

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF RELIGION AND THE BODY

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TRANSFIGURATION

Márcio Vilar

1 Introduction¹

Widely used in Western texts, *transfiguration* appears clear, referenced by several entries in different dictionaries and academic literature. However, upon closer inspection, it is not apparent what is meant when one refers to it. What is *transfiguration*? Under which conditions does it take place?

Transfiguration, as a noun, is defined in the *Collins* English dictionary as “the act or an instance of transfiguring or the state of being transfigured,” “the change in the appearance of Christ that took place before three disciples (Matthew 17:1–9),” and “the Church festival held in commemoration of this on Aug 6.” As a verb, *transfiguration* means, first, “to change or cause to change in appearance” and, second, “to become or cause to become more exalted.” One finds variations of these definitions, and eventually additional ones, in other English dictionaries, and its meanings differ very little to the registered in continental European languages. Moreover, many examples offered here portray contemporary, sometimes quite-ephemeral situations that, initially, contrast with the sacredness attributed to transfiguration as it appears in biblical sources. For instance, “As she gazed down at the baby, her face was transfigured with tenderness” (*Cambridge*); “In this light the junk undergoes a transfiguration; it shines” (*Oxford*); or “The paintings are a meditation on war, death, and transfiguration” (*Collins*). Most people use *transfiguration* as a synonym for “change,” “transformation,” and “metamorphoses.” Although none of the aforementioned definitions and uses are indeed incorrect, specific meanings and uses of *transfiguration* sometimes get lost in translation.

Regarding the literature in the humanities and social sciences, including theology and religious studies, most scholarly publications remain circumscribed to the survey of transfiguration as found in the Bible or seek to apply it to a single case study outside a theological scope. In either case, conducting a systematic analysis of *transfiguration* from a comparative and transdisciplinary perspective remains mostly unaccomplished. Yet I believe that the very conceptual elaboration of *transfiguration* as an analytical tool capable of simultaneously apprehending multiple aspects of contemporary realities, such as bodily, religious, and political ones, as inextricably intertwined, is possible through a critical differentiation from and repositioning of its diverse uses and related references. This chapter offers a brief contribution to this broader project mainly by exploring the primary distinction between transfiguration and metamorphoses, or transformation, and its implications from a historical and relational perspective.

In what follows, I present essential elements for the production of an inventory of the uses and definitions of transfiguration as found in religious texts and humanities literature. During my investigation, I did not find a cumulative conceptual development of it. Instead, after having sought to identify what many of its uses and reappropriations in different historical periods and places look like, I here draft variations of an archetypal narrowly related to the savior and/or hero. As an ideal type, I suggest that transfiguration as archetypal stands for *the self-unfolding of a person as triggered through a transgressive encounter with another as wished unknown, which as catalyzer recreates the surrounding world in a new fashion. At the same time, the involved cosmological orders manifest and switch themselves through and with the self-unfolding body of the transfiguring person.* In other words, in transfiguration, the changing appearance of one's body coincides with, expresses, and stimulates the change of concurrent paradigmatic models of cosmological order (thus, also politicoreligious ones) and their repositioning. Given its importance, transfiguration stands alongside critical concepts such as initiation, ritual, myth, taboo, purity, sacrament, and sacrifice. To begin with, the principal distinction is between transfiguration and metamorphoses.

2 Of Metamorphoses as Heathen and Transfiguration as Christian Topos

During the Hellenistic period, metamorphoses were used to designate a corporeal change, the transformation of someone's form into another form, by which the consciousness of the metamorphosed being remains intact. By analyzing the Greek mythological literature produced at that time, Thomas Hatina notes that "in the stories of Arachne, Zeus, Daphne, and other gods who had the power to change form, the transformations were usually from a human/god figure to an animal or plant" (2016, 11). Particularly, through an analysis of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, which is "contemporaneous with nascent Christianity" (ibid.) and, after Homer, comprises "the most important source for metamorphoses" (ibid.), Hatina verifies that in the "15 books that comprise this work, gods and humans are constantly being transformed into different shapes and beings" (ibid.). Similarly, in the book *Metamorphoses (The Golden Ass)*, from the late second century AD, Apuleius – a Numidian who lived under the Roman Empire and became a renowned Latin writer – tells the story of Lucius, a young traveler, who wanted to transform himself into a bird but, in a magic spell gone wrong, mistakenly transformed himself into an ass. Lucius finally returns to human form when the goddess Isis undoes his transformation (*reformationis*) in exchange for eternal worship to her. This sense of metamorphoses is common and used in several languages nowadays, as in Franz Kafka's book *The Metamorphoses* (as the English translation of the German word *Verwandlung*, i.e., mutation).

For centuries, the word "metamorphoses" (μετεμορφώθη) has occupied several theologians and biblical scholars who read the New Testament directly in Greek. The reason might be its association with "transfiguration." For instance, professor of New Testament and exegesis Benjamin W. Bacon expresses his astonishment when, at the beginning of the last century, he asked: How did the evangelists come "by the extraordinary term μετεμορφώθη"? (1902, 256). Indeed, when one looks at some biblical translations, this association appears more complicated than at first sight. Besides its circulation in antiquity throughout the Mediterranean, it is noteworthy that Ovid and Apuleius used *metamorphoses* only as the title of their respective publications and did not use the word *transfiguratus* as its synonym within their texts. Instead, Apuleius uses *reformationis*, while Ovid employs *reformamis*, *transformia*, and *mutatio*².

