

# 1 *Theoretical Equipment*

This chapter provides a brief introduction to the conceptual tools that are used throughout this book, and which were fully developed in the companion volume.<sup>1</sup> Those familiar with the framework may skip it, although there are a few new areas of discussion.<sup>2</sup> New readers, on the other hand, should note how brutally condensed the discussion is here; *Unearthly Powers* will need to be referred to for a proper sense of how these concepts work and of the various theoretical and methodological questions they bring in their train.<sup>3</sup>

## **Immanentism and Transcendentalism**

The most fundamental concepts used here, ‘immanentism’ and ‘transcendentalism’, refer to different kinds of religiosity. Immanentism may be defined by the following ten features:

Immanentism is the default mode of religious behaviour. Since it is found, in some form, in every society known to scholarship, it is reasonable to speculate that it has roots in evolved or at least universal elements of human cognition. Above all, this means the tremendous force of anthropomorphism – the tendency to attribute motivated agency to forces, objects, dead people, features of the landscape, abstractions and chains of cause-and-effect. In particular, whatever harms or benefits us is liable to be seen as the product of willed agentive movement. Marshall Sahlins has referred to the ancestors,

<sup>1</sup> And see the Glossary.

<sup>2</sup> The themes of cultural glamour and intellectual appeal; and a more expansive account of religious diplomacy. See the Appendix on the implications of transcendentalism for gender relations and religious violence.

<sup>3</sup> For example, *UP* 11–19 discusses several tendencies in scholarship that have inhibited global comparative projects by hardening into taboos: (1) an aversion to essentialism; (2) an esteem for genealogical deconstruction; (3) the prioritisation of the emic over the etic; (4) the avoidance of teleology.

Table 1.1 *Immanentism*

(1)	Rampant generation of metapersons
(2)	Monistic cosmology
(3)	Undifferentiated afterlife
(4)	Focus on power
(5)	Unsystematised and community-focussed morality
(6)	Amoral metapersons
(7)	Empirical understanding of the function of ritual
(8)	Dynamic incorporation and flexibility
(9)	Unselfconsciousness
(10)	Translatability

spirits and gods that people our existence as ‘metapersons’.<sup>4</sup> They circle around or tower over us to form a whole other dimension of social action, invisible and always intricately hierarchical. They may be imagined as existing in some other dimension of existence – underworlds or spirit worlds or the sky – but that realm is homologous to ours in important ways, and leaches into it routinely. Metapersons move among us, continually impinging upon our wellbeing. In this sense the cosmology is fundamentally monistic. In keeping with this monism, the afterlife is often relatively undifferentiated from this life; more consistently, it is not at all the central focus of religious activity. In Hawaii in the 1820s, for example, William Ellis reported of the afterlife that it ‘could not be discovered whether they had any definite idea of the nature or even the existence, of such a state’ and went on to report a range of speculations about it.<sup>5</sup> A range of familiar conceptual dualisms therefore finds little purchase here – including that between ‘nature’ and ‘supernature’. (Where these terms are used here, it is therefore only in a highly etic sense.)

Instead, the main purpose of religious action is to conduct appropriate relations with metapersons in order to ensure that their powers may be harnessed for our well-being. For the success of every form of human endeavour – from waging war to growing taro – is held, at

<sup>4</sup> Graeber and Sahlins 2017. In his last book, Sahlins (2022) suggested that his comparative work on ‘the enchanted universe’ could be framed by the concept of immanentism.

<sup>5</sup> Ellis 368–9.

some level, to depend on it. In a more etic sense, religious activities will also, of course, serve certain Durkheimian functions of social order and cohesion. In that sense, we may refer to a certain moral or pro-social dimension to immanentism. However, this morality is essentially that of successful communal living rather than an interiorised commitment to universal principles. What the stories and symbols and rites of immanentist religion embody are the normal appetites and desiderata of this world: heroism, consumption, fertility, sexuality, honour, peace, victory. Indeed, this pertains to the nature of the gods too, who are typically no more or no less given to moral behaviour than are visible persons. Like human lords, they may be irascible and petty and vainglorious.

There is, therefore, usually a rather transactional quality to conducting relations with these beings. The quintessential means by which this is done is through rites of sacrifice, which may be understood in global terms as a form of gift-exchange – even if any particular tradition of it will be loaded with all manner of other meanings too. Thus, the mutual dependency of life and death: a logic taken to an extreme with the practice of ritual homicide. Human sacrifice is only found in some immanentist societies but in diverse and disconnected ones; it was certainly an important feature of state cult in Hawaii in the early nineteenth century. The field of the ‘sacred’ is not therefore to be confused with idealised images of the ‘good’ or the ‘holy’. If the maintenance of ‘purity’ in the broadest sense is a defining preoccupation of immanentism, this was so only in the dimension of ritual, the physical qualities of bodily conduct and spatial arrangement, rather than as a matter of ethical or cognitive propriety. Immanentism does not demand labour in the inner life of the individual but correct observance as a social being.

