Transgressive Sacrality in the Hindu Tradition
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Transgressive Sacrality defined

It is important to clearly distinguish the phenomenon of “transgressive sacrality” in a religious tradition from the well-known opposition of orthodoxy and heresy. A religion is defined by its imposition of a specific system of observances and interdictions, binding on all its adherents and even more so on its spiritual elite. Heresy (or heterodoxy) challenges some of these doctrines, observances and interdictions and seeks to substitute new ones in their place, and in this way a new sectarian orthodoxy is established that can do without, survive and even aim at completely usurping and replacing the mother-religion. Where the original observances and interdictions are violated, this is merely the inevitable consequence of the adoption of new rules and doctrines which seek to wholly invalidate and replace the former, and not because any specific value is placed on the fact of transgression itself. This would be the relation between Christianity and Judaism, Protestantism and Catholicism, Buddhism and Brahmanism, Shiism and Sunnite Islam, to mention only the best-known examples.

“Transgressive sacrality” within a religious tradition is something completely different for, though violating the interdictions and observances of the tradition in question, it does not seek to replace the latter. Instead it lays claim to a superior degree and second order of spirituality derived precisely from the violation of socio-religious interdictions, the general validity and binding force is not at all questioned by the transgressor. In fact, transgressive sacrality cannot operate without the existence of such binding and powerful taboos, and often presents itself as an esoteric form of the mother-religion, the latter serving as the exoteric prerequisite and recruiting ground for it. Unlike heterodoxy, which publicly questions and challenges the authority of the mother-religion, the adepts of transgressive sacrality often paradoxically play the role of champions of orthodox religion in the public life of their respective communities. Thus the brahmanicide Bhairava, guilty of the most heinous socio-religious crime in Hindu society and whose mythic model is imitated ritually by transgressive ascetics, like the Kāpālikas, is simultaneously the policeman-magistrate of the socio-religious order and
the guardian of the territorial limits of the sacred city of Vārāṇasī.\textsuperscript{1} Where such sacrality finds expression in well-defined initiatic currents, like Tantricism or the Pāśupata “sect” in India, one often finds a graded development from the neophyte, observing more rigorous interdictions and a more intense asceticism than that generally prescribed by the public religion, to the adept, who is required to flagrantly violate even the most fundamental taboos of his society. This type of sacrality finds its most spectacular expression in the phenomenon of “ritual clowning” in “primitive” religions, like that of the Pueblo Koyemshi, where the highest specialists of the sacred publicly violate fundamental taboos before the half-terrified half-amused spectators of the tribe, whose entire religion would seem to be founded on the observance of these very taboos, which the clowns indeed help maintain by their ridiculous negative example.\textsuperscript{2}

**Transgressive Sacrality in the Hindu Tradition**

Taking the ritual clown (Vidūṣaka) of the Sanskrit drama as the point of departure, I am at present working on the “The Semiotics of the Vidūṣaka: The Ideology of Transgression in Brahmanical India,” which attempts to reconstruct the unity of the submerged discourse on/of Transgression in India by considering all its diverse manifestations. Hindu religiosity generally conjures up before our eyes the self-denial of the yogin practicing severe asceticism, the world-renouncing sannyāsin in quest of the Absolute Reality of Brahman, the precarious ritual purity of the orthodox brahmin shying away from all defilement, the devout householder on pilgrimage to shrines of various deities, the chaste devotion of Sītā exaggerated in practices like satī and/or the stable socio-religious hierarchy where everyone knows his proper place. Yet deeper familiarity with the tradition confronts us with various, and at first sight, unconnected distinctly religious phenomena which flagrantly contradict the above tableau and seem to constitute regular eruptions, within the upper world of the pure luminous sacred, of

\textsuperscript{1} See the paper on “Adepts of the god Bhairava in the Hindu Tradition” presented by my wife Dr. Elizabeth-Chalier Visuvalingam. It deals in greater detail with many aspects of this divinity par excellence of transgressive sacrality, which I have been able to no more than allude to in my own paper.

an active underground ideology of transgression that finds in the deliberate manipulation of impurity, violence, sensuality and, yes, what we might even be tempted to call “evil,” depths of the Sacred inaccessible to those reluctant to trespass the bounds of the upper-world. Let us rapidly survey some of the typical phenomena that I am in this way obliged to try and comprehend.

There are ascetics like the Kāpālikas, Pāśupatas, Aghoris, having their Vedic predecessors in figures like the Vṛātya, who indulge in various forms of ritualized anti-social behavior easily spilling into the criminal domain, or specialize in the manipulation of impurities and who, for this reason, tend to be written off as “marginal” sects. It is impossible to reduce these currents to “popular, licentious, anti-Brahmanical movements” obliged to assume a pseudo-religious garb. They were all renouncers seeking spiritual liberation through truly penitential and ascetic practices inextricably combined with radically transgressive elements to form integral spiritual disciplines. The Kāpālikas’ terrible ritual penance corresponds exactly to the punishment prescribed in the Brahmanical law-books for brahmanicide. The Pāśupata, though obliged to perform lewd obscene gestures in the proximity of women, must however avoid all contact with them; in its classical form it was meant especially for Brahmins. Then there are left-hand Tantrics like the Kaulas, many of them Brahmins, who live within society as householders and publicly participate in its values, and yet break fundamental taboos like the incest barrier secretly under special ritual conditions. In one play, the Vidūṣaka is depicted in open collusion with a Kaula adept called Bhairavānanda, “Bliss of Bhairava,” who extols the transgressive practices of the Kaula-tantras but is nevertheless venerated by the royal hero. Corresponding to the cult practice, we are confronted in the mythology by transgressive divinities who assume terrifying or, sometimes, ridiculous aspects.