In its verbal conjugations, "transfiguration" appears in six passages of the *Vulgata*, the Latin translation of the New Testament from Koine Greek, often attributed to Jerome of Stridon. There is also a single appearance in the Old Testament, constituting seven uses. As can be seen

in the following table, *transfiguratus* is used to translate three different words. First, “*métallon*” (μεταλλευομένη), later translated through variants of “adaptation,” “alteration,” or “change,” and not necessarily directly from Greek³. Second, “metamorphoses” (μετεμορφώθη), which became a central issue in theology and religious studies. Third, “metaschimatizo” (μετεσχημάτισα), possibly a neology consisting of a compound term built through the juxtaposition of “meta” and “schematizo” (from “schíma,” i.e., *figure, shape, scheme*). There are two further passages in which *metamorphoses* is not translated as *transfiguration* but, instead, as “reformamini” and “transformamur.” All these appearances remain unaltered in the *Nova Vulgata*.

“To (Be) Transfigure(d)” in a Comparative Translational Perspective

Nr	Location/source	NA28 ⁴ 2012 (unknown)	Vulgata end of fourth century	Lutherbibel 1534	King James 1769 (1611)	OSB ⁵ 1992
01	Wisdom of Solomon 16:25	μεταλλευομένη	transfigurata	wandeln	altered	adapted itself
02	Matthew 17:2	μετεμορφώθη	transfiguratus	ward verkleret	transfigured	was transfigured
03	Mark 9:2	μετεμορφώθη	transfiguratus	sich verkleret	transfigured	was transfigured
04	Rom 12:2	μεταμορφοῦσθε	reformamini	euch verendert	transformed	transformed
05	1 Corinthians 4:6	μετεσχημάτισα	transfiguravi	mich gedeut	in a figure transferred	adapted being
06	2 Corinthians 3:18	μεταμορφοῦμεθα ⁶	transformamur	verkleret werden	are changed	being transformed
07	2 Corinthians 11:13	μετασχηματιζόμενοι	transfigurantes	sich verstellen	transforming	masquerading
08	2 Corinthians 11:14	μετασχηματίζεται	transfiguratur	sich verstellt	transformed	masquerades
09	2 Corinthians 11:15	μετασχηματίζονται	transfigurentur	verstellen	transformed	masquerade

Source: Author’s elaboration

Because the word “metamorphoses” is absent in Luke’s description of the same event found in Matthew and Mark, Hatina suggests that “Luke may have avoided the use of the term because he did not want his Gentile audiences to associate Jesus’ transfiguration with pagan myths and legends, which focused on changes in forms rather than the enhancement of the existing form” (Hatina 2016, 4)⁷. Indeed, there are several references to the tensions between Gentiles and Jewish Christians in the time of the early churches (Bacon 1902; Eliade 1982). Examples of these controversies are found mainly in the preaching of Paul of Tarsus, the Apostle of the Heathen, who preached to audiences which had different notions of the body.

After Christianity became first tolerated and then the official religion of Rome in the late fourth century, this distinction continued to be a matter of concern. At least for St. Augustine of Hippo, a contemporary of Jerome of Stridon. To anticipate what would later become a consensus, St. Augustine unambiguously used the word *transfiguration* in contrast to *metamorphoses* as a change of form and transformation characteristic of pagans. At the same time, he skillfully recognized both notions as part of Jesus’s capacities. Writing in his *Harmony of the Gospels* about the blindness of Jesus’s disciples in identifying the risen Lord, St. Augustine stated that Jesus could:

alter the form of His flesh, so that His figure might be literally and actually different, and not the one which they [Jesus’s disciples] were in the habit of beholding. For,

indeed, even before His passion, He was transfigured on the mount so that His countenance “did shine as the sun.” And He who made genuine wine out of genuine water can also transform any body whatsoever in all unquestionable reality into any other kind of body which may please Him.

(Augustine of Hippo 2004, 203)

Despite his portrait of Jesus as a wizard-like figure, which he also disregards in his *Sermons* (2007 [1888], 1990), Augustine clearly distinguishes between Jesus’s power to change the appearance, form, and reality of himself and anybody else and his transfiguration as a single occurrence, calling it “the great vision” (“*Visionem magnam in monte . . .*”) (2007 [1888], 348). Later, this differentiation will become commonplace within Christianity.

Subsequent translations of the Vulgate into modern languages also employ derivatives of variant terms, such as “adapted” (Wisdom of Solomon 16:25), “transferred” (1 Cor. 4:6), and “masquerade” (Cor. 11:13–15), alongside “change” and “transformation” (in the case of English), as synonyms of *transfiguration* and *metamorphoses*. These other words began to be included predominantly from the Renaissance in the context of European elaboration, adoption, and improvement attempts of ancient Roman and Greek antiquities, after the invention of the printing press, and under the impact of the encounters with new non-Christian people during the *Age of Discoveries*.

2.1 The New World

During the great navigations and the colonization processes of the Americas, from Terra del Fuego to the Bering Strait, as well as in other parts of the world, Christianized European settlers often had to deal with people who were acquainted with notions of bodily transformation as fundamental parts of their mythologies. Frictions were then generated through the encounter with diverse shamanic and totemic traditions that somehow restaged those situations experienced through preaching the Good News to Gentiles at the beginning of Christianity. This was especially so given that the central notion of transformation found in Amerindian mythologies shares important features with that of metamorphoses in Greek mythology.