Given its fundamental orientation to the business of human flourishing, immanentism could take on a deeply empirical, pragmatic and experimental quality. Relations with metapersons were expected to produce tangible results and, under certain circumstances, could be set aside if they failed to deliver. That is to say, to some extent such relations could be characterised by an ‘economy of ritual efficacy’. There were several reasons why this ‘economy’ was usually limited in scope. The Durkheimian functions of religion, as noted above, ensured that traditional forms of ritual practice and narrative were invested with authority and hardly jeopardised by empirical setbacks as a

matter of routine. Even where ritual action was undertaken with explicit instrumentalist and perlocutionary effects in mind, there were all kinds of ways in which priests and specialists could rationalise unfavourable outcomes – a process that some cognitive scientists have referred to as ‘conceptual control’. While the fundamental principles of religious life were rarely called into question, therefore, much more subject to flux was the efficacy attributed to particular instantiations of certain metapersons and their ritual interlocuters. This could endow immanentist religious systems with a distinctly dynamic and mutable disposition, especially since they were not defined and authorised by canonical texts. They did not pivot around a single decisive moment of revelation in the past; information from the sphere of the metapersons rather poured into this world unrestrained.

Indeed, exegetes of immanentist cultures frequently note that they find no emic counterparts to central concepts of the Western vernacular. The notion of ‘religion’ itself, as something that could be extracted from the mass of social relations and customs, is inherently alien. These are therefore the religions of no name – frequently only rendered legible through the deprecating generalisations of transcendentalisms: paganism, heathenism and so on. The field of immanentism is in an important sense borderless and elastic, such that the metapersons of foreign peoples could be equated with one’s own. It was the shared, universal forms of immanentism that allowed such translatability to occur.

In what would appear to be relatively autonomous intellectual flourishes animating certain parts of first-millennium-BCE Eurasia, many of the features of immanentism came under sustained assault. In this ‘Axial Age’ of human history, diverse thinkers and prophets established the foundations for cultural structures that persist to this day: Confucianism and Daoism in China; the origins of European Philosophy in Greece; Buddhism, Jainism and Upaniṣadic Hinduism in India; and the transformation of Judaism that laid the foundations for monotheism in West Asia.<sup>6</sup> Fully fledged transcendentalism emerged in the last two cases and indeed formed two quite distinct families: the Abrahamic and the Indic.

<sup>6</sup> UP 19–26 on the Axial ‘age’. Important works in historical sociology include Eisenstadt, ed. 1986 and Bellah 2005; 2011.

Table 1.2 *Transcendentalism*


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(1)	Ontological division between transcendent and mundane spheres
(2)	Orientation towards the objective of salvation
(3)	Ethicisation of values and metapersons
(4)	Otherworldly values
(5)	Emphasis on individual interiority
(6)	Ideological ‘offensiveness’
(7)	Attempts to canonise and textualise revelation
(8)	Intellectualisation
(9)	Self-conscious identity formation
(10)	Universalism and conversion-seeking
(11)	Assertion of superiority
(12)	Deprecation of magic
(13)	Development of autonomous clerisies
(14)	Emergence outside the state
(15)	Dynamic of reformism

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Transcendentalism cuts reality into two: The mundane sphere, inherently corrupt and unsatisfactory, is set against a sacred dimension of existence that is, in one sense at least, literally ineffable, transcending any capacity of the human mind to represent it. The Buddha of the Pali canon, for example, refused to define *nibbāna* (nirvana), even as to whether it was existence, non-existence, both of these things or neither of them. But attaining this ineffable state, escaping the human condition – achieving salvation, in short – now becomes the focal point of religious activity. The new nothingness exalted by the transcendentalist traditions is made most explicit in the aniconic movements that have emerged among them from time to time: the reluctance to represent the divine that we can find at certain points in the histories of Buddhism, Jainism, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

The sphere of the sacred becomes characterised by absolute good, and religion becomes the search for the good – as something quite distinct from human flourishing or the wellbeing of the immediate community. It was rather founded upon a universal ethics articulating the golden rule, taking in all humanity or even all living beings, and was amenable to explicit codification such as the Ten Commandments or the Five Precepts of Buddhism. This new morality, idealised to the

point of utopianism, fought hard against human nature in certain ways. The quest for salvation can seem to flip the normal criteria of human flourishing upside down, endowing status and soteriological glamour upon suffering, celibacy, poverty, death and defeat. Asceticism arrived in the form of monastics, mendicants and hermits who attempted to live out this transcendence of human nature. Sacredness was now not achieved by amassing power, success or brilliance but by repudiating the quest for these worldly attributes. Their focus on salvation gave the transcendentalist traditions a powerful enhancement of 'conceptual control' – such that calamitous outcomes in this plane of existence did not touch upon their core purposes. Indeed, a much more holistic apprehension of evil and misfortune could now be deployed.

All this, in turn, entails an entirely new valuation of the self – as something encountered in prayer or meditation, for example. But the self is discovered only to be chastised: This shadowy interior realm of desires and thoughts is where the business of purification must now take place. As the religious life shifts from the communal to the individual-cum-universal, kinship may be cast aside or castigated. And the practice of ritual is subject to a powerful relativisation: 'If ritual is the characteristic activity of the immanentist mode (and sacrifice the most typical form), then ethics is the characteristic activity of the transcendentalist mode (and self-sacrifice the most typical form).'<sup>7</sup> Indeed, displays of immanent power were vulnerable to suspicion as superstition, deceit or 'mere magic'.