It is the overbearing fifth-head of the god Brahmā, who represents the values of the pure self-controlled brahmin class, that is lopped off by the transgressor-god Bhairava. The tantric depiction of this head subsequently receiving esoteric doctrines from his very decapitator precludes all attempts to interpret the myth as reflecting no more than the clash between orthodox Brahmanism and a popular extra-Vedic Bhairava cult, and rather points to a central transgressive dimension hidden in the very heart of Brahmanism. For this fifth-head, also the central head, is more often characterized by wholly unbrahmanical traits, especially the incestuous desire for his own daughter
Sarasvati, retained from his hallowed Vedic predecessor, Prajāpati, who later came to embody the entire Brahmanical sacrifice. The pre-classical sacrificer, on being initiated, regressed into the dark embryonic realm of Varuṇa (another Vedic divinity with transgressive notations) to be charged with evil and impurity, with a “dangerous sacredness,” before he emerged therefrom by discharging this evil and impurity onto the officiating brahmin priest, who in this way came to represent the initiated condition in himself as it were. In the ritual drama, the couple, constituted by the sacrificer/initiate (or sacrificer/brahmin-priest) and defined by a cooperative rivalry, forms a paradoxical bi-unity, which seems to be the very model of the inseparable (sacrificer=) hero/Vidūṣaka (=initiated condition, brahmin-priest) pair in the secularized drama. The avowed helper of his friend, the hero, the selfless Vidūṣaka is seen repeatedly bungling his friend’s designs, often in very suggestive situations, before the drama (-sacrifice) is willy-nilly brought to a successful issue. The initiate is typologically related to other mythico-ritual figures like the brahmacārin, Vṛṣākapi, Vrātya, Pāśupata, etc., who, like him, indulge in ritual abuse, obscenities and blabbering nonsense. All these transgressive traits, and more, find condensed expression in the Vidūṣaka, whose obscene abuse of the maids may be understood as a displacement of what is finally directed at the heroine herself, who is sure enough presided over by Sarasvati. The Vidūṣaka, though always a brahmin and indeed protected by Oṃkāra which is the symbol par excellence of Brahman, is regularly depicted profaning all the values of classical brahminhood, so as to earn the mocking label of “brahman par excellence.” Yet constant allusions, sometimes teasing, are made to the formidable (magical) powers of the apparently timid and gluttonous Vidūṣaka, who revels in making abrupt enigmatic remarks dismissed as puerile jokes. Now the term ‘brahman’ itself is originally believed to have signified both ‘mana’ and ‘enigma’, and recent anthropological studies have sought to demonstrate that mana as power is unleashed through transgression, and that the key to the enigma is likewise hidden in transgression.³

The pious Hindu householder who, with his family, regularly visits the temples and occasionally undertakes an arduous pilgrimage to a distant shrine, could have nothing further from his thoughts than transgression. He may visit the Kāla-Bhairava temple of Vārāṇasi on the occasion of the important festival of Bhairavāṣṭamī to pay obeisance to the protector of the sacred city just as he would worship some other god like Gaṇeśa. Yet this festival finds justification only in the same origin-myth that defines Bhairava as a transgressive, even criminal, divinity, and the temple-walls retain all the symbolism of his bearing Brahmā’s skull and accompanied by his (black) dog, the most impure of animals. Things are no better if he instead approaches the pot-bellied crooked-trunked Gaṇeśa, whose syllable is Oṃkāra and who is Brahmanical enough for the worship to be enjoined before all auspicious undertakings. For he was worshipped in certain left-hand sects in a transgressive manner, with meat, wine and sexual orgies, in forms corresponding to those of Bhairava, and the symbolism of his iconography is invested with these transgressive significations. In this aspect, he has penetrated into the Tibetan and Far-Eastern religions as well. The Vidūṣaka too is not averse to meat nor wine and shares his obsession for rounded sweetmeats, which symbolize sexual bliss; in one play this glutton is actually called “big-bellied,” one of the names of Gaṇeśa. He always carries a crooked stick matching Gaṇeśa’s trunk in its phallic signification. His constant assimilation to a “brown monkey” points to yet another model: the Vedic Vṛṣākapi, who sought to molest his own “mother” Indrāṇi, wife of the royal Indra. If, in despair, the pilgrim finally flees for refuge to the benign vegetarian virgin Vaiśṇo Devī, Bhairava pursues him even there, for all the stages of the pilgrimage are modeled on the incidents of Bhairava’s pursuit of the goddess to violate her sexually after he, the seniormost disciple of Gorakhnāth, was refused meat and wine by her. Every other temple the Hindu visits has Bhairava as the guardian door-keeper, and converting to Jainism does not help much when even the Jainas have adopted him, sometimes under the name of Mānabhadra, as door-keeper. The point to be made here is that the symbolism of transgression is omnipresent and inescapable in the Hindu tradition, even when the fact is denied or absent. The transgressive aspects of the cult of the Mother-Goddess in her terrible forms like Kāli, Cāmuṇḍā, Chinnamastā, etc., are too well-known. The socially inferior Hindu woman is not only educated in all the arts but also granted unlimited erotic satisfaction and liberation within the sacred precincts of the temple-walls which, adorned with ascetic-and-courtesan motifs and soaring to the
pinnacles of orgiastic ecstasy, project her heavenward as voluptuous *apsaras*. It is in the same temple that the chaste Hindu wife, bound in matrimonial subservience to her husband, comes to pray and make offerings for the weal of her family, but within the orgiastic secret tantric rituals, the distinction between the courtesan and the familial woman would appear to become blurred, and one can only wonder as to what reality the adulterous beauties extolled so effusively by the Sanskrit poets correspond…

Then, there are festivals of transgression like Holi, corresponding to the New Year saturnalia of most archaic societies, carefully delimited in time, during which the entire populace is expected to transgress socio-religious norms and established hierarchies are reversed. Not only is the Vidūṣaka sometimes depicted participating with gay abandon in such festivals but, being a brahmin with impure low-caste traits, he tends to level out the hierarchy in his own person. The origin of the Sanskrit drama itself has been traced back to such New Year festivals in the archaic Rg Vedic cosmogony, when the demons led by Varuṇa are supposed to overrun the cosmic order, and the Vidūṣaka himself has been identified with Varuṇa. The Hindu king who, despite his apparent secularization, is in many ways the pivot of the socio-religious order, is described in his primordial mythical prototype of Vena, as having an irredeemable evil and impure dimension, that is expelled from him in the form of an untouchable outcast. Transgressive notations are not lacking in the mythology, ritual and representations of kingship as including the office of the royal chaplain. Protected always by the king of the gods Indra, the sacrificer par excellence, the protagonist is often a prince and in such cases the Vidūṣaka is subtly identified with royal chaplain (even with his divinization: Bṛhaspati), who officiates for the king and forms a bi-unity with him.

It is impossible to give here a satisfactory survey of transgressive phenomena in the Hindu tradition and a convincing exposition of their mode of articulation in the Vidūṣaka, but at least our readers can no longer be unaware that such phenomena not only exist and are interlinked, but also insinuate themselves into every sphere of traditional existence.
I have already mentioned how the public display of undisguised transgressive sacrality, where sanctioned in archaic societies, lends the performance a comic aura and tends to transform the transgressor into a ritual clown. The normal reaction to such transgressive behavior generally takes the form of distressing negative emotions like disgust, shame, indignation, fear, etc., precisely the kind of emotions that the adept himself seeks to overcome and surpass while committing ritual transgression privately in closed esoteric circles. But when such public transgression is socially sanctioned, often through direct or indirect valorization of the person of the transgressor, the negative affects, and the combined energies of the mutually opposing emotions are discharged in the form of pleasurable laughter. In my Ph.D. thesis, I have argued for a “bisociation-theory” that discovers the universal cause of laughter precisely in the mutual neutralization of two simultaneous but sharply contrasting, opposing reactions (emotional, cognitive, motor, etc.) to one and the same stimulus. And such is the exoteric perception of the ritual transgressor that obliges him to assume a comic character. The inherent ambiguity/ambivalence of our laughter at a forbidden theme leaves it wholly unclear whether the driving force behind the laughter is due to one’s participation in the transgression or due to one’s resistance to it or, rather, due to both. The intimate association of transgression and the comic reacts in turn upon the transgressor encouraging him to amplify and diversify his comic effects even independently of his primary function of transgression. Thus an integral element of the Pāśupata’s spiritual discipline is to laugh explosively and to provoke others’ laughter through ridiculous behavior. In a traditional culture sharing a depreciative, repressive attitude to profane laughter, the Pāśupata’s “sacred” laughter in imitation of the violent laughter of his elect divinity Rudra can only further signify transgression. What