For instance, among the Kwakiutls, as documented by George Hunt (Boas 1921), or the Yudjá (Lima 2005), as well as among many other Amerindian people (e.g., Kasten 2009), countless stories tell about transformations, mostly from humans into animals (such as dogs, wolves, and fish) and vice versa. These seldom take place purposefully, occurring very often when the protagonists find themselves in liminal situations, sometimes close to death. Normally, their transformations are described in terms of changing their skin, as these were clothes, and usually end up implying a sort of *gift* since their change of form is seen as a journey from which, if they succeed, they return with treasures, such as, among other things, new knowledge, extended kinship, new weapons, and dances. Simultaneously, these journeys also imply initiation experiences into one or more of many coexisting worlds inhabited by other humans who cannot be seen as such in daily affairs but rather perceived otherwise (as animals, trees, stars, and so on).

On the one hand, by conceiving these coexisting worlds as implying different natures that share a common human substrate, the experiences of transformations narrated in Amerindian mythologies point to a multiperspectivism that accommodates multiple modes of existence (see, e.g., Viveiros de Castro 2022). On the other hand, the impact of the global spreading of Christianity through the colonization processes, with the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven in the form of *civilization* in the tropes and elsewhere, was also appointed as resulting in multiple unforeseen world transfigurations (e.g., Ribeiro 2021 [1969]; Burrridge 1975).

2.2 Consolidating Transfiguration as a Christian Epiphany

Martin Luther, who translated the Bible into German mainly from the Greek sources compiled by Erasmus von Rotterdam (the *Textus Receptus*), substantially reinforced this distinction. However, he employed the German word “Verklärung,” which literarily means *enlightenment* or *illumination* instead (Luther 2012 [1534])⁸. Posteriorly, *transfiguration* also became the title of the passage in the New Testament that illustrates it explicitly. According to Hatina (2016, 1), it first occurred in the *King James Version* of the Bible in 1661.

Finally, in the context of other modern translations of the Bible directly from Greek, a dual movement substantially diminished the ambiguity of transfiguration within the limits of the Bible by singularizing it as a Christian epiphany. On the one hand, the modern translation of “metamorphoses” as change and transformation became more attributable to the formation process of the exemplary character of the Christian person, for example, in Rom, 12:2, 1 Cor. 4:6, and 2 Cor. 3:18 (see Hatina 2016, 1). On the other hand, in contemporary translations, the word *transfiguration* was kept only in two passages of the synoptic gospels marking the same specific event. Since then, *transfiguration* (or *Verklärung*), according to many different versions of the New Testament, refers specifically to what three disciples experienced during the enlightenment of Jesus’s body at the top of a mountain. The vision referred to as *transfiguration* is found in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. It is described, in Matthew (17, 1–8), as the following:

17 [1] Six days later, Jesus took Peter, James, and John, the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves. [2] And in their presence, he was transfigured; his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became a brilliant white. [3] And they saw Moses and Elijah appear, talking with him. [4] Then Peter spoke: “Lord,” he said, “it is good that we are here. Would you like me to make three shelters here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah?” [5] While he was still speaking, a bright cloud suddenly cast its shadow over them, and a voice called from the cloud: “This is my beloved Son, in whom I take delight; listen to him.” [6] At the sound of the voice the disciples fell on their faces in terror. [7] Then Jesus came up to them, touched them, and said, “Stand up; do not be afraid.” [8] And when they raised their eyes, there was no one but Jesus to be seen.

With it, the differentiation between *transfiguration* as a synonym of *metamorphoses* in general (and, therefore, as transformation and change of form and appearance), as usually employed from the Hellenistic period and at the beginning of Christianity to the present, and *transfiguration* as a specific epiphanic event coproduces Christianity institutionally as much as a theological motif during this same period.

2.3 Salvation Through the Work of Art

Concomitantly to this process, the word *transfiguration* was used between the Renaissance and the modern age to point to encounters between artists’ bodies and God and/or saints, the fruit of which becomes materialized through divinized works of art. Artists such as Raphael, Mozart, and Beethoven are emblematic examples (see Strong 2010; Kramer 2006, respectively). Elizabeth Kramer thoroughly analyzed this phenomenon through the lens of the concept of *Kunstreligion* in the context of German romanticism:

In *Kunstreligion*, art is thought to express divine feelings, the artistic experience is compared to religious ritual, and artistic works are seen as divine presences on earth,

whether as divine in and of themselves or as striking manifestations of the divine. Particularly important to the field of music, early nineteenth-century *Kunstreligion* inspired beliefs that the concert, composer, and musical work each embodied aspects of the sacred to varying degrees. Audiences were depicted as listening with devotional contemplation, composers were described as deities, and the musical work was thought more capable than any other artistic form of revealing the divine.

(Kramer 2006, 74)

In this context, transfiguration played a fundamental role:

Transfiguration (*Verklärung*) was one of the most important spiritual ideas associated with *Kunstreligion*. Originating in religious writings of antiquity, the concept of transfiguration entered musical aesthetics around 1800. In German-language writings after Luther, the state of transfiguration, in which an individual appears in heavenly garb, was most commonly evoked in connection with Christianity, whether in descriptions of Jesus's transfiguration . . . or as the spiritual transformation of the Christian believer (2 Cor. 3:18). In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, transfiguration was increasingly used in secular arenas. Friedrich Schiller, for instance, employed "verklärt" in both secular and sacred contexts in his drama *Maria Stuart*.

(Ibid.)