In keeping with their origins in the philosophical and political convulsions of the Axial Age, there is a self-consciousness to the transcendentalist traditions: They are, to use (or abuse) a term by Ernest Gellner, characterised by 'offensiveness'. That is to say, they are predicated on an assertion of the inadequacy or deceptiveness of alternative visions of reality. This new insistence on Truth rather than mere knowledge was intimately bound up with two further distinctive features that help to explain the astonishing durability of transcendentalist traditions as structures of authority: In their most definitive form they referred to a single primary point of revelation associated with a single historical figure, and those revelations were set down in textual form. This partially closed and textualised form of teachings is central

<sup>7</sup> UP 54.

to many of the fifteen features touched on here. All the transcendentalisms produced a class of literate intellectuals – a ‘clerisy’ – who acted as the champions and interpreters of scripture. These developed forms of learning and debate, which meant that the tradition became shaped by intense processes of ‘rationalisation’ and enhanced the potential for religion to reproduce itself through the ‘doctrinal mode’ driven by routine participation in rites of indoctrination and the extension of literacy.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, most basically and tellingly of all perhaps, many transcendentalisms became religions of expansion, of conversion. They were able to move into new societies as whole systems, spreading and inculcating a relatively durable set of truths and narratives enshrined in scripture. Although it has become routine now to point out how recently certain terms and sentiments of religious identity have become normalised (that Buddhism only became an ‘ism’ in the nineteenth century, for example), these genealogical preoccupations have disguised the capacity of pre-modern adherents of Asian traditions to see themselves as belonging to vast moral communities and to produce discourses castigating those who disagreed with them or sought to corrupt them from within. All such traditions therefore carried within them a certain potential for identity construction, although it must be underlined that the monotheisms, structured by what Jan Assmann refers to as ‘the Mosaic distinction’, were far more liable to produce sharply defined and indeed exclusivist understandings of collective identity.<sup>9</sup> This is related to the way that the monotheisms sought to monopolise the sphere of metapersonhood, while for Buddhists the gods were inferiorised, being themselves subjected to the iron laws of soteriology.

None of the transcendentalist traditions began as ideologies of state, and they carried within them a potential rebuke of the exercise of political authority. Their clerisies developed institutions (sangha, Church), often embodying meritocratic principles, that displayed unusual organisational strengths, maintaining their integrity and coherence even while states rose and fell around them. Yet, these very same attributes made them irresistible sources of social power, which

<sup>8</sup> Whitehouse 2000.

<sup>9</sup> Assmann 2014. For Duara 2015: 6, the Indic and East Asian traditions were more capable of combining with each other in diverse ways, hence their ‘dialogical transcendence’.

states strove to harness. But the clerisies (bhikkhus, monks, priests, jurists, scholars) could claim a moral authority that was quite distinct from that of lords and kings. Against their privileged relationship to the ultimate ends of life, the concerns of mundane politics may be deemed trivial. The social power this lent Buddhist orders will be seen to be crucial in the outcomes of the cases of Japan and Ayutthaya.

This understanding of transcendentalism was largely, if not exclusively, derived from a reading of Buddhism, Christianity and Islam.<sup>10</sup> The much longer discussion in *Unearthly Powers* also sought to emphasise the *different* ways that the Indic and monotheistic forms embodied these features of transcendentalism. For example, from a certain angle, the Indic traditions, which conceived of soteriologies governed by impersonal cosmic laws, look more profoundly transcendentalist than the Abrahamic traditions, which tied salvation to an inflated metaperson. But the flip side of this was that the Indic traditions could leave large stretches of immanentist behaviour in place, while the Abrahamic traditions had to dominate religious life much more completely.

However, such references to 'Indic' traditions left the place of Hinduism in the paradigm ambiguous, while Confucianism was also quarantined for further analysis.<sup>11</sup> These are now properly integrated into the framework in Chapter 9. What we refer to as Hinduism, Judaism and Confucianism may be understood as capacious traditions that found ways of incorporating the results of Axial Age eruptions of reflexivity while maintaining a greater continuity with an ancient immanentist heritage than we find in the more radical transcendentalisms of Buddhism, Christianity and (certain forms of) Daoism. Thus, it is certainly more awkward to assimilate Hinduism, Judaism and especially Confucianism to the fifteen characteristics that were listed above.<sup>12</sup> Most significantly, otherworldly salvation-liberation is not a feature of Confucianism, and a far more minor element of Jewish tradition, while no principal prophet-teacher stands at the font of Hinduism. All these three traditions retained ritual practice as a foundation stone.

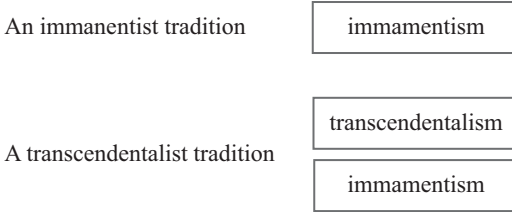
<sup>10</sup> Jainism and Sikhism would also work rather well.

<sup>11</sup> Although Indian and Chinese material was deployed in various places in *UP*.

<sup>12</sup> In terms of their core hegemonic elements rather than in any given historical instantiation.



But the truth is that all transcendentalist movements, however radical their origins, developed into traditions that came to incorporate immanentist elements.<sup>13</sup> Thus, any religion such as Christianity, Islam or Buddhism that we may wish to refer to as ‘transcendentalist’ is in fact an unstable and changeable synthesis of both elements. It is extremely important to note that the reverse is not true: That is to say, immanentism has existed untroubled for most of human history.



