the opening of people to each other, actualizing love and justice in the world. So when the pious actualize Torah, they enact the will of God himself.” Therefore, one experiences God by fulfilling the will of God prescribed in the Torah.

Even though Zuesse separates the process of experiencing the transcendent God into categories like rituals, community identity, moral action, repentance, and intellect, the whole argument is based on the implication of the Torah ritual and its education in the daily life of the believers. He also approaches the human experience of the transcendent God through emphasis on a personal relationship of “moral self-transcendence,” identification of the self with the “trans-historical identity of Israel” and through “the intellectual discipline of Torah- and Talmud-study” (Zuesse 1982:30). These are Zuesse’s fundamental modes of the experience of God, which can be simplified into two major aspects, namely the personal and community aspect of self-transcendence.

The personal aspect of self-transcendence by the Jews is realised through the adherence to the life of the Torah ritual. This includes the practices of the Synagogue ritual and prayers as well as the observance of Sabbath. Zuesse (1982:32) explains that “the Sabbath is a time of union on all levels of the universe, with God joining all things into a unity.” Furthermore, he stresses the *halachah*, the commandments, as a “dispensation of life” that acts as a medium for uniting God and creation (Zuesse 1982:32). This experience is reinforced by the discipline of Torah and Talmud study by believers.

The entire individual mode of self-transcendence is also applied to the community of Jews. However, “in a peculiar way both Jews and non-Jews have agreed that the Jewish community has a transcendental value quite apart from the individual deeds of its members” (Zuesse 1982:34). Zuesse argues that the transcendental community of Jews originates from Genesis 32:28 where God created “Israel” (יִשְׂרָאֵל)³³ out of Jacob’s struggle with God. The

³³ Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל) is a compound word derived from the terms אֱל (God) and שָׁרָה (to struggle, fight), and thus it means *he has struggled with God* (Duff-Forbes 1960:294).

community is further assured of their transcendental value through God's commission to the Israelites in Exodus 19:6 as "you [Israel] will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." This would imply that by transcending all other nations of the earth to become a holy nation, Israel could access and experience the transcendent God by acting as a high priest for all nations. By means of an individual's communal living under the identity of Israel, both the individual and community can achieve self-transcendence in order to experience the transcendent God.

Zuesse's approach to the transcendence of God through the two poles, "Wholly Other" and "Wholly the Same" has provided a fundamental understanding of a Christian concept of the transcendent-immanent God and the absolute transcendent God in Islam. Zuesse's arguments for the transcendence of God are further reflected in the way Christians experience the transcendental God through Jesus (Jn 8:19; 10:38; 14:6, 7, 9) instead of the Torah. In Islam, "Wholly Other" is reflected in the absolute transcendence of God through emphasis on Islamic worship, as in the Torah ritual.

3.4 TRANSCENDENCE IN ISLAM

William Graham (1982:8) approaches the experience of the transcendence of God through the ritual of worship. He explains that the word "Islam" summarises the entire concept of the transcendence of God with respect to the human experience of God.

As an Arabic word, it means simply "submitting" or "surrendering"; in Muslim usage, "submitting" only to God and His will. As a concept it is a profound affirmation of the commitment of finite creatures to worship and

serve the infinite Creator and Sustainer of the universe. Thus *islām* denotes all those acts of body and spirit that bind the contingent, mortal being to his or her omnipotent, eternal Lord. *Islām* is the action by which one transcends simply physical existence to become the fully human, obedient servant and worshipper of the Divine. This is the most basic level of ‘transcending’ in Muslims view.

The explanation of transcendence through the implication of “Islam” alludes to true worship. Graham (1982:8) considers the nature of true worship by using three themes: “first, God’s unity, uniqueness, and perfection; second, His omnipotence and majesty; and finally, His specifically transcendent attributes of infinitude and everlastingness.”