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5 For the distinction between ‘sacred’ and the repressed ‘profane’ laughter in Amerindian religion, see Lévi-Strauss, "Le Rire Réprimé," *Le Cru et le Cuit: Mythologiques*, vol. 1 (Paris: Plon, 1964), pp. 117, 128-40. Which also provides evidence, overlooked by Lévi-Strauss himself, of not only comic behavior but also
matters here is how the clown-transgressor through his cosmic behavior mediates--even while embodying the conflict--between the two opposing poles of archaic sacrality: the transgressive pole that he enacts both materially and symbolically permitting the exoteric public to participate in it, even if only indirectly, partially and unconsciously, and the interdictory pole that contributes towards rendering these transgressions ridiculous and fit only to be shunned by the same public. However paradoxical and teeming with contradictions, a vital mode of communication between the two conflicting dimension is in this way maintained.

When this clown-transgressor later steps out of his ritual context onto the secularized stage of the Sanskrit drama, governed by its own aesthetic and “ethical” norms, his performance has already evolved in two complementary directions. Firstly, the material transgressions have been underplayed, disguised, even largely eliminated, and displaced into symbolic substitutes in the form of various stereotyped comic traits pertaining to the appearance, gestures, utterances and interventions of the Vidūṣaka, already illustrated above. His deformity, gluttony, contrary speech, obscenity, crooked stick, etc., are all synonyms insofar as they all comically signify transgression through parallel codes like the visual, alimentary, linguistic, sexual, and geometric. Secondly, the comic aspect, originally the fall-out of his transgressive role, now acquires an independent status and undergoes secondary elaboration to serve the purposes of plot-development, dramatic humor, characterization and so forth, while its social-censure function is more systematically exploited. The normative classical Sanskrit drama, even while entertaining all sectors of the society, seeks to reinforce the proper and harmonious pursuit of the four traditional legitimate goals of Indian life: sensual enjoyment, acquisition of wealth, fulfillment of ordained socio-religious duties and spiritual emancipation in ascending hierarchy of values. Though this is normally achieved through the audience’s voluntary and total identification with the exemplary conduct of the hero, Abhinavagupta also prescribes for the comic the additional function of safeguarding socio-religious norms though negative example. By introducing improprieties, in the form of comic incongruities, into the pursuit of the four goals, the dramatist should wean away the laughing audience from imitating such deviant behavior, from becoming themselves objects of ridicule in real life. One

tickling serving as symbolic substitutes for transgression in mythology. This is demonstrated in my above thesis.
frequent form of the farce provokes much merriment by caricaturing (but not really
distorting) transgressive ascetics like the Kāpālikas and Pāśupatas pursuing final
emancipation through “improper” means.

The problem with the “negative” example of the Vidūṣaka is that, instead of
pursuing any goal whatsoever of his own, he selflessly devotes himself to aiding the
hero in achieving his own goals. Though mocked and even manhandled by the inferior
characters, he is the only personage who can address the hero (or king) on equal terms,
and continues to enjoy the confidence of the latter even after repeated betrayals of trust.
One princely hero finds life unbearable without this “other half” of his body. This
supreme though indirect valorization of his person, in the midst of symbolic traits and
associations that dissolve him into a background of ultimate metaphysical principles
like Brahman and the Sacrifice, chaplain (or brahmin officiant) and cherished religious
symbols like Oṃkāra, would underline his being ‘the brahman par excellence’ not only
ironically but also really. Abhinavagupta cryptically observes that the Vidūṣaka, whose
comic function he nowhere denies, manifests the “semblance of humor” which can only
hint at the vital function of sacred transgression that his profane comicality vehicles and
simultaneously disguises. For the ramification of the transgressive notations invested in
the diverse figures of his background form a veritable symbolic system that would seem
to embrace the entire socio-religious life of the community in a web of significations
held together, at its secret center, by a transgressive conception and experience of the
Sacred. The Vidūṣaka is an exceptionally striking example of how, by various intricate
yet conventionalized techniques, the language of transgressive sacrality is
communicated, through the aesthetic appeal of humor even in an apparently “secular”
aristic medium like the Sanskrit drama, to an audience that thereby comes to
participate in spite of itself in a symbolic universe whose coherence it does not
recognize and whose values it is as yet not prepared to accept.6 In the laughing

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6 The language of transgressive sacrality finds its ideal expression in the archaic sacred enigma (brāhman),
whose structure characterizes much of the Vedic hymnology: "The aim was to compose on a given theme,
or perhaps according to a given plan, not introducing direct accounts of the lives of the gods so much as
veiled allusions, occult correspondences between the sacred and the profane, such as still form the
foundation of Indian speculative thought. A large part of Sanskrit literature is esoteric. These
correspondences, and the magic power they emanate, are called brāhman: this is the oldest sense of the
term. They are not intellectual conceptions but experiences which have been lived through at the
culmination of a state of mystic exaltation conceived as revelation. The soma is the catalyst of these latent
forces. The designation kavi is given to the poet who can seize and express these correspondences, and to
the god who sends him inspiration .... The kavi of the classical period, the learned poet, transposes the old
Vidūṣaka, an exoteric vision wholly enmeshed in the hierarchy of the four goals, which he entertainingly reinforces by his negative example, is nevertheless forced to submit itself to the claims of an esoteric vision that encompasses it, and is all the more effective for the reason that it is carefully hidden.