This synthesis is apparent from the very inception of these traditions, first as a matter of their core conceptual arrangements and, second, as a matter of history, as the transcendentalist traditions were forced to gradually make peace with the structures of mundane reality in order to thrive and survive. Every single defining feature of transcendentalism was subject to reversal or erosion. All major theorists of the Axial Age, including Shmuel Eisenstadt, Eric Voegelin, Jan Assmann and Robert Bellah, have referred us to the persisting influence of what is described here as immanentism. Underlying this, surely, are the evolved structures of human cognition and need that had generated the characteristic features of immanentism in the first place. Thus the ceaseless desire to access supernatural power will turn the Koran into a magical object; the anthropomorphising tendency will ensure that icon and deity will ever be conflated; the simple fact that human beings continue to dream and enter altered states of consciousness will mean that revelation can only be reframed rather than halted, prophets and visionaries emerging willy-nilly; the instincts underpinning ritual will process the management of relations with the divine through its reassuring mechanisms; the need to represent ideas in the guise of things and images will ensure that transcendent concepts take material

<sup>13</sup> For clarity, the description of immanentism above is of its ‘untouched’ form, whereas what follows indicates how immanentist elements or tendencies work within a transcendentalist system.

form, enchanting objects and people, and forcing the ineffable to speak. All this means that immanentist elements are not best understood in terms of survival but as ongoing generation.

No less important is what happens when the movements driven by otherworldly aspirations take on institutional forms that acquire social and political functions.<sup>14</sup> As Christianity, for example, worked its way from the margins into the centre ground of any society, it had to take on the Durkheimian roles that religion had always fulfilled: Far from challenging the primacy of the family, the givenness of the cultural inheritance or the justice of the political status quo, it had to become the most fundamental legitimator of each.<sup>15</sup> Monasteries, temples, churches, lodges and shrines were pulled into local economies of material exchange, translating their soteriological capital into political and financial boons. And as the transcendentalisms expanded – both into new sectors of any one society and into new societies tout court – so they had to meet immanentism on its own terms in order to obtain victory. The development of the cult of the saints – regardless of scriptural foundations or the lack of them – in Christianity and Islam is just one of myriad means by which this happened. Christian saints even became vaguely amoral metapersons who were assumed to be actually present in their material forms and thus vulnerable to coercion. Ironies abounded of course: The Buddha of the Brahmajala Sutta may deprecate mere magic, but inevitably his own teeth and bones became the repositories of tremendous magical power after his death, while the ascetic monks who followed in his footsteps by renouncing all worldly desires were sought out by laypeople who granted them unusual capacity to bend the material world to their will. (The underlying equation here is that soteriological virtuosity equals immanentist power.)

Transcendentalism, however, fought back. Such syntheses were, over the long-term, always unstable because the immanentist elements were vulnerable to reprehension in the light of transcendentalist criteria. Perhaps broadly associated with certain socio-economic developments, at some point voices would emerge that attacked the ‘paganism’ lurking within the veneration of saints or idols, or lamented the way that monasteries had become sites of luxury and bodily pleasure rather

<sup>14</sup> Martin 2005: 12 refers to Christianity’s encounter with the logic of social organisation.

<sup>15</sup> Loubère 418–19; Luke 9:59–60.

than ascetic self-denial, or insisted that the true meaning of the scriptures had been forgotten or that the scriptures were no longer being copied and circulated, or that true piety had been suffocated by mechanical observance, and so on. The more successful clerisies became at inducting their flocks into transcendentalist visions, the more vulnerable they became to being judged and found wanting by the same criteria. These voices are perhaps most audible in the histories of the monotheisms, most famously in their sudden fortissimo coalescence in the Reformation, but echoes may be discerned in the *longue durée* of Buddhism too. By contrast, nothing like this particular dynamic may be found in purely immanentist traditions.<sup>16</sup>

### The Types of Sacred Kingship

Just as the term ‘religion’ has masked profound differences between immanentist and transcendentalist systems, so the term ‘sacred kingship’ has masked the quite different modes of sacralising the ruler these systems entailed.<sup>17</sup> In the immanentist mode, what results is *divinised kingship*: The ruler is treated as if they were a metaperson; they are conceived as being close to the ancestors, spirits and gods, having kinship with them or sharing in their power or incarnating them at times. This is not quite, then, to uphold the most straightforward understanding of ‘divine kingship’, in which the king is simply understood ‘to be’ a god. Rather, surveying a very broad range of cases, one finds scholars repeatedly grappling with a generic sense of ambiguity. Indeed, this is often a cultivated ambiguity, for monarchs are ‘in-between’ things: Already and evidently human, they are pushed part way into the sphere of the divine in order to intercede on our behalf. In this vision, the monarch may be sacralised through an appreciation of their negative powers, their capacity for arbitrary violence, and the deliberate breaking of convention. Immanentism allows for this ‘non-euphemised’ understanding of kingship, its unstinting gaze upon the flux of power, because the whole field of relations with metapersons is relatively non-ethicised.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Note, however that other forms of dualism characterise immanentism: see Gose 2022; Moin and Strathern 2022a: 324.

<sup>17</sup> The following section draws on *UP* ch. 3, and Moin and Strathern 2022a.

<sup>18</sup> ‘Allows’, *not* ‘necessitates’. Only a subset of immanentist kingship appears strikingly non-euphemised.