First, Graham argues that God’s unity and singularity is evidenced from *al-shahadah* (witness of faith) and *tawhid* (declaration of divine oneness). The *al-shahadah* is a confession of faith and the first pillar of Islam. It says, “*Ashhadu an la ilaha illa 'llah; ashhadu anna Mohammadan rasulu 'llah*” which is “I witness that there is no god but Allah” (S 47:19), and “Mohammad is the messenger of Allah” (S 48:29). The first part of *al-shahadah* (there is no god but Allah) emphasises the singularity of God. Together with the second part (Mohammad is the messenger of Allah) Muslims repeat this confession at the event of conversion and during devotion to religious duties and practices. Graham (1982:9) further supports God’s unity with the description of *tawhid*. He says *tawhid* “symbolises and summarises both the commitment to worship and serve God alone and also the acceptance of His injunction, ‘take not two gods; truly, He is One God only....’ (Q 16:51).” For this emphasis of oneness of God

among all others, Muslim scholars define *tawhid* as an equivalent term for the transcendence of God (Glasse 2001:450).³⁴

The second theme of true worship, the omnipotence of God, is explained with the so-called “Throne-verse.” Surah 2:255 says “His throne doth extend over the heavens and the earth and He feeleth no fatigue in guarding and preserving them. For He is the Most High the Supreme (in glory).” Graham (1982:10) explains “From a transcendent perspective, God of course controls all things absolutely: from a human perspective, the individual chooses and acts in accordance with or against God’s commands, as he or she chooses.” Therefore, this aspect of “God’s omnipotence logically entails the acute awareness of human accountability” (Graham 1982:10). Having recognised the unlimited power and authority of God, the awareness of human accountability would result in the action of Islam, “submission” to God’s almighty power. As God’s omnipotence³⁵ is expressive of the transcendent character of God (Erickson 1985:318), acknowledgment or submission to God’s power refers to the limit of human power before the transcending power of God.

³⁴ The Oneness of God is also shown in the Bible as, “There is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a saviour. There is none but me! Turn to me and be saved all you ends of the earth; for I am God and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, My mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked. Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, ‘In the LORD are righteousness and strength’” (Is 45:21-24 also Dt 6:4; Ex 20:3; Is 44:8; Mk 12:29; Jn 17:3; 2 Cor 17:3; Gl 3:20).

³⁵ Omnipotence can refer to “functionally transcendental” in comparison with the “metaphysically transcendental” nature of God’s character (Farley [s a]:186) as it means that “within the ‘limits’ of God’s own attributes, God possesses the capacity to do everything” (Kärkkäinen 2004:55).

The third theme of Graham's discussion of the transcendence of God grows out of the first two. Both "the divine everlastingness" and "transcendent attribute of infinitude" are also expressed through the worship of God. Graham (1982:12) says, "Emphasis on divine transcendence is also evident in the constant praising of God that recurs in the *salat*, private prayers, and even everyday speech (e.g., in the common expression, *alhamdu lillah*, 'praise be to God!')." Furthermore, the expression of worship, *Allahu akbar*, states that God is the "greatest" with respect to everything; thus God is above all others in divine transcendence.

On the three themes of the God's transcendence—God's unity and singularity, the omnipotence of God, and the divine everlastingness—Graham rightly indicates the problem of emphasizing divine transcendence in Islam: that absolute transcendence of God must be maintained where the experience of God's reality is forbidden. He says, "The picture of God elaborated in the preceding pages seems to emphasise so radically the transcendence of the Divine that there is virtually no place left for human nearness to God, let alone human experience of divine immanence" (Graham 1982:13). This is an orthodox Muslim's position concerning the transcendence of God. However, Graham (1982:14) proceeds to present an occasion of the immanence of God in Islam:

Transcendence is thus not only an ontological property of the Divine, but also a real presence in human history. Like Jews and Christians, Muslims see the hand of God not only in nature but also in the temporal process of history itself. The Transcendent is thus also in some measure immanent in the world, which is not merely a mechanism governed by a celestial clockwork but the arena of divine activity.