**Ascending and Descending Realization**

My own understanding of transgressive sacrality stems from my study of and reflection on the works of Abhinavaguptācārya whom we already know as India’s greatest theoretician of aesthetics and the dramatic art. He is being increasingly recognized as India’s most totalizing, most representative metaphysician, who was able to synthesize within a single harmonious intellectual framework entire realms of experience, like aesthetics, Tantric ritual and practice, and the world of everyday transactions, necessarily ignored by the world-negating Vedāntin Śankara.7 Now Abhinava was the crowning theoretician of the transgressive ideology of the Trika (rather Kaula) tantricism, developed out of the radical practices enjoined in the textual traditions of the esoteric Bhairava-schools, and attributes his highest spiritual realization of the supreme all-devouring Bhairava-consciousness to precisely such transgressive praxis. At the same time, he clearly recognized the dichotomy between the esoteric and the exoteric domains, the latter governed by rigorous socio-religious norms from which perspective alone he comments on the Sanskrit drama. Forbidding the uninitiated access to the secret texts of the Bhairava-traditions, he insists on the continuity between the Vedic and Tantric traditions of esotericism exploiting extreme impurity and radical transgression in order to transcend the pure/impure distinction, and attributes the...
Transgressive Sacrality in the Hindu Tradition

reticence of the Vedic sages on this transgressive dimension of the realizations to their
concern with preserving the exoteric worldly order founded on norms of purity.8

The Trika distinguishes between two modes or, rather, logically successive states
of spiritual realization, which I shall translate by borrowing the terms “ascending”
(saṅkoca: ‘retraction’) and “descending” (vikāsa: ‘expansion’) realization respectively.9
During the “ascending” realization, Consciousness isolates itself from all objectivity
(including body, mind, etc.) until it transcends the latter through a process assimilated
to a gradual “self-purification.” For it is the contact with such extraneous matter that
sullies the pristine purity of Consciousness and imposes all manner of adventitious
limitations and human finitude upon it. Practices, like Yoga or Vedāntic world-
renunciation, are equally subsumed under this mode of realization which likewise
determines their “philosophical” outlooks, and it is here that the continuity, evident in
the Pāśupata praxis, between ritual purity and yogic asceticism, must be sought. For
this withdrawal, with its accompanying observances of chastity, non-violence, fasting,
silence, and so on, are already prefigured in the system of socio-religious interdictions
which reach their maximum intensity in the orthodox model of the classical brahmin.
But the process attains completion only when Consciousness ‘re-descends’ to assimilate
the entire objective world to itself, a “universalization” culminating in the state of
Anuttara, impossible to describe in terms of saṅkoca and vikāsa, understood as
constituting the ultimate essence of Bhairava. This claim is typically inserted in the
midst of arguments justifying the non-observance of the distinction pure/impure or
edible/prohibited (food) and so on. The logic behind this equation becomes clear when
we consider the definition of purity: whatever is (experienced as) distinct from
Consciousness is impure, whereas whatever is (experienced as) identical with
Consciousness is pure. Both terms of the opposition are therefore relevant only with

8 Abhinavagupta, Tantrāloka (= TA henceforth), Kashmir Series of Texts and Studies (= KS henceforth)
no. XXX (Bombay: 1921), vol. 3, 4.243a-244b. For his attribution of his highest spiritual realizations to the
transgressive technique of the Kulayāga, see TA vol. XI, ch.29, KS no. LVII (Bombay: 1936). For the
pure/impure opposition as the basis of Hindu socio-religious order, see L. Dumont, Homo Hierarchicus:
The Caste System and Its Implications (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1979 rev. ed.). For transgressive Vedic
esotericism, see Dumézil below on the Varunic pole of the first or priestly function in Vedic society.
9 From Réné Guénon, "Réalisation Ascendante et Réalisation Descendante," ch.32, Initiation et Réalisation
Spirituelle (Paris: Éditions Traditionnelles, 1975 new ed.). It must be emphasized that Guénon's position
here, though expressed in the typical terminology of Vedantic ontology, corresponds more closely to the
Trika (Pratyabhijñā point of view, apparently unknown to him. Abhinava's clearest distinction between
the two modes of realization can be found in his Īśvara-pratyabhijñā-vivṛtti-vimarśini (IPVV), vol.3, KS
no. LXV (Bombay: 1943), p.172.
respect to that preliminary, though better known, process of the “ascending” realization. For the Kaula adept intent on universalizing his Consciousness by ‘re-descending’ to and assimilating the lowest and most impure aspects of objective manifestation, it is the pure/impure distinction itself that is considered the ultimate impurity to transcend.\(^{10}\) It is in attempting the dangerous process of totalization that the adept often commits deliberate transgressions to shatter the rules and limitations that had earlier propped up both his worldly life and spiritual disciplines. It is the impurity represented by Bhairava—the disgust it evokes—that accounts primarily for his “terrifying” character. It is because the universalization of Consciousness necessarily involves the overcoming of this disgust to assimilate the worst impurities in an act that amounts to transgression, that the ultimate Anuttara state itself comes to be represented by Bhairava.

Once it has been sufficiently kindled, Fire, instead of being snuffed out, purifies in the very process of consuming whatever impurities it comes into contact with. Whereas only pure offerings are made in the brahmanical sacrificial fire, the Trika technique of ḫaṭha-pāka “cooking, burning or digesting (the world) by force” aims at offering the entire objective universe into the blazing gastric Fire of one’s own Bhairava-Consciousness so that it is transformed into undifferentiated ambrosia to be relished till satiation.\(^{11}\) In the Vidūṣaka, this totalization is symbolized by his gluttonous, all-devouring appetite, the dramatic transposition of the mythical Fire that in the Purāṇic cosmogonies destroys the world at the end of each cycle and whose imagery has been borrowed in the above technique. His rounded sweet-meats (modaka) likewise represent the Vedic soma-amṛta (ambrosia), which would seem to refer ultimately to the

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\(^{10}\) TA 4.213-47, esp. 240-1a. Elsewhere Abhinava insists that the universalization of Consciousness or achievement of total I-ness symbolized by Bhairava "necessarily presupposes purity (of Consciousness), because identification of oneself with any single particular (objective) form implies opposition to (exclusion of) other forms" TA 4.13-4. In other words, only by detaching oneself from objectivity in its particular, limiting character can Consciousness "redescend" to freely assimilate all objectivity.

\(^{11}\) TA 3.262-4, volume 2, KS no. XXVIII (Bombay: 1921). Abhinava’s foremost disciple, Kṣemarāja, describes the Fire of Consciousness as continuing to partially and imperfectly consume sense-impressions even when subdued and debilitated in the ordinary state of consciousness, but as capable of assimilating the entire universe when intensified. See J. Singh trans., Pratyabhijñā-hṛdayam (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass), pp.87-90 (sutras 14-15). The burning of the Khāṇḍa forest ("sweetmeat") by Fire assuming the form of a gluttonous brahmin synthesizes the Vidūṣaka and the destructive cosmogenic symbolisms through sacrificial terminology in the Mahābhārata; see J. Scheuer, Shiva dans le Mahābhārata, Bibliothèque de l’École des Hautes Études, Sciences Religieuses, vol. LXXXIV (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1982), chapter IV.
supremely blissful state, often induced by sexual techniques, of Consciousness, which moreover is believed in the Trika to have a rejuvenating influence on the psycho-physical system as a side-effect.