It would appear, however, that there in turn are two rather different routes to the divinisation of the ruler, which means that on occasion we may need to deploy two sub-categories: the heroic and the cosmic. As is summarised in the table in the glossary, *heroic kingship* involves a claim to supernatural power and is most compelling when rulers have achieved extraordinary accomplishments, on the battlefield above all; their access to the non-human wellsprings of all good fortune is therefore advertised in an immediate and concrete manner and invites veneration. This does not preclude the king from mixing with his subjects in a relatively free and open manner. *Cosmic kingship*, on the other hand, is sustained by ritual performance rather than achieved by transgressive or godlike deeds. Given that in the immanentist worldview, the biological, social, political and cosmological realms are relatively undifferentiated, the figure of the ruler may be established as the central pivot of all of them. Thus are they fashioned into ritual objects/agents so they may become the focus of communal hopes for the coming of the rains, the banishment of disease or simply the continuing order of the universe. But this also tends to entail an effort to dehumanise the monarch, to turn them into a cult object, to constrain and stylise their movements, to obscure them from view and to isolate them from the rest of society.

These sub-types cannot be pushed too far; indeed, it must be stressed that there are times when they are distinctly unhelpful. Nevertheless, they allow us to discern what seems to be a recurring dynamic in the monarchies of immanentist societies. The heroic form is inherently unstable. As reigns wear on, as misfortunes accumulate, as less successful successors succeed to the throne, as bureaucracies develop around the court and as the ruler is withdrawn from the battlefield, the more natural it becomes to elevate their status king in the cosmic mode. This may be a strategy of the dynasty, but it may also be a strategy of lesser elites who wish to detach the ruler from the levers of power. For, as expressed in many diarchic forms of kingship worldwide, ritualisation and political efficacy are not simply mutually constitutive: The pursuit of one may damage the other. At one extreme then, rulers may fall – or be pushed – into the ritualisation trap.

The transcendentalist mode of *righteous kingship* is very different. At the centre of this vision is not the metapersonal quality of the ruler's being; it is rather their responsibility to establish the conditions within which their subjects might attain salvation, to uphold the truth and to

model a pious subordination to a higher order. The darker tones of royal sacred theatre are thereby expunged, the rites of human sacrifice anathemised. ‘When kings are divinised, it is their human mortality and weakness that must somehow be obscured; when kings are made righteous, it is their human immorality and violence that must be effaced.’<sup>19</sup> The representation of political authority was now subject to an anxious moralising. The agency of the ruler was not tamed through ceremonial elaboration but by subjecting it to a principle of self-government lodged in their hearts and minds, reducing them to the level of all other beings concerned for their own liberation. Underlying this was a certain strand of thought by which politics may be relativised, resulting not in the secularisation of power but rather in a certain potential for its disenchantment or chastisement.<sup>20</sup> The clerisy were empowered to describe the ideals by which monarchs ought to live and rule. Church, sangha, ulema could be used as a vehicle of state power, to be sure; but they might also act as its counterweight, reserving the right to pass judgement on the question of legitimacy.<sup>21</sup>

For most of premodern history any such potential disenchantment of kingship was largely suppressed. Once again, we must recall the inevitable tendency for transcendentalist understandings and immanentist forms to combine. Thus, righteous kingship was frequently combined with and expressed through divinised forms, especially in Asia, and most spectacularly apparent in the awesome dignity of the kings of Ayutthaya.<sup>22</sup> Two specific forces that worked to catalyse this synthesis are important for this book. The first, illustrated in the Kongo and Hawaii cases, is the tendency for rulers converting to Christianity or Islam to stretch the immanentist elements of their adopted faiths as far as they will go in order to allow traditional forms of divinisation some sort of after-life in the new dispensation. Secondly, when rulers in any

<sup>19</sup> *UP* 197.

<sup>20</sup> Eisenstadt 1986a: 8. ‘Secularisation’ implies that kingship is either removed from the sphere of the religious/sacred or held there at the expense of its political and societal significance. ‘Disenchantment’ signals a devaluation of immanent power in describing and constituting kingship.

<sup>21</sup> Moin and Strathern 2022a: 18–20 then breaks down righteous kingship into ‘doctrinal’ and ‘zealous’ forms, which parallel the cosmic and heroic in certain ways.

<sup>22</sup> *UP* 206–13 and Strathern 2017: 38 on Christian and Muslim divinisation, generally more restrained than that allowed by Indic traditions, where the whole field of metapersons was far less problematised to begin with.

society wished to break the intolerable authority of their clerics, they frequently turned to the register of divinisation in order to insist upon their embodiment of ultimate moral authority. Rulers who achieved unusual feats on the battlefield, creating or rapidly expanding imperial dominion, were particularly prone to turn to divinised claims – reflecting the charismatic authority, political capital and personal megalomania that their successes generated.