In this sense, transfiguration became technically achievable through genius art, which in turn expressed divinity. The elected, chosen artists encountering divine forces coproduce works of art that are at once signs and confirmations of the presence of the divine among humans. At the same time, their transfiguring works of art also elevate those who witness them, that is, the public (Strong 2010). The audience members around works of art that accomplished transfiguration are contaminated through their more-than-human divine radiance as to become transfigured-transfiguring actors in turn.

This transfiguration would gradually become less confessional, although it kept its religious character, partially attaching it as divine attributes to ideas such as self-realization that, linked to the ascension of the individual in modern societies, would potentially become a source of emancipation. Later, this development of this notion of *transfiguration* would be adopted and reappropriated by thinkers such as Nietzsche (Strong 2010) and, later, Foucault (Venn 2005) as constitutive of modernity.

That said, the ambiguity of *transfiguration* as a synonym of *metamorphoses* and, simultaneously, as a specific event persists to the present day. It is possible that, paradoxically, the Latin version of the New Testament introduced the Hellenistic notion of metamorphoses current among Gentiles, while its Greek sources, probably written by converted Jews, maintained this distinction. Something similar possibly happened in the Gothic version of the New Testament (see, e.g., Jellinek 1918, 30–31). That is maybe why, up to the present day, and with the emergence of science as legitimate producers of facts and associated secularization processes, most people tend to see no significant difference between *transfiguration* and *transformation* or *change*.

2.4 Of Demeter's Enlightenment Song

Going beyond semantic investigations, Hatina calls attention to a diffusionist interpretation, which he calls "the enthronement theory" (2016, 14), according to which the story of Jesus's

transfiguration was influenced by the following passage (275–280), translated from the Greek by Gregory Nagy, in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*:

“I am Demeter, the holder of *túmai*. I am the greatest boon and joy for immortals and mortals alike.
[270] But come! Let a great temple, with a great altar at its base, be built by the entire *dêmos*. Make it at the foot of the acropolis and its steep walls. Make it loom over the well of Kallikhoron, on a prominent hill. And I will myself instruct you in the sacred rites so that, in the future, you may perform the rituals in the proper way and thus be pleasing to my *noos*.”
[275] So saying, the goddess changed her size and appearance, shedding her old age, and she was totally enveloped in beauty. And a lovely fragrance wafted from her perfumed robes. The radiance of her immortal complexion shone forth from the goddess. Her blond hair streamed down her shoulder.
[280] The well-built palace was filled with light, as if from a flash of lightning. She went out of the palace, and straightaway her [Metaneira’s] knees buckled. For a long time she [Metaneira] was speechless.

(Homer 270–280)

Both narratives share significant similarities, such as, among other things, the description and symbolism of the public enlightenment of divine entities before humans, with whom they must mutually come to terms. Indeed, like in the case of Jesus’s transfiguration, her change does not imply metamorphoses into the form of another living being, including some chimera; instead, her change consists in her becoming rejuvenated. Thus another version, or unfolding, of herself, which is not a minor detail.

Indeed, as found in the literature, an essential distinction between metamorphoses and transfiguration is that the first might be undone, just as the metamorphoses of the sorcerer’s apprentice, who became the Golden Ass, are undone and he can return to his human form (Apuleius 1988). Because those among these Hellenistic figures who were metamorphosed into diverse body-natures often struggle to get back to their old shapes, which they see as their original and natural ones, it seems reasonable to suppose that many among them perceive their new bodies as strange ones (ibid., 41). Mainly when the metamorphoses are the unwished result of magic conflicts. For transfiguration, by contrast, there is no way back and, significantly, no longing for that, as in Demeter’s case.

Nevertheless, although this approximates Demeter’s enlightenment to Jesus’s transfiguration and whether the narrative structure was borrowed, Demeter’s story lacks a fundamental element in Christian interpretations of transfiguration. Demeter’s *change* takes place as part of the natural order of things as conceived within what one, at that time, expected from gods and goddesses like her who belonged to the shared Ancient Greek universe. The source of Demeter’s power and what makes her enlightening self-improvement neither lies outside the established cosmological order nor causes a rupture with it. In other words, the cosmological order is not implicated or questioned in the context of Demeter’s enlightenment, just as it is not threatened in the case of metamorphoses stories. On the contrary, Greek cosmology and mythology are confirmed and further reinvigorated through the entities’ activities which, belonging to the established cosmological order, exercise the power they are entitled to.

That is not the case when Jesus and his followers experience that revealing enlightenment on the top of the mountain, which has to do with the enthronement of Jesus as much as with

the dethroning of the hegemonic earthly order, that is, the world of humans and its fake deities (like *Mammon*). In contrast to metamorphoses, *transfiguration* decisively involves switching cosmological orders as paradigmatic models through the body, including the mind, of those who embody their moving boundaries. So much so that the authority of established entities is compromised. At the same time, concurrent actors begin to emerge, not seldom, as the new holders of truth and bringers of the light increase. In the transfiguration, one becomes empowered through affiliation to the new emergent order that seeks to replace the established one under the sign of salvation. Finally, while Demeter, as a goddess, was already immortal before and remained immortal after her enlightenment, Jesus would still have to die as a human after his transfiguration and before becoming immortal.