Though transgressive sacrality claims privileged access to the fullest expression of the Sacred, it accommodates all the varied, even opposing, modes of spiritual practice that proliferate in Hindu religious life. But whereas those techniques aiming at an ascending realization and the religio-philosophical currents based on them advocate turning away from the world of ordinary sensory-experience to attain an ultimate reality that is transcendent, the techniques of the descent insist that it is possible to recognize (Abhinava’s metaphysics calls itself *pratyabhijñā*: ‘recognition’) this transcendent reality as simultaneously immanent, even glorifying itself, in the everyday world of sensory-experiences. Not falling prey to it by recognizing one’s inner transcendence, it is possible to continue living in the world, enjoying it as a manifestation of the Divine. It is not surprising that it is only a metaphysics of the descent, like the *pratyabhijñā*, that has provided the basis of a successful account of the aesthetic experience, distinguishing it carefully from the bliss of transcendent reality on the one hand and gross sensuous pleasure on the other. By living through ordinary experiences in an extraordinary mode, the adept of the descent has an essentially aesthetic perception of life. Though the ideal is for one’s Self-Consciousness to maintain its transcendence even in the midst of worldly activities, this is a capacity which the adept generally achieves only through repeated experiments in inner withdrawal and steady introversion.

Though this explicit formulation of the soteriological distinction between “ascending” and “descending” realizations on the background of the Trika metaphysics has found late expression in the history of Hindu traditions, the class of transgressive practices it seeks to account for and justify, along with the abiding symbolic universe they have generated, has been a permanent feature of this tradition right from its Vedic origins. It alone explains the necessity of Dumezil’s first or priestly function being split between the opposing poles of the pure, luminous Vedic Mitra governing the socio-religious order based on interdictions and the dark, chaotic Vedic Varuṇa inspiring the transgressions of secret initiatic societies, parallels to which Dumezil finds in other archaic and primitive societies. Caillois has gone further in demonstrating the universality of this opposition or alternation, within a single religious tradition,
between the pure sacrality of order and interdiction and the impure sacrality of chaos and transgression. The dialectics of transgression, its theory, in all archaic and “primitive” religions has been lucidly expounded by Bataille: transgression does not contradict the rigorous observance of taboos but presupposes and completes it even while transcending it. The access to the sacred impure that is the basis of transgression is mediated by the sacred pure, which alone is the explicit model of profane society. Unless this dialectic is recaptured in its dynamic movement, which imitates the alternation of the two opposing yet complementary modes of spiritual realization, the curious conjunction of elements of both dimensions of the sacred in a single figure, like the Pāśupata or the Vidūṣaka, will remain forever insoluble.  

The “Ethical Problem” of Transgressive Sacrality  

To the avowed moralist, the divinities that incorporate the values of transgression can only be the equivalent of the Devil. Indeed such divinities as Bhairava have marked demoniac character even in the indigenous perception, so much so that a conference is even now being held in Washington on “Criminal gods and demons devotees” in South Asia. Attempts, whatever their merits, are however not wanting in the West, to see in the Devil himself the representative of an archaic transgressive sacrality, dethroned completely by a religious outlook that, having identified itself exclusively with the pure luminous pole of the sacred, slid increasingly into a Christian moralism.  

It is clear that the specifically moral point of view, so pronounced in the Judeo-Christian tradition, exaggerated in Protestantism and proclaiming its secular independence in the modern world, is wanting in Hinduism where, as in other archaic societies, it is rather the ritual point of view that holds sway. This does not mean that the Hindus are amoral or, worse, still immoral, but simply that even behavior that sometimes impresses us as superlatively “moral” should be viewed from a different angle. Those who wholeheartedly pursue the final goal of spiritual liberation, through that ascetic and renunciatory mode in harmony with the system of socio-religious interdictions,

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14 The distinction elaborated here corresponds essentially to that made by R. Guénon, “Point de vue rituel et point de vue moral,” chapter 9 (1975).
rigorously observe precepts like non-violence, chastity, truthfulness and so on, with an intensity of self-denial that could surprise and disconcert the most stringent moralist. But such “ethical” conduct is an integral part of, and is wholly dependent on, a larger culturally sanctioned design that aims primarily at self-liberation and has no independent or absolute status such as claimed by modern, especially areligious, morality. If the moral force of even a politician like Gandhi, influenced as it was by the social ethics of Christianity, remains unattainable to our contemporary world-leaders, this is no doubt because it was still deeply rooted in that ancient quest for liberation.

What is important here is that the same precepts, even the fundamental pillars of worldly morality without which no life is possible even in the most secular of societies, may be transgressed by spiritual adepts, including those who had been observing them rigorously and intensely over a long period, in order to achieve the same goal of spiritual liberation but in a different, perhaps more effective and quicker, mode. The elements of ascetic self-denial and of transgression fused, in sects like the Pāśupata, into a single discipline and contributing to a single goal, defy all analysis in moral terms and are intelligible only from a ritual point of view that equally justifies certain socio-religious norms, as well as their ritual violation.

For the moralist to ask “whether transgressive sacrality is ethical” is to beg a question that cannot arise from the point of view of such sacrality at all. The question to be posed is rather “what opposing understandings of Man’s essence do the differing points of view of morality and transgressive sacrality presuppose?” The moral point of view presupposes that man is essentially good or can become good if he tries hard enough or, if it agrees with modern psychoanalysis that man is at heart evil, that he must nevertheless strain to conform unswervingly to the good. Where the last outlook is tempered within a religious tradition of salvation through such principles and doctrines as grace, love, surrender, etc., the redemption is still attained in spite of and from one’s innate evil whose expression and, still less, exploitation can in no way contribute to it. Yet René Girard, for whom Christianity remains closer to the truth than psychoanalysis or the other human sciences, seeks to reinterpret the Christian mystery itself in terms of the primordial violence at the heart of humanity, which the archaic religions were regularly and universally compelled to channel into the mechanisms of the sacrificial scapegoat, often the king himself, in order to prevent human society from
reverting to undifferentiated chaos, to protect society from man himself.\(^\text{15}\) At least one of the Vidūṣaka’s ritual models was the Vedic deformed human scapegoat upon whom not only the evil of the initiated king, but the sins of the whole community, were discharged, and the clown as the favorite butt of our aggressive tendencies continues to play this scapegoat role in the drama.\(^\text{16}\) Has modern humanity really evolved to such a degree that it can now forgo such specifically religious mechanisms and achieve global unity through purely moral precepts, however noble?