## The Model of Ruler Conversion

### *Religious Diplomacy*

The model of ruler conversion first draws our attention to banal matters: the pull of diplomatic, commercial and military advantage. It comes first because such reasoning was almost a precondition of engagement with Christianity.<sup>23</sup> In many cases, that engagement would stay at the level of tolerating or patronising missionaries, but sometimes diplomatic considerations were strong enough to induce much more profound forms of commitment. Religions such as Christianity, Islam and Buddhism created these fields of religious diplomacy as a function of some of their basic properties: the way they formed moral communities; preached a universal message; generated transnational networks exchanging higher ordination, texts and learning; and particularly insofar as they were bent on conversion of others. Naturally, these fields become particularly highly charged when these groups started expanding into new regions and did so with considerable commercial and military clout. The late-fifteenth and sixteenth centuries saw a truly worldwide field spring up by virtue of the seafaring exploits of the Portuguese and Spanish, and the way in which Catholic imperialism was so openly and aggressively imbued with proselytising ambition. Europeans themselves tended to see temporal and spiritual dynamics as conjoined – assuming, for example, that the baptism of foreign rulers was a means of making friendly or even pliable allies.<sup>24</sup> Yet it is perhaps surprising how swiftly political agents

<sup>23</sup> Sometimes referred to as ‘extrinsic factors’, material and mundane benefits distinct from the inherent qualities of the religion itself. Compare Robbins 2004: 85–7 on utilitarian motives as the initial draw.

<sup>24</sup> Sebastião de Souto, 1561, MMA II: 477–80.

from all parts of the world and at all levels of power – from the headman of a small village on a tributary in Upper Guinea to a great shogun of Japan such as Hideyoshi – understood the logic by which showing favour to Christianity could be translated into diplomatic capital with European polities.<sup>25</sup> Both sides instinctively appreciated that the social power of religion could be used to organise and stabilise relations with outsiders, just as it could be used to this effect with their subjects – although these two ambitions might conflict. No doubt ruling elites came to observe a mental fallibility to which few missionaries were immune: the tendency to assume that royal shows of friendliness and tolerance towards them reflected a movement towards conversion itself.<sup>26</sup>

This dynamic may be inserted into a larger paradigm: the association between the expansion of trade networks, the spread of the world religions and the formation of states.<sup>27</sup> On a basic level, commerce typically provides the means by which inter-cultural contact occurs. Scholarship sometimes sees merchants as vectors for religious and cultural forms that are naturally inclined to spread like viruses. Hence, if we consider the historiography of maritime Southeast Asia, the expansions of Buddhism, Sanskritic culture and Islam have all been associated with shifting patterns of inter-regional trade and the political possibilities they enabled.<sup>28</sup> Yet, simply pointing out the mechanics of connectedness affords only a trivial explanation as to why forms of cultural influence were absorbed. The scholarship of the spread of Islam in maritime Southeast Asia has sought to identify a more specific rationale: Islamising rulers of the new city states were consciously attempting to attract Muslim merchants to their ports.<sup>29</sup> As Sebastian

<sup>25</sup> Upper Guinea: Cipriano, 10 June 1596, MMA, 2nd series, III, 390–4; Rema 1982: 76–7; Amazon: Viveiros de Castro 2011: 36; tenth-century Rus: Shepard 2014: 234–5.

<sup>26</sup> Knobler 1996: 191–2. Iberian missionaries at the court of the Safavid Shāh ‘Abbās (1587–1629) convinced themselves that this divinised grand Muslim ruler might convert, while he dropped tantalising hints in order to pursue an anti-Ottoman alliance with European powers and to play divide-and-rule with his own clerics and ethnic factions: Matthee 2010. Compare Jesuit excitement regarding the Sultan of Makassar in 1665: Jacobs, ed. 1988.

<sup>27</sup> For Southeast Asia: Reid, ed. 1993; Wheeler 2007.

<sup>28</sup> Neelis 2010; Andaya 2008: 27; Guy 2011: 252; Ali 2011: 285–6; Hall 2001.

<sup>29</sup> Strathern 2013, for Southeast Asia; also, Strathern 2017; Tymowski 2009: 67.

Prange has pointed out, the Koran ‘even describes the sails of ships as portents of the faith “like banners on the sea” (42:32)’.<sup>30</sup>

Access to the wealth generated by luxury and long-distance commerce has often been a strong spur to the coalescence of political authority, allowing rulers to accumulate resources that set them apart from rivals.<sup>31</sup> It seems to have been a defining feature of kingship worldwide that office holders reserved the right to establish control over relations with foreign realms: It is their unique job to mediate the inner and outer worlds.<sup>32</sup> Ruling elites need prestigious luxury items in order to advertise their status, and they desired access to new military and technology capabilities and the service of mobile elites skilled in them. Some polities, however, such as commercially vigorous port cities, may be considered more ‘extraverted’ than others by virtue of their predisposition to suck in such outside sources of strength.<sup>33</sup>

The Portuguese tracking down the west coast of Africa over the fifteenth century and then up its eastern seaboard following 1498 set up an equivalent paradigm to that of Muslim merchants traversing the seas of Southeast Asia.<sup>34</sup> Over the next two hundred years, African rulers large and small requested missionaries or even baptism in order to gain trading privileges with Lisbon or Madrid and more informal groups of Portuguese and *lançados*.<sup>35</sup> The Portuguese Jesuit Baltasar Barreira (1531–1612) baptised a number of rulers in the Sierra Leone region in the first years of the seventeenth century, including the Mane-Sumba King of Tora (Dom Pedro). God then ‘ordained that more Portuguese vessels than ever before should come to his kingdom’.<sup>36</sup> But Barreira’s companion, Fr. Álvares, saw what happened when the hopes of great trade riches were not borne out. When first converted, various official declarations were read out, containing great promises, that ships would come, etc. When things went wrong the heathen did not remember that the advancement of the faith was the highest interest, but they did remember that no ships came. When the official declarations were not fulfilled, they said ‘that’s Christians for you’ and they sold the Portuguese clothing which had been given them at great expense.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Prange 2009: 35. Christian missionaries sometimes even acted as commercial agents: Boxer 1951: 111–21; Alberts 2018.