3 Becoming Part of an Eschatological Revolution

As parts of the synoptic gospels, the transfiguration-related passages can be superimposed onto each other to allow a complementary reading of their descriptions to provide a bigger picture of that same event (see Augustine of Hippo 1990, 2004). In particular, some differences are worth addressing. First, according to Luke (9:28–29), Jesus and his disciples “went up a mountain to pray,” and it was while Jesus “was praying” that “his face changed and his clothes became dazzling white.” Additionally, following the appearance of Moses and Elijah, as Peter questioned whether to provide shelter, “he spoke without knowing what he was saying” (Luke 33), given that “they [all three disciples] were so terrified” (Mark 9:6). Finally, in Matthew and Mark, there is no mention of what Jesus said to Moses and Elijah, whereas in Luke it is stated that Moses and Elijah “spoke [to Jesus] about his departure, and the destiny he was to fulfil in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). In all accounts, after the transfiguration took place, Jesus instructed his disciples not to tell others what they had seen “until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead” (Matthew 17:9)⁹.

As an established theological topos, this episode has been exhaustively discussed for centuries, and disputes for the legitimate interpretation of transfiguration between different Christian traditions and doctrines were joined, among others, by St. Augustine through his idealization of the *City of God* in the Rome period, Thomas de Aquinas’s natural theology in the thirteenth century, and Gregory Palamas’s doctrine of light in the late-Byzantine period.

On the one hand, many analyses situate their focuses interchangeably between historical and hermeneutic aspects to find out its meaning(s). As part of these efforts, the elements assembled through the transfiguration narrative are mobilized sometimes as objects of special attention according to their particular symbolic properties in the framework of particular explanations. That is the case, for example, of the symbolism of the “high mountain” as a place appropriate for a connection between heaven and earth. Likewise, brightness, whiteness, and “light” are commonly related to existence, but also to purity, divinity, power, and apparently above all, the superiority of the good over the evil (Palamas 1983 [1341], 1:2–2). Associated with that, “glory” is often understood among scholars as a synonym of God’s participation in human affairs. What or who is “the cloud” is also a central matter. The presence, positions, and representativeness of Moses and Elijah (the latter often seen as consubstantiating John the Baptist; e.g., as in Matthew 11:13–15) are often considered.

On the other hand, certain elements associated with transfiguration are also found scattered across other biblical passages, such as the statement “This is my beloved Son . . .,” which is also pronounced immediately after John baptized Jesus through a voice coming from the sky (Matthew 3:15–17). Likewise, central attributes of transfiguration are restaged at the end of the

gospel, coinciding with the vision of the angel that appeared to Jesus's disciples to confirm his resurrection:

About daybreak on the first day of the week, when the Sabbath was over, Mary of Magdala and the other Mary came to look at the grave. Suddenly there was a violent earthquake; an angel of the Lord descended from heaven and came and rolled away the stone, and sat down on it. His face shone like lightning; his garments were white as snow. At the sight of him the guards shook with fear and fell to the ground as though dead./The angel spoke to the women: "You," he said, "have nothing to fear."

(Matthew 28:1–7)

For these reasons, some scholars consider transfiguration as one of the decisive moments in Jesus's life cycle, alongside birth, baptism, death, and resurrection (e.g., Stein 1976). The different interpretations of transfiguration frequently overlap and might exclude or even combine (Hatina 2016, 1). For instance, according to Francis J. Badcock, the transfiguration was

at once a manifestation of that heavenly state into which He had passed by the endowment of the Holy Spirit [the cloud] at His baptism by St John, an event in itself typical of death and resurrection (Lk. Xii 50), and a revelation confirming to the Apostles the prophecies in word (2 Pet. I 19) which they found it so hard to realize.

(Badcock 1921, 326)

Whatever meanings scholars attribute to Jesus's transfiguration specifically, at least since St. Augustine (e.g., Sermon LXXIX), most of them first situate transfiguration as part of a sequence of events that constitute the broader narrative on the proclamation of the "Good News," that is, the gospel or *euangélion*: "The time has come . . . and the Kingdom of God is close at hand. Repent, and believe the Good News" (Eliade 1982, 332). As stated by Mircea Eliade, this message "expresses the eschatological hope that with few exceptions had dominated Jewish religiosity for more than a century. Following the prophets, following John the Baptist, Jesus predicted the imminent transfiguration of the world: this is the essence of his preaching" (ibid.).

3.1 *Sharing the Same One-Multiple Body*

For Paul of Tarsus, who was engaged in building the Church out of multiple conflictive parts (i.e., bringing together Gentiles and Hebrews), transfiguration as "the enhancement of the self" (Hatina 2016, 4) takes place through immediate contact with and mediation of the divine as world-changing and wished-unknown *other*. As written in the passages which precede the term *transfiguration*, "[t]here is no question of our having sufficient power in ourselves; we cannot claim anything as our own. . . . [I]t is he [God] who has empowered us as ministers of a new covenant, not written but spiritual" (Cor. 3:5–6). That includes Jesus's capacities as a dual entity. By being human and a being of heaven at once, Jesus makes the bridge that enables other humans to be transfigured in his transfiguration and, as such, to experience his baptism, death, and resurrection as if it were one's life cycle. Transfiguration, in Paul's sense, integrates the individual body of the converted into the collective-unique body of the Church composed of the triad and all their affiliates:

Indeed, to this very day, every time the law of Moses is read, a veil lies over the mind of the hearer. But (as scripture says) "Whenever he turns to the Lord, the veil

is removed.” Now the Lord of Whom this passage speaks is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. And because for us there is no veil over the face, we all see as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, and we are being transformed [transfigured] into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, through the power of the Lord who is the Spirit.