Here, Graham is referring to the immanence of God in general revelation. As I already distinguished between general and special revelation in reference to the transcendence of God in 1.7.2, it is sufficient to present his view here. Furthermore, the above-mentioned discussion of the immanence of God is basically an attempt of the theology of Sufis, who strive for the transcendent experience of God. Sufis represent a minority in Islamic theology, and thus Graham should maintain the argument within orthodox Islam. Nevertheless, Graham (1982:17) presents Sufism's paradoxical thought that God is both the infinitely transcendent Lord of the universe and also "closer to man than his own jugular vein."³⁶ He further provides several passages from the Qur'an to support the argument of Sufis and makes a conclusion on the transcendence-immanent God from the human experience, ". . . the state of the finite soul [believer] in union with the Transcendent [God], where one is lost to ego [transcendence] and then sustained and buoyed in the everlasting presence of the Divine [immanence]" (Graham 1982:18). In conclusion, in Islam, from the perspective of God, there is no sense of His immanence; it is the believers' hope of experiencing God (the immanent God) through their transcendent way of life that is evident in the Sufis. The God of the Qur'an maintains and reflects the absolute transcendence within the realm of special revelation.

³⁶ This is from Surah 50:16, "It was We who created man and We know what dark suggestions his soul makes to him: for We are nearer to him than (his) jugular vein." However, this verse is not an indication of the immanence of God, but the omniscience of God, so that God knows the will of the believers. Omnipresence and omniscience are generally considered to be aspects of God's transcendence (Lemke 1981:552). Ali interprets it figuratively, "As the blood-stream [jugular vein] is the vehicle of life and consciousness, the phrase 'nearer than the jugular vein' implies that Allah knows more truly the innermost state of our feeling and consciousness than does our own ego" (Ali 1989:1348).

3.5 TRANSCENDENCE IN CHRISTIANITY

In Christianity, transcendence is a theological term referring to the relationship of God to creation which may mean difference or “otherness” and distance or remoteness (Marchant 1960:528). Immanence is the counterpart of transcendence. Philip Hughes (1960:280) concisely explains the two terms:

Theologically, the former [immanence] connotes an indwelling of God within the world and its processes, the latter [transcendence] the superiority of his existence above and beyond the temporal sphere....God is immanent in the sense that he is everywhere present (Ps. 139) and that the order of nature unmistakably reveals his handiwork and his eternal power and sovereignty (Ps. 19; Rom. 1:20); God is transcendent in the sense that in being and majesty he is infinitely above all that is human and temporal.

Robert Crotty (1982:48) analyses the Christian origin of the transcendence of God from post-exilic Judaism. He compares the Old Exodus of the people of Israel with the New Exodus of the Christian church where the immanent activity of the transcendent God is tangible. Crotty initiates his discussion with a general definition of transcendence within the context of Christian theology, including the Christian antinomy, the transcendence and immanence of God.

First, Crotty (1982:48) delimits the Christian definition of transcendence of God as similar to Judaism’s definition of God as the “Wholly Other.” He says the transcendence of God is an

attribute of God indicating that he is outside and independent of the world. This definition is a confirmation of orthodox Christian theology that God cannot be confined to any spacio-temporal context (Erickson 1985:312; Grudem 1994:267). However, Crotty (1982:48) argues that there is “an historical involvement of the transcendent God in the cosmos and, above all, in human history.” This aspect of transcendence confirms the Judaic concept of transcendence: the “Wholly the Same.” For this legitimate corresponding definition of the transcendence of God, Crotty’s approach to the study of transcendence through Judaism lends a valuable perspective to understanding the Christian doctrine of the transcendence of God.

Unlike Zuesse’s approach to the transcendence of God within the Torah ritual in Judaism, Crotty (1982) observes the presence of a transcendent God through the concept of *Shekinah*.³⁷ The term *Shekinah* is derived from the Hebrew word שָׁכַן (to dwell) and indicates the presence of the glory of God. Payne Barton (1960:484) delineates the word from the localisation of God with the denial of any permanent or apprehensible presence of God. Furthermore, from the definition *Shekinah* derived from the implication of שָׁכַן, Crotty (1982:49) asserts that “The *Shekina* was an abiding, active presence which would fulfil the expectations of the people of Israel, and soon the very word functioned as a surrogate for the name of YHWH.” *Shekinah* becomes a central and key component of the transcendent community of the people of Israel by the presence of God among them. Peters (2003:168) says this presence of God seems to be understood by the early Israelites as more literally and more communally, as God’s dwelling among the people in an almost physical sense.