<sup>31</sup> Tambiah 1976: 129–30. <sup>32</sup> Piggott 1997: 8. <sup>33</sup> Reid, ed. 1993: 252.

<sup>34</sup> See Strathern 2018. <sup>35</sup> Law 1991b: 46–7; Brooks 1996: 225, 237.

<sup>36</sup> Brooks 1996: 313–4; Gonçalves 1996: 185. <sup>37</sup> Brooks 1996: 314.



As we shall see in the case of both Kongo and Japan, firearms brought by the Portuguese played an important role. It was the prospect of obtaining firearms that seems to have enticed the ruler of Benin to send an embassy to Lisbon in 1514 requesting missionaries.<sup>38</sup> When Benin proved a dead-end, Portuguese merchants cultivated an alternative trading centre at Ode Itsekiri in the 1540s by exchanging firearms in return for a package of trade and Christianisation.<sup>39</sup> This tiny polity hosted one of the few lasting Christian dynasties in Africa during this period.

The prospect of military assistance might cast a spell on local rulers, especially where they were caught in intense rivalries. The perennial factionalism around succession meant that kingdoms were liable to crack open into forms of abnormal extraversion as reigns drew to a close. Contenders who found themselves marginalised or removed from the line of succession had obvious motives to upset the status quo by reaching for Christianity.<sup>40</sup> This is what led to various sidelined princes in Sri Lanka touting their baptisms in return for Portuguese assistance from the 1540s onwards.<sup>41</sup> Indeed, a general principle is apparent: The more a region has fragmented into competing polities or rivals facing existential threat, the stronger the incentive to reach out for foreign sources of assistance.

Where Europeans came to intervene with greater belligerence, this dynamic could take on a more coercive and desperate aspect. Queen Njinga of Ndongo and Matamaba spent all her adult life struggling against the Portuguese as a warrior leader in the region of present-day Angola and repeatedly used requests for missionaries and the promise of her conversion to open negotiations.<sup>42</sup> In 1656, as she sought to establish a more durable kingdom of Ndongo-Matamba, she finally agreed to baptism and the Christianisation of her people as part of a treaty that she hoped would provide a lasting guarantee of peace. Meanwhile, Spanish Capuchins labouring in the court of Allada in 1660–1661 learned that they were tolerated ‘more from fear than from love of what we had proposed’, for it was assumed that if they felt

<sup>38</sup> Ryder 1969: 46–7; compare Kabaka Mutesa, nineteenth-century Buganda: Peel 1977: 128.

<sup>39</sup> Ryder 1960. <sup>40</sup> Strathern 2007b; Webb 1965: 36.

<sup>41</sup> Strathern 2007a. Compare 1640s: Biedermann 2017.

<sup>42</sup> Heywood 2017: 74–8; 165–92. For Boris I of Bulgaria, 860s: Sullivan 1994: 69.

rejected the King of Spain would be offended and send a punitive expedition.<sup>43</sup>

Yet if the connection with hard power was so strong, it is not difficult to see how the whole field of religious diplomacy might easily sour as a result. Consider the fact that the Portuguese insisted on baptism on the part of chiefs in Angola as a mark of their submission to vassalage in the 1580s–1590s, for example. What did this signal to elites in the wider region? Even the Catholic kings of Kongo warned their neighbours in Ndongo that missionaries were part of a Portuguese plan to rob them of their kingdom.<sup>44</sup> In the Karanga state of Mutapa in South-eastern Africa (modern Mozambique), the Jesuits had come close to an extremely important conversion in 1561; indeed, they had even baptised the young king. But what should have been a glorious opening for the faith ended up with the Jesuit Gonçalo de Silveira strangled and cast into a river. It seems that he had received advice that the missionary ‘had been sent by the governor of India and the captain of Sofala to spy out the land’ – and that the rite of baptism was the means by which the king would be brought under their control.<sup>45</sup> Such intuitions were not entirely paranoid: The Portuguese went on to launch projects of territorial conquest in both Angola and Mozambique, and used the mistreatment of Jesuits as part of their rhetorical justification.<sup>46</sup> In Sri Lanka, where the Portuguese also introduced a clear association between vassalage and baptism, they first sought to exert influence through Christian client rulers, then, by the end of the century, launching a war of conquest.<sup>47</sup> No wonder rebels turned to the imagery of anti-Christianity to symbolise their resistance.

Foreign military power is of course only attractive to local rulers to the extent that it can be harnessed to their interests, turning it inwards to overawe internal rivals and subjects or outwards to defeat enemies. The ease with which that sense of opportunity may transmogrify into

<sup>43</sup> Relation of the Kingdom of Arda, 17 July 1662, MMA XII, 379–89.

<sup>44</sup> António Mendes, 9 May 1563, MMA II, 502; Jesuits in Angola, 1 May 1594, MMA IV, 555.

<sup>45</sup> Luís Fróis, 15 December 1561, DPMAC VIII, 56–8; António Caiado, 1561, DPMAC VIII, 5–9.