(Cor. 3:15–18)¹⁰

To communicate the Good News, Jesus first would have to demonstrate to people that he is the predestined one entitled by God to spread his Word. That is not an easy task, since the prophetic concurrence was exceptionally high (Otto 1908). Robert Holmes argues that the common understanding of Jesus’s disciples was based on terrestrial premises that did not correspond to those of the Kingdom of Heaven. This incompatibility is illustrated, for instance, in the episode in Caesarea Philippi where Jesus explained to his disciples what would happen next, one week before his transfiguration. That is to say, Jesus’s disciples just did not know anything else as their human world and not from that of God.

Consequently, in Jesus’s eyes, their expectations regarding the Savior’s coming were also false. Several authors emphasize that, in that setting, most people tended to imagine and expect the one who would save the Jewish people from its millenary subjugation to be a king who would rule in Jerusalem from the temple while carrying a crown instead of being crucified as a false prophet alongside robbers outside its walls (Holmes 1903; Otto 2014 [1917]; Eliade 2000 [1976]; Hatina 2016, *inter alia*). That was as good as inconceivable for the common Jewish person.

To make matters worse, the teaching of Jesus was not exactly what people would have expected from someone who intended to free the Jewish people from their long oppression. For instance, how could the King of Israel and Son of God say things like, “If someone hits you in the face, give the other side of your face to be hit too”? All the gospels, including that of John, contain scenes before and after transfiguration in which Jesus’s disciples do not understand what he does. Not surprisingly, not only did Jesus and the Kingdom of Heaven become central for theological and biblical interpretations, but so, too, did the witnesses of his transfiguration as privileged members of his audience. Following that, for many scholars, transfiguration is a means used by Jesus to tackle three narrowly interconnected challenges related to his public ministry of the Good News. First, to show his accompanying disciples, through unusual means, who he is. Second, to demonstrate to them what the Kingdom of Heaven is. And finally, and maybe the most difficult, to show that the Kingdom of Heaven is already there, on earth, yet both are not the same.

3.2 Learning to See

For Palamas, after Mircea Eliade, “there had been no change in Jesus [during his transfiguration], but a transformation in the Apostles: the latter, by divine grace, had recovered the ability to see Jesus such as he was, in the blinding light” (1985, 219). According to Palamas, this ability had been lost since humanity fell from paradise (*ibid.*; Palamas 1983 [1341]). It is noteworthy that, in his *Harmony of the Gospels*, St. Augustine had already reflected on different possibilities for what he called the initial difficulty of some of Jesus’s masculine disciples to recognize the risen Lord. Nevertheless, instead of associating the overcoming of their blindness as directly related to Jesus’s previous transfiguration, as in Palamas’s case, St. Augustine argued that the ritual act of sharing the bread caused the disciples to see him. This act, as a sacrament, would have restored the unity between the different parts (or figures), that is, the multitude of the disciples and the

trinity, that compound “the same body,” or in St. Augustine’s words, “His Church” (Augustine of Hippo 2004, 376). According to him:

[N]o one should consider himself to have attained the knowledge of Christ, if he is not a member in His body – that is to say, in His Church. The unity of which is commended to our notice under the sacramental symbol of the bread by an apostle, when he says: “We being many are one bread and one body.” So was it that, when He handed to them the bread which He had blessed, their eyes were opened, and they recognized Him, that is to say, their eyes were opened for such knowledge of Him, in so far as the impediment was now removed which had prevented them from recognizing Him.

(Ibid.)

The discussion about the capacity of Jesus’s followers to see him and the Kingdom of Heaven is found again at the beginning of the modern age in Great Britain. According to Holmes, Rev. Harry Kennedy likewise suggested in an article that:

[T]he purpose of the Transfiguration, viewed from the disciples’ standpoint, was to manifest to them, as it were by anticipation, the post-resurrection appearance of our Lord, to the end that they might be able to recognize in the glorified Jesus the same Jesus whose disciples they had been: such recognition being, of course, essential to their ability to testify to the Resurrection.

(Holmes 1903, 543)¹¹

Disagreeing with this view, Holmes argues that, after his resurrection, Jesus appeared at first to persons who were not present at his transfiguration and yet recognized him as the “risen Lord” without further concerns (ibid., 544). While also seeking to offer another reading of the transfiguration from the perspective of its effects on the witnesses, Holmes and Badcock suggest for their turn that Jesus’s transfiguration can be read, essentially, as a lesson (also Braithwaite 1906).

Finally, just as the Christmas crib portrays Jesus’s birth, the vision that characterizes transfiguration, as in Raphael’s painting, contains all the elements that act as a retelling of cosmic history and confirm the paradox of the arrival of the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, while signing its perpetual omnipresence. It portrays a reunion. According to Badcock:

Moses and Elijah are figures [326] in a parable not spoken but exhibited to prophetic sight, and their reality lies in that which they symbolize, Moses and John the Baptist, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end of the old dispensation, “beginning from Moses” (Lk. Xxiv 27), “the law and the prophets”, “in all the scriptures”, “prophesied until John” (Matt. Xi 18). . . . Moses and John [as Elijah] alike symbolize in their own persons the preparation, in the fulfilment of which they nevertheless have no share; both look forward to and tell of Another in whom their prophecy is to be accomplished.

(1921, 325)

In Christianity, then, transfiguration implies a revelation and the realization of the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven through the sacrifice of Jesus as God’s adopted Son in his human form, that is, as part of the human world, just as God required Abraham to sacrifice his son. That restores the world by recreating it through everyone else’s transfiguration whose sins are cleansed off,

just like the earth is washed off through *the* deluge, as God's Son resurrects as a divine person (see Romanos 12, 1–2). Through their conversion to Christianity, the new adepts abandon the world that they knew while they begin to share Christ's immortality as part of the one-multiple body.