The Vidūṣaka’s “perversity” is frequently alluded to, and sometimes even by himself while “innocently” demonstrating it. The Protestant philosopher, Paul Ricœur, has appealed to the pessimistic psychoanalytic view of Man as innately evil to justify his interpretation of the “original sin” of Christianity inherited by all of Adam’s children, by all of us. But whereas Ricœur concludes therefrom that any totalizing Absolute Knowledge is impossible because of the very existence of Evil,\(^\text{17}\) the transgressive techniques of Tantricism, as explicated by Abhinava, seek to attain Absolute Knowledge precisely through the exploitation of the very dregs of the ordinary “moral” surface-consciousness, of the dark, chaotic, repressed forces of the subconscious. For, as radically opposed to psychoanalysis, the Trika holds that Man’s ultimate nature to be Consciousness itself, but does not confuse it with its smoldering, almost snuffed out reflection in the ordinary surface-consciousness. The ego, which in the psychoanalytic view differentiates itself from and against the womb-like chaotic instinctual forces of the unconscious would, in the Trika view, owe its luminous subjectivity to the borrowed light of this undifferentiated Consciousness. It is this ego, relative island of stability torn between the instinctual demands of the unconscious and the repressive force of socio-religious (or moral) interdictions, that suffers an existential anguish which, in Hindu tradition, finds expression in the urge to self-liberation. It

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Transgressive Sacrality in the Hindu Tradition

seems to me that the “descending” realization may be understood in terms of the ego serving as the transparent instrument of Consciousness in the attempt to illuminate and appropriate the dark depths of the unconscious forces wherein its own energies are ultimately rooted. Even when this process is not accompanied by deliberate acts of transgression, there is all reason to believe that it is inwardly relived as a mode of transgression, which explains why the mythical projections of such sacrality lend themselves so readily to the psychoanalytical treatment of symbols, even while ultimately resisting all attempts to simply reduce them to the latter point of view. In order not to lose control, disintegrate, and risk its borrowed light being completely overwhelmed and snuffed out by the dark chaotic forces it has unleashed, the ego must have already achieved a degree of unity and transparency to Consciousness, possible only by the cultivation of proximity to the latter. It is the preliminary struggle of the socio-religious interdictions governing the pursuit of the life-aims in the outer world of reality that assures the indispensable unity, transparency and control of the ego in the service of the pure Consciousness. Otherwise, madness, often outwardly assumed by the adepts of transgressive sacrality in ritual imitation of their divinity, will be the only fruit of such practices.\textsuperscript{18} The most supreme conception of the Divine that has devoured and assimilated the demoniac finds its most forceful expression for Abhinavagupta in the figure of the terrifying quasi-demoniacal Bhairava, fearful not only because he represents the dark chaotic destructive aspects of the unconscious, but also, and probably more so, because he represents the sudden breaking in of the “Superconscious,” brought about by the deliberate exploitation of these very dregs of the moral consciousness.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} See Guénon, "Folie Apparente et Sagesse Cachée," ch.27 (1975), where he gives parallels of assumed madness from the Christian and Islamic traditions. "Mad" (\textit{ummatta}) forms of divinities like Bhairava and Gaṇeśa seem rather to reflect transgressive practice in cult. The Pāśupatas were also obliged to feign madness, which greatly contributed to their comicality, and the Vidūṣaka as clown also inevitably gives that impression at times.

\textsuperscript{19} It would be interesting to examine in this light the problematic and controversial "initiation" of the adolescent Guénon, who later contributed so much to the furthering of inter-religious dialogue on a traditional, as opposed to modernistic, basis. In his own words, he became Prince Rosy-Cross, by leaning on Evil through the left-hand way and thanks to the black power, "at the end of which Luciferian initiation, Samaël appeared, bearing the iron scepter of the domain of death . . ." J. Robin, \textit{René Guénon: Témoin de la Tradition} (Paris: Guy Trédaniel, 1978), p.48ff.
**Transgressive Sacrality as the basis of Interreligious Dialogue**

In a sense there has always been interreligious dialogue even within the Indian traditions, for it is century-long mutual influence in the cult-practice and fierce interaction of clashing theological standpoints that has constantly shaped the intertwined evolution of the numerous currents of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism. Philosophical debate and mutual borrowings also mark the relations between the various Hindu cults, doctrines and philosophical systems, which have always been anxious to establish their own positions through a systematic critique of those of their opponents. But to what extent can this interaction be justly termed a “dialogue,” on the model of modern ecumenism? A proper evaluation of the attitudes to real dialogue within the Indian traditions will certainly contribute to a just appreciation of the Hindu position as a whole.

The first feature that strikes the observer is that each cult, doctrine, and philosophical system is convinced of its own superiority over the other, just as is the case with our major world-religions, corresponding to the “ethnocentrism” of archaic and “primitive” religions, and seeks to establish this superiority in various ways. It may be affirmed by an outright rejection of the opponent’s position (exclusion), or by integrating it, with due modification in perspective, at a lower level of one’s own hierarchized outlook, as embodying a lower truth leading up to one’s own supreme truth (inclusion). The latter inclusive method, adopted especially by the Pratyabhijñā, enjoys far greater prestige and also permits a certain unequal dialogue. But not even the most syncretizing doctrine has claimed or could have claimed to impose uniformity and unanimity on *homo hierarchicus*, whose religious needs, practices, attitudes and milieu is a function of his specific place in a fundamentally unequal caste-society, itself based on a complex series of exclusions and inclusions. On the contrary, any mixing of doctrines and practices is rigorously condemned as inevitably leading to disillusionment and falling away from both the traditions concerned. Thus Abhinava warns that “the Vaiṣṇavas and others, by mixing Śaiva doctrines with their own teaching, are sure to be afflicted with doubt and to stray from both traditions (due to loss of faith in either).” Why? “Because of the transgression of (mutually conflicting)

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norms, both from the point of view of one’s own tradition and from that of the other, he is bound to create dire obstacles and difficulties for himself, and should not proceed in this manner.” 21 The result of such groping, self-searching, even “free-thinking” dialogue can only be further inextricable confusion and complete loss of faith, perhaps in all religion. Is this not precisely the predicament of modern Man?