³⁷ See further discussion of *Shekinah* in Christianity and Islam in 4.4.4, “*Shekinah* and the Ark of the Covenant.”

If the Old Exodus event of *Shekinah* was realised under the historical Moses, then the New Exodus event of *Shekinah* took place in the person and activity of a Moses-like figure, Jesus of the New Testament. Having experienced Jesus' presence on earth, Christians confirmed the Old Exodus of *Shekinah* in the present time of the New Exodus under Jesus. This transcendent act of God is then explained with the new terminology of Christians, *Abba* (Father). Crotty (1982:51) explains that Christians, having experienced the immanent activity of the transcendent God, devised a new terminology, *Abba*. This Aramaic word for "Father" replaced the personal name of God (YHWH) to indicate familiarity and paternal closeness to God.

By using the intimate Aramaic term *Abba*, the early Christians demonstrated the *Shekinah* glory of God presented through the presence of Jesus on earth as "here" [on earth] and "now" [at our present time]. For the future presence of *Shekinah*, the Greek word *paraclete* ["comforter or Spirit of Jesus" (Jn 14:26)] fulfils the continuing presence of the transcendent God among the believers after Jesus' ascension. However, this experience of the transcendent God faced the development of an orthodox doctrine of the Trinity under the influence of the hellenisation of Christian thought that resulted in the emphasis of the transcendent God over the immanent God. This was a result of Greek philosophy (Platonism, Neoplatonism and Gnosticism) which exercised a vast influence on early Christian theology. Greek philosophy influenced Christian theology with the notion that the world of physical objects is an inferior kind of reality as "the material world was evil, the immaterial good" (Kärkkäinen 2004:61). Thus any human experience of God, which is physical and inferior to the spirit, would only be a distortion of the true perfection of the godhead (Crotty 1982:53).

Crotty (1982:57) proceeds to describe the origin of the “Death of God movement” from Bonhoeffer’s attempt to reject Greek-based ideas of transcendence and the demythologization of Rudolf Bultmann in terms of the spatial distance of transcendence of God. Kärkkäinen (2004:173) concludes that Bonhoeffer believed that God can be found “out there” with ordinary life. This “God is everywhere” concept developed into the later thoughts of “God is not here” for everything with God means nothing is God. Therefore, “the death of God meant the unreality of the idea of God or the word *God*” (Erickson 1985:114). “The Death of God” movement bases its ideas on Philippians 2:7 where the Godhead “emptied” (*kenōsis*) itself thoroughly into Jesus and God became identical with humanity by negating his own objective existence through finite life and death. Thus, the movement emphasises the immanence of God which paradoxically results in the absence of God from the world or the nonexistence of God for “the God who is wholly transcendent has died” (Kärkkäinen 2004:171, 172). Due to his untimely death, Bonhoeffer failed to reintroduce the idea of the immanence of God (Crotty 1982:56) and thus the “Death of God movement” prevailed in the 1960’s. The Death of God movement became a direct threat to Christian faith, and thus the Bultmann school of thought raised the question of eschatology that sees the birth of the “Theology of Hope.” Crotty (1982:60) gives his conclusion of the discussion of Christians’ thought of the transcendence of God based on the Theology of Hope:

So, in summary, the God of the Theology of Hope is not the *Actus Purus* or the *Summum Bonum* of the Greek-based philosophies but he is essentially the power of the future which contradicts the negativeness of the present and frees man to overcome all negatives. The theological affirmation of divine creation does not refer to a primordial event in the past but to the eschatological future, for without such a future there is no Christianity and there is no God.

Then, according to Crotty's argument, the Theology of Hope calls for Christians to be future-oriented people whose present experience of reality through the Holy Spirit will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. The presence of God, as reflected in *Shekinah* of Exodus and the Church, will continually exist among Christians with the presence of the *paraclete*. Yet, the Theology of Hope looks forward to balancing the trend of Christian emphasis on transcendence over the immanence of God. Crotty's argument of the transcendence of God adequately delineates the paradoxical argument of the transcendence-immanence of God through the concept of *Shekinah* with this Theology of Hope, which looks at the present and future of God's relationship with humankind.