In a nutshell, concerning its essential conditions of possibility, transfiguration occurs by encountering and accepting the unknown-wished *other* as a story in which one might participate (*the Good News*). Secondly, it defies and transgresses the established cosmological order, which functions as a paradigmatic model of religious and political organization, representing what has come to pass. Thirdly, and finally, it occurs as the fulfillment of a prophecy that takes place now, once and for all, to recreate time anew by producing a new era.

4 Of Archetypical Antecedents and Modern Transhumanism

Transfiguration is not a phenomenon described solely in the context of conversion to Christianity as a monotheistic expansionist religion through its adepts' struggles with those whom they regard as heathen. Despite its common associations with Christianity, transfiguration processes can also be found in other religious traditions and systems, as in ancient religions of Egypt, Iran, and in Buddhism, as an archetype relatable to that of the savior and/or hero, even if they are not explicitly referred to as such (Eliade 1978, 1982, 1985).

For instance, in Ancient Egypt, according to Eliade, the tomb "is the place where man's transfiguration (*sakh*) is accomplished" (Eliade 1978, 99) as to overcome both the organic condition of the living and the reality of death. There, "the dead person becomes an *Akh*, [i.e.] a 'transfigured spirit'" as they pass "from the sphere of the meaningless to the sphere of the meaningful" (ibid.). Symbolically, laying the dead in the coffin was equivalent to placing them in their mother's arms or bringing them to bed to wait for a new awakening life (ibid.). In particular, the coffin reproduces the conjunction of figures accompanying the deceased throughout their transfigurative journey. After Eliade, its four sides are "personified as Isis, Nephthys, Horus, and Thoth; its floor is identified with Geb, the earth god, and its cover with the sky goddess. Thus, the deceased in this coffin was surrounded by personifications of the entire cosmos" (ibid.). That resembles transfiguration in the Christian context as a composition, a picture in which, like in the crib, the new world, which is coming and already present at once, is not only represented but also radiates through its watching audience.

Yet the transfiguration of human persons, both royal and common ones, as a substantial improvement of the self achieved through the proper funeral rites, which are described, for example, in *The Book of the Dead*, is only possible through the previous transfiguration of Osiris as a God that came back from the dead, and the "democratization" (ibid.) of his experience.

Since pharaohs cannot die, Osiris's drama represents the single exception. As a symbol of order, justice, energy, and prosperity, Osiris ruled as a legitimate and popular pharaoh. Seth, that is, Osiris's brother, who was inversely associated with chaos (hence as a symbol of disorder), killed him to usurp the throne and threw him into the river. Isis, that is, Osiris's wife (who was also his and Seth's sister), found Osiris's body and managed to get pregnant from him magically. Horus, their son, grew up unknown, and once an adult, he searched for recognition first before the gods of Ennead (ibid., 98). Then, he avenged his father by winning the combat against Seth, after which, as Eliade puts it, Horus went down to the land of the dead and announced the good news: recognized as his father's legitimate successor, he was crowned king. It was thus that he "awakens Osiris; . . . he sets his soul in motion" (ibid.). Osiris returned from the dead not as a physical deity but rather as the soul ("spiritual person") "and vital energy that permeates everything, symbolizing 'the sources of fecundity and growth'" (ibid.).

Eliade calls attention to the universal aspect of Osirisation theology since “Osiris increasingly becomes the paradigmatic model, not only for the sovereigns but also for every individual” (Eliade 1978, 99).

By developing the old conception of death as spiritual transmutation, the theologians of the [New] Empire [in Ancient Egypt] identified the models of this “mystery” at once in Re’s daily exploits and the primordial drama of Osiris. In this way, they articulated in a single system what seemed the supreme example of the eternal and invulnerable (the course of the sun), what was only a tragic episode but, in the last analysis, a fortuitous one (the murder of Osiris), and what would seem by definition to be ephemeral and meaningless (human existence). In the articulation of this soteriology, the role of Osiris was essential. By virtue of him, every mortal could henceforth hope for a “royal destiny” in the other world. In the last analysis, the pharaoh constituted the universal model.

(Ibid., 113)

A period of chaos is succeeded by a period of order through Horus’s predestined figure as the legitimate successor of Osiris and carrier of *ma’at* (i.e., truth, justice). Through Osiris’s pioneering story, the resurrection of which is the conclusive phase of his transfiguration, the entire world is also transfigured. As part of the very same process, everyone else participating in this story is likewise affected and becomes a further transfiguring actor.

At this point, it might be illustrative to mention the transfiguration experience in Paul’s terms as analyzed by Eliade to draw a comparison with the transfiguration experience described previously. According to him, Paul interprets his revelation experience

as analogous to the Crucifixion (Gal. 2:19): he now possesses “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor. 2:16) or “the Spirit of God” (7:40). He does not hesitate to proclaim: “It is Christ speaking in me” (2 Cor. 13:3; Rom. 15:18). He refers to being mystically caught up “into the third heaven” and to “revelations” that he had received from the Lord (2 Cor. 12:1–4, 7). These “signs and wonders” were granted to him by the Spirit of God “to win the allegiance of the pagans” (Rom. 15:18). Despite this privileged experience, Paul does not demand an exceptional status, different from that of others. Every believer accomplishes mystical union with Christ through the sacrament of baptism. For “when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized in his death . . . we went into the tomb with him and indeed joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glory, we too might live a new life” (Rom. 6:3–4). Through baptism, the Christian “is in Christ” (2 Cor. 5:17); he has become a member of a mystical body. Baptized in one Spirit, to “make one body,” “Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens . . . one Spirit was given us all to drink” (1 Cor. 12:13).