But does this mean that traditions other than one’s own are invalid for their respective adherents simply because their practices and beliefs contradict our own? Should we not then attempt to wholly convert them to our views, if necessary by force? Indian traditions have in this respect been marked by a deep de facto tolerance, even when they condemn certain opponents as anathema. It is this attitude of compartmentalization and separation that has permitted the survival in India, as separate castes, of Parsis, Jews, and sects of Christianity and Islam, who were persecuted and even exterminated in their own far more “egalitarian” societies.22 Hindu “ethnocentrism” is tempered and counterbalanced, in its foremost representative(s), by a resolute relativism that grants validity to every tradition, but only for its own adherents. This can best be understood in the light of Abhinava’s definition of the term ‘tradition’ (āgama). Himself raising objections like “which tradition for whom? teaching mutually contradictory doctrines and practices, how can what is tradition (as a source of authority) for one not be so for another?,” Abhinava comes to the conclusion: “All traditions are indeed of the nature of (a set of) injunctions, prohibitions, etc., that take into consideration specific conditions of person, place, time, state, contributory factors, etc.” Moreover, “conditioned by (consideration of questions like) what? when? how? and where? all traditions are valid. Even the traditions of the barbarians (mleccha), etc., are to that extent valid, though due to the (inevitable) contact with non-Indian (an-ārya) cultures they are rather ‘semblances’ of tradition” (for those brought up and living within Indian culture; IPVV 3:96). Abhinava does allow for ‘conversion’ when a person, due to the influence of another tradition, comes to be convinced that he had erred


22 G. Deleury, "Pluralisme Culturel et Liberté Religieuse," Le Modèle Indou (Paris: Hachette, 1978). This observation does not blind us to the fact that, with the disintegration of the traditional system under the impact of modernism, it is the most negative aspects of the caste-society, in the form of inter-caste rivalry, communalism and sexual exploitation, that have come to the forefront with a sometimes unimaginable brutality.
before, thus rendering his own henceforth a non-tradition for him. But even in that case, special procedures are necessary to eliminate the traces and after-effects of his earlier convictions and practice, so that they do not interfere with his new-found vocation, rendering it sterile (IPVV 3:97).

Religious traditions make all manner of authoritative but mutually contradictory pronouncements on issues lying beyond the ken of ordinary perception, and invariably appeal to the extraordinary perceptions and revelations of a singular sage or an exclusive elite. Inter-religious dialogue, as we understand it, is impregnated with modern humanism that assumes that controversial issues can be settled and mutual understanding brought about through rational discussions that can however appeal to nothing higher than ordinary perception, even if refined into a scientific empiricism. Thus religious tradition(s) and inter-religious dialogue would appear to be founded on mutually incompatible presuppositions. For Abhinava, all logic is inconclusive in itself; its use by the various philosophical systems in arguing out their own conception of ultimate reality and the manner of attaining it, is finally only apologetic in character, convincing only to those already pre-inclined to adopt the presuppositions and tenets of that particular tradition. Our faith should be placed only in the authority of tradition, which is superior to that of logic, and the tradition in question is precisely that which has established itself in the heart of the individual concerned. If no tradition has been able to lodge itself in his heart, so much the worse for him!²³

Does this imply an absolute relativism recognizing and encouraging no communication or transition between equally impervious traditions? Surprisingly, Abhinava himself boasts of having learnt at the feet of numerous spiritual masters of diverse Hindu and even heterodox Buddhist and Jaina traditions, and of being all the richer spiritually for it. Not only that, he asserts that the Kaula adept who has realized the highest grades is free to teach Vaishnava doctrines to Vaishnava and Buddhist doctrines to Buddhist disciples! (TA 13.341-346a, 322b-3241, IPVV vol.3, p. 101). That this is due to something specific in the Kaula (or Trika) mode of spirituality is evident

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²³ IPVV vol.3, pp.91ff. This explicit subordination of logic to tradition, even while developing and refining it in the service of the latter, is an explicit continuation of the position of the famous grammarian-philosopher Bhartṛhari in his defense of the Vedic traditions as expounded in his Vākyapadiya, eds. K.V. Abhyankar and V.P. Limaye, Univ. of Poona Sanskrit and Prakrit Series, vol.2 (Poona: 1965), 1.30-43, 136. My own guru, Mahāmahopādhyāya Ācārya Rameshwarha, who was steeped in the Vākyapadiya, never tired of repeating that the Pratyabhijñā system was in many respects only a refinement of this seminal work.
from the fact that even mere access to the Kaula esoteric texts is forbidden to the Vaiṣṇava and others (TA 13.320-22a, 280). The indiscriminate mixing of traditions was condemned only because conflicting rules lead to confusion and chaos both externally and internally. But what harm can it do to the Kaula adept whose primary aim is to rise above all injunctions and does not hesitate to transgress even the most fundamental prohibitions marking the passage from nature to culture? If a religious tradition is defined by the number and type of injunctions and prohibitions it imposes, a wholly transgressive mode of sacrality would consequently be defined by the absence of all such limitations. This is indeed implied in the oft-repeated declaration that the advancing grades of descending realization overrule or annul the restrictive teachings based on the grades of the ascending realization (TA 4.249-253); which provides the framework for assigning the various traditions and their corresponding points of view their definite places at the various levels of the initiatic hierarchy culminating in the Kaula and, especially, Trika stage of realization. Whereas premature exposure to a transgressive sacrality can prove shattering to one whose practice, outlook, and understanding is restricted to the narrower confines of a religion of interdictions, the transgressive adept can easily adapt himself to and assume the external appearances and language of any of the more restrictive traditions because he appreciates their necessity, at their own levels, as lesser truths. Suggestions that one should remain a Kaula at heart, an orthodox Śaiva externally, a Vaiṣṇava in the discussion-hall, and a Vaidika in one’s worldly transaction should therefore not be understood as religious “opportunism” or “hypocrisy” but rather as the practice of ‘catholicism’ in its truest sense (TA 4.251, also Guenon (1977) chapter 37 “Le Don des Langues”).

It would follow that inter-religious dialogue should be primarily the affair of the adepts of transgressive sacrality in the world’s religions. Their role in the Eastern traditions is uncontested. The determining role of transgressive sacrality in the so-called “primitive” religions of the Americas, Africa and Oceania has been demonstrated by Makarius through a cross-cultural typology of phenomena like ritual clowning, trickster in myth and divine kingship.24 Though parallel phenomena are not lacking in the

24 Makarius (1974). We however find their exclusively magical interpretation of transgression and the exaggerated place they accord to the violation of the blood-taboo quite unacceptable. Indeed, “the ethnologists habitually treat as ‘primitive’ forms which are only degenerate to a greater or lesser extent; and anyhow these forms are very often not really on as low a level as might be supposed from the accounts that are given of them .... Indeed, where there is degeneration, it is naturally the superior part of
Christian context, the absence of clear evidence of a systematic Christian praxis, and almost complete absence of a Christian theory of transgression, has permitted Christians to either relegate such phenomena to a pagan prehistory somehow incorporated slowly into Christianity (as “survivals”) against its will, or seek to explain away such phenomena, and justify them, by minimizing reference to their transgressive dimension. The moral and ethical point of view, which resists conceding any degree of validity to transgression as a form of sacrality, perhaps makes it impossible for Protestantism in particular to countenance the notion of transgression (whose prime figure is, after all, the Devil). Nevertheless, many of the phenomena unearthed by specialists in European culture, when put together, would tend to indicate that they have been too well integrated into the medieval Christian order, so well as to warrant the posing of a specifically Christian problematic of transgressive sacrality. I leave it to our Muslim colleagues to enlighten us about the possible transgressive implications of the “Way of Blame” (mala’amatiyah) in Sufism, and as to whether there is any place for such modes of sacrality in Islamic esotericism. In view of the apparent absence of a transgressive dimension in Judaic sacrality, our Jewish friends could perhaps elucidate those features and structures of Judaism that would have tended to exclude such a dimension. Whereas it has been till now fashionable to emphasize, in international conferences, those aspects of Hinduism that would place it on par with the West, the present paper would rather reconcile a permanent, and perhaps even central, dimension of Hinduism with the religions of the Americas, Africa and Oceania. Instead of comparing Hindu bhakti to a personal god with the same in the Semitic religions, or Hindu ‘philosophy’ with that of Kant, Hegel and Bradley, or Vedantic absolutism with that of the Western mystics like Plotinus or Eckhart, or Hindu asceticism with Buddhist and Christian monasticism, the problem of transgressive sacrality in India would bring it spiritually closer to the archaic and “primitive” religions, whose true sophistication is only recently being revealed to us by the painstaking researches of anthropologists like Lévi-Strauss. It is by refocusing attention on parallel phenomena in their own religio-

