

## Transcendence and Immanence

The relationship between God and his creation also marks another way in which the Bible provides a distinctive account of reality. Western thought has long wrestled with the distinction between the transcendent and the immanent. Something is transcendent (from the Latin *transcendere*, meaning “to climb over,” “climb beyond,” or “surmount”) if it exists or operates beyond the universe or beyond our experience. Something is immanent (from the Latin *immanens*, meaning “indwelling” or “inherent”) if it exists or operates within the universe or within our experience.

For most of its history, and with a vengeance since Immanuel Kant, Western thought has considered the transcendent to be mysterious, unknowable, absolutely “other,” whereas the immanent is accessible, known, and virtually indistinguishable from the rest of our experience. These concepts yield either a god who, if transcendent, is so other to us that we can have precious little idea what he/she/it/them is like or a god who, if immanent, dissolves into our everyday lives and becomes indistinguishable from anything and everything else. Neither deity is likely to bother us, but neither can satisfy us either. They are also incompatible. Transcendence and immanence have been cleaved apart on the butcher’s block, packaged and sold separately as the distinct cuts of the ineffable wholly other and the intimate god in all things.

The Bible does not understand transcendence and immanence in this way, nor does it butcher them apart in this way. The Bible does certainly have a category for God being unknowable in some respects (e.g., Isa 55:8–9), but the main reason for God’s transcendence or exaltation is not his metaphysical otherness but his blazing holiness. As Herman Bavinck says, God is “not removed by a spatial transcendence from his creatures.”<sup>i</sup> He is removed, as the architecture and ceremonies of Israel’s temple eloquently testified, by his uncompromising purity.

Similarly, a biblical understanding of God’s immanence does not assert that he is the same as us, just one more element of our experience, but that he is intimately involved with his world and rules over it sovereignly as the one in whom “we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28), who knows our needs before we ask him (Matt 6:8), and who does not forget even a sparrow or one hair on our heads (Luke 12:6–7). Because God remains transcendent, his immanence is an immanence of *involvement with the world*, not of *identity as the world*. In short, God is simultaneously “over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6).<sup>ii</sup>

For the unbiblical view, if God is transcendent, then we cannot say anything about him. For the biblical view, if God is transcendent, then we cannot approach him. For the unbiblical view, if God is immanent, then we cannot ultimately distinguish him from the stuff of creation. For the biblical view, if God is immanent, then we cannot escape his care and love. Furthermore, in the biblical God, transcendence and immanence are not opposites but complementary aspects of the divine nature and character. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “God is the beyond in the midst of our lives.”<sup>iii</sup>

(Biblical Critical Theory: How the Bible’s Unfolding Story Makes Sense of Modern Life and Culture by Christopher Watkin, Zondervan: Academic, 2022, Kindle, Page 57-58 of 648)

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<sup>i</sup> Herman Bavinck, *The Philosophy of Revelation*, ed. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, and Cory Brock (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2018), 50.

<sup>ii</sup> See John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God, A Theology of Lordship*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1987), 13-15.

<sup>iii</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Christian Gremmels et al., trans. Isabel Best et al., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 367.