(Eliade 1982, 347–348)

Apart from ancient Egypt and the Christian experiences, Eliade sought and explored the transfiguration of the world in other religious traditions, such as in Zarathustra’s legacy in the context of Mazdeism, which he addresses as *Frašō-Kereti* (also Arjomand 1993), as well as in Buddhism in the context of Buddha’s enlightenment (see, especially, Lindtner 2015). Common to them all are the central features, such as the pursuit of immortality and the following of one or more heroes who, situated between switching worlds, enable ordinary humans to have a share in their

numinous force (Otto 2014 [1917]) that can be understood as comprising enlightening teachings and practices.

Yet as discrepant as it might sound, would it not be the case to speak of transfiguration when one looks closely at contemporary evolutionist transhumanist movements in technoscientific societies? Does the ongoing biomedical and nonbiomedical turning of aging into a disease to be overcome through applied reason and by further advancing science and technology share common fears and longings with those found, for instance, in Zarathustra's pursuit to *cure existence* through sacrifice, the search for immortality sought by Chinese Buddhists through Yoga, and by Christians through baptism?

In principle, if one understands transhumanism as the set of future-making projects that aim to revolutionarily change the human condition through rational reason and high technology (Huberman 2020), it seems that it seeks to fulfill the conditions of possibility for transfiguration to take place. From a symmetrizing perspective, it would be possible to state that, as the work of art from the Renaissance could potentially become a path and a source of salvation for humans when touched by the grace of God, mainly since the Enlightenment, technology and science might become the contemporary means to overcome the human condition and death when touched by Reason.

After all, also in our contemporary, highly individualistic, technoscientific societies, *transfiguration* might refer to the radical effects of a transformation which takes place in daily life by an ordinary human person, and to a change not only of form but also of ways of feeling and perceiving which brings people to participate in a world reordering related to a dislocation of perspective. So much so that, from a transhumanist perspective, the world of humans as limited creatures imprisoned in their bodies, societies, and planet might be seen as predestined to be transfiguratively replaced by the world of limitless people. This new person, a transhuman one, would be distinctively generated by means of yet-to-come technoscientific innovations, which by a matter of faith in science, are wished for despite being unknown. The new world, which many among its adherents announce, is still beyond comprehension for most mundane contemporary humans. Yet, until then, transfiguration is already achievable for most people in their daily lives.

Conclusion

Attempts to overcome the human condition through self-enhancement by encountering and affiliating with an unknown-wished other, whose multiple revolutionary effects one seeks to instrumentalize with the help of appropriate materials, rituals, and techniques, have been documented in diverse places and times since antiquity. In Western societies, one of the names given to this pursuit was transfiguration, which in principle refers to its biblical descriptions and relates to theological discussions that coproduce a particular version of an archetypal found in other confessions, such as Ancient Egyptian religion, Buddhism, and Zoroastrianism. This also finds resonance in actual attempts of achieving immortality through the cult of Reason and science. This contrasts with the variations of the notion of metamorphoses, such as transformation and change, found elsewhere in diverse cultures and societies, such as in Ancient Greek, Amerindian mythologies, and modern literature as well, among other things.

To contribute to the understanding of transfiguration as a religious phenomenon directly implied in bodily changes and worldmaking and of the conditions of possibility for it to take place, this chapter supports a broader inventory of its definitions. It uses, mainly by highlighting and investigating, key distinctions between transfiguration and metamorphoses in a transdisciplinary fashion.

Notes

- 1 I would like to thank Bernhard Streck for suggestions, André Visinoni for the help with Greek and Latin words, and Harriet Gardner for proofreading parts of this chapter. The writing of this text was funded by the *Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft* (DFG, German Research Foundation); project-nr 419940268.
- 2 Apparently, the Latin word *transfiguratus* was not common in the antiquity. Researching on an online Latin library (www.thelatinlibrary.com), I just found one use of it (by Seneca the Younger).
- 3 For an etymological discussion about it, see Pfarrer and Etymologist Heinrich Tischner's remarks: www.heinrich-tischner.de/22-sp/2wo/wort/idg/fremdw/m/metall2.htm.
- 4 I compared these appearances with other Greek copies found in Byzantine and Alexandrian texts, including the Sinaiticus Codex.
- 5 *Oxford Studies Bible* (1992).
- 6 On the original copy, one finds the word (maybe incorrectly) written as the following: “μεταφορμορφούμεθα.”
- 7 According to the OBS, “The Gospel of Luke was written about 90 c.e. by a Gentile Christian, one of the first church writers” (1992, 1327).
- 8 According to an actual definition at *Duden Dictionary*, the verb “verklären” (related to the substantive “Verklärung”) refers to the act of giving to someone's face or look a fortunate (“glücklich”) expression. It might also be used in reflexive form (“sich verklären”).
- 9 In fact, the only direct mention to it was made by Peter after Jesus's resurrection in 2 Peter: “For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received from God the Father honour and glory, when there came such a voice to him from the excellent glory, this is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with him in the holy mount” (2 Peter 1, 16–18).
- 10 In this context, the passage 2 Cor. 3:18, by the way, seems to complement the gospels.
- 11 See also Kennedy (1903).

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