the doctrine, its metaphysical or spiritual side, which disappears more or less completely; as a consequence, something that was originally only secondary...inevitably assumes a preponderant importance. The remainder, even if it persists still to some extent, may easily elude the observer from outside, all the more so because that observer, being ignorant of the profound significance of rites and symbols, is unable to recognize in them any elements belonging to a superior order . . . and thinks that everything can be explained indifferently in terms of magic,” R. Guénon, *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*, transl. Lord Northbourne (1953; rpt. Baltimore: Penguin, 1972), p. 216.
cultural histories that the Judeo-Christian religions may be expected to participate on the same platform. India occupies a privileged situation in an inter-religious forum on transgressive sacrality because, on the one hand, it has seen the same developments of philosophy, bhakti, ethical tendencies, aesthetics, etc., as the West(ern religions) has undergone and, on the other hand, it has always retained that transgressive dimension that seems so central to the intelligibility of archaic religions, but has become obscured in the Judeo-Christian tradition. By showing how this transgressive dimension has managed to integrate these later developments in India, the way would at least be partly cleared for reconciling the Judeo-Christian tradition with the sources of archaic spirituality.

But why should one now indulge in the public discussion of a tabooed form of sacrality, always confined to closed esoteric circles, and especially with and before fellow men who in no way subscribe to it? By Abhinava’s own logic, should not such dialogue be undertaken only by the adepts of such sacrality and out of the hearing of those who live by religious interdictions alone? But we are moderners and modernism stands in a peculiarly ambiguous relation to the archaic transgressive sacrality. On the one hand, by questioning the religion of interdiction (for example, through Nietzsche, Marx and Freud) it has opened the way for a better appreciation of and even resurgence of transgressive sacrality. On the other hand, the process of secularization has short-circuited the dialectic of sacred transgression which necessarily presupposes a rigorous system of specifically religious interdictions. Already shaken by the encounter with other and conflicting religions, the modern man, whose religious faith has been devastated directly or indirectly by the revolutions of the above three secular philosophers is able to re-appropriate the transgressive core of archaic religion only through the application of specifically modern categories and intellectual disciplines.

Finally, no inter-religious dialogue can be of value and bear any practical fruit unless interlocutors are prepared to modify their existing points of view, to admit that much in their own traditions is no longer of any relevance due to changes in general mentality, conditions of modern life and the spatio-temporal upheavals in the recent history of these traditions. These are precisely the factors that for Abhinavagupta define any tradition and, its adherents must now be able to recognize their relative and contingent character and thereby court the danger of religious confusion and loss of faith. Otherwise, instead of borrowing whatever is of value in the other religions, there
can only be a hardening of attitudes into an uncompromising rigidity. The current phenomenon of fundamentalism has not spared any of the major religions, and, in many respects, it is a specifically modern phenomenon. Though under normal circumstances the adepts of transgressive sacrality play the role of champions of the orthodox religion in the life of their respective communities, they are also potentially the most effective instruments of change in their own traditions. Transgression relativizes the entire system of norms that constitutes the mother-religion, and thereby places these esoteric currents in a particularly privileged position as potential reformers, whether from within or without, of the existing system, when it is no longer capable of responding to the challenges of the times, or has to interact with a different and largely incompatible religious system, or when it has to face the onslaughts of modernism (with its own secular modes of transgression). For example, socio-religious hierarchies are temporarily abolished in the exceptional rituals of transgression, and this attitude is easily generalized to the social order at large in order to renew and transform it, all the more so as such transgressive disorder already finds social sanction in festive saturnalia. Even the inferior social status of women in the patriarchal religious traditions can be thereby radically questioned through a generalization of their equality in the cult of transgression, which can easily accommodate their sexual liberation today.

Epilogue

This essay was originally presented to the Word Parliament of Religions held in New York in December 1985 alongside a complementary paper on “Adepts of the god Bhairava” by my wife Dr. Elizabeth Chalier-Visuvalingam. In response to the query addressed to my Jewish interlocutors, Rabbi Rami Shapiro, the coordinator of our conference subsection, introduced us all to Gershom Scholem, Sabbatai Sévi, and transgressive sacrality (TS) in the Judaic tradition. The essay then served as prospectus for the TS pilot sub-conference hosted within the annual South Asia conference at the University of Madison, Wisconsin, in November 1986. Partly because I had explicitly addressed the recent conference on “Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees,” Elizabeth and I were then invited to contribute to the conference volume for which I wrote the concluding paper from the TS perspective. TS in Islam was subsequently explored in

This typewritten TS manuscript eventually found its way, without my knowledge, into the hands of Prof. Lakshmi Bandlamudi, the foremost Indian scholar of Mikhail Bakhtin, who was immediately able to make sense of my treatment of dialogue and the carnival from the perspective of this Russian theoretician. She contacted me in August 2011 to present these ideas on clown, carnival, and transgression as the keynote speaker at “Bakhtin in India” international conference held in Gandhinagar (Gujarat) on 19–20 August 2013, where Elizabeth made a complementary plenary presentation reinterpreting (Bakhtin’s) Rabelais and the Medieval carnival in the light of TS in the Hindu tradition. Both our papers are appearing in the resulting conference volume. My subsequent talk (December 2013) at the Bakhtin Center at Sheffield University fleshed out the specifically Christian problematic of TS that we had already posed in Gandhinagar by drawing upon anthropologist McKim Marriott’s early participant fieldwork on the Holi festival.

My original TS paper has been reproduced here almost as is, with trivial corrections for accuracy and a couple of updated references in footnotes 7 and 15 [in square brackets]. Widely circulated in typescript form, the paper had been published, in full or in part, in Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Hindi, and Tamil. That it is being published in this Festschrift for the first time in the original English is extremely gratifying, for Prof. Antonio de Nicolás has been sympathetic to the questions raised by the TS problematic from the very beginning (late 2003).