3.6 CONCLUSION

Evaluating the transcendence of God in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, there is clear evidence that the concept of transcendence in Judaism has influenced both Islam and Christianity. For example, the two pillars of transcendence of God in Judaism, "Wholly Other" and "Wholly the Same" have a fundamental value for both Islam's and Christianity's concepts of God. Within these two pillars of the transcendence of God, Judaism explores the experience of God through the Torah ritual. God became "Wholly Other" for one cannot experience him unless he is in "an ecstasy of death" (Zuesse 1982:25). Drawn from Zuesse's (1982:24-25) argument of the "kiss of God"³⁸ from Exodus 33:20, I conclude that the "Wholly Other" is a result of God's withdrawal from the sinful world. As individuals and groups alike, people can be separated from this sinful world by observing the Torah ritual and

³⁸ By "the kiss of God," Zuesse (1982:24-25) means that the experience of the oneness of God is intensely different from the ordinary ego consciousness that can be fulfilled only in an ecstasy of death based on Exodus 33:20. This context of Exodus will be further discussed in chapter 4.

becoming transcendent from the world. Then, the transcendent people may experience the “Wholly the Same” God by identifying with the historical Israel.

Similar to the “Wholly Other” of Judaism, orthodox Islam emphasises the separateness of God and approaches God through true worship. True worship in total submission to God emphasises the oneness of God, thus making God transcendent above all others. To experience this transcendent God, Islamic believers seek to achieve union with God through the expression of their worship and a total submission to God (Islam).

On the other hand, Christianity’s argument for the transcendence of God is somewhat different from the arguments of Islam and Judaism. Both Judaism and Islam approach the transcendence of God with the aim of an active human experience of God while Christianity reflects God’s active appearance that results in a passive human experience of God. Christianity sees the “Wholly Other” and “Wholly the Same” God. It approaches the transcendence of God through the Old and New Exodus. In the Old Exodus, the transcendent and immanent appearance of God is seen through the promise of *Shekinah*, that is “the presence of God” (Kärkkäinen 2004:274) consummated in the coming of Jesus (Kaiser 1978:82, 132; 1995:45). As God transcends (“Wholly Other”) from creation through a cloud-like glory, his presence appears (“Wholly the Same”) in the same cloud with God’s self-declaration to make his dwelling place among the people (*Shekinah*). In the New Testament, God’s dwelling became visual in the incarnation of Jesus and this immanence continues through the Holy Spirit after Jesus’ ascension. This is called the New Exodus under the Moses-like figure of Jesus, as compared to the Old Exodus under Moses.

Judaism emphasises God’s transcendence due to the “kiss of God” from the sinful nature of humankind as well as from God’s immanence through the sanctification of the believer through the written guidelines of the Torah ritual. Islam expresses the unholy nature of humans, which causes the experience of the absolute otherness of God. Christianity maintains the notion of the Judaic transcendence of God with implications of *Shekinah* which result in a close fellowship of the believers with God. This is evident from the calling of God, “Abba.” Then, though none of the three discussions directly mentions it, the argument for the transcendence of God underscores the sinful nature of man (in contrast to which we see the transcendence of God) while God is actively involved in human history (which shows the immanence of God). Believers are then able to know God because God’s immanence is manifested among believers, but their experience is limited to what God reveals to the believers (the reality of God); believers can only know or experience him within that revelation.

From the above conclusion of the theoretical discussion of the transcendence of God in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, there are some feasible questions to be answered. They are in the area of the believers’ experience of God within the limit of God’s revelation, prohibitions to experiencing God based on the sinful nature of humankind, and misunderstanding of God’s manifestation. These are some of the areas dealt with in chapter 4 along with the major investigation of God’s immanence and transcendence in Islam and Christianity with regard to the limited experience of Adam, Abraham, and Moses.