<sup>46</sup> Francisco de Gouveia, 1 January 1564, MMA XV, 231; Heywood and Thornton 2007: 154.

<sup>47</sup> Strathern 2007a.

threat helps explain the volatility of religious diplomacy. Moreover, religious diplomacy was most compelling when just one religious system was associated with the benefits brought by a single dominant foreign partner. If the Comaroffs have argued that the Protestant message in nineteenth-century Africa was of a piece with ‘the global spirit of commerce’ and free trade, the Iberian approach rather mirrors the logic of mercantilism: Catholicism was used to secure the kind of monopolistic relations that often slipped into clientage.<sup>48</sup> But in the latter half of the sixteenth and especially the seventeenth centuries, other European powers, and especially the Protestant Dutch, began to challenge the Portuguese for maritime primacy. At this point the very binding and permanent nature of allegiance associated with Catholic baptism might become a liability for trade-oriented rulers who would rather profit from maintaining a position of diplomatic flexibility. The growing pluralism of the European expansion benefited coastal African powers who could play the diverse nations off each other and were by no means forced to consent to the terms of any one group.<sup>49</sup>

The underlying dynamics extended well beyond early modern or Catholic forms of seaborne expansion, however. British missionaries in the Pacific in the early nineteenth century understood that their presence could be seen as a means of presenting a friendly face to the trading ships.<sup>50</sup> In 1824, James Elder wrote from Tahiti that the chiefs tolerated the missionaries because

They considered, by the continuance of the Missionaries & Ships touching at the Island, from which they obtained firearms, & other property, they would keep down rebellion, and eventually completely humble the discontented. On the other hand, the Chiefs thought if the Missionaries went away, Ships would not visit the Island, that they would get no more firearms.<sup>51</sup>

Recently converted regional Christian hegemony tended to further fuel religious diplomacy by extending it to their neighbours and vassals.<sup>52</sup> The Fijian chiefly contender Cakobau, who had long resisted baptism, was finally compelled to call on the assistance of the Christian Tongan

<sup>48</sup> Comaroff and Comaroff 1992; Peel 2003: 5.

<sup>49</sup> Ebert 2008; Kelly 2009: 151. <sup>50</sup> Watts et al. 2018: 560.

<sup>51</sup> Newbury 1980: 44; compare Thomas 2010: 115–16; Latukefu 1974: 26.

<sup>52</sup> Compare Higham 1997 for Anglo-Saxon kings.

king Tāufa‘āhau in order to defeat his rivals in a major battle in 1855. His baptism followed.<sup>53</sup>

### *Magic and Immanent Power*

Religious diplomacy was normally not enough by itself to entice rulers to take the high and narrow path from patronage of mission to baptism itself. That was rather associated with a striking display of immanent power on the part of the new cult: the second element in the model of ruler conversion. A dramatic change of fortune, a healing miracle, a great battle won after the new deity had been propitiated: These often proved decisive in tipping a ruler into accepting baptism or providing a persuasive story of superior power that could be communicated to subjects. Such accounts in our sources naturally come freighted with significant issues of source criticism.<sup>54</sup> But from a global perspective they reflect fundamental qualities of immanentism and the way in which it was partially subject to an economy of ritual efficacy – the possibility that the stock of ritual activities may rise or fall depending on how far the desired outcomes are achieved.<sup>55</sup> It was noted above that the reach of that economy tended to be limited to the more superficial elements of religious life – should one attend this shrine or that? – rather than its deeper underpinnings. Priests, shamans, monks, magicians, healers and holy men had all manner of ways they could exert ‘conceptual control’ over the interpretations of events following their interventions. But it would seem that there were situations in which that conceptual control could be stripped away and a more explicit atmosphere of competition between ritual systems invoked. This was particularly visible in moments of existential import (the battlefield, the sickbed) when empirical outcomes mattered above all else and an experimental attitude towards ritual solutions was most compelling.

Christian (and Muslim) missionaries often arrived with a set of attributes that would stimulate that sense of competition and allow them to gain an advantage in it. Some of these were rather contingent: Arriving as confident strangers from afar, they might benefit from a general tendency to attribute supernatural power to the alien and

<sup>53</sup> Derrick 1950:114–16; Routledge 1985: 86. <sup>54</sup> Explored in *UP* 261–4.

<sup>55</sup> *UP* 219–29 for theoretical debates about ritual.

exotic.<sup>56</sup> Moreover, where they came associated with new technologies – of iron working, firearms, medicine, literacy, for example – these displays of special attainment might be taken as evidence of the efficacy of their rituals and the metapersons with whom they claimed to communicate. Other attributes were more inherent. The supercharged offensiveness of monotheism turned proselytisers into de facto atheists: Thanks to the selective disenchantment taken by transcendentalism, they were able to step outside of the universal forms of immanentism and turn a withering scepticism upon the powers of all other metapersons. In all the cases of successful ruler conversion discussed in this book, acts of iconoclasm played a central role as deliberate provocations of rival gods and revelations of their impotence. Thus, Catholic missionaries used the techniques against ‘pagan’ sacred spaces and objects that Protestants used against the immanentist qualities of their own faith.<sup>57</sup>

There is a great irony here. For all that I have underlined the distinctiveness of transcendentalist traditions, what has emerged from the comparative investigation is how important it was for religions like Christianity and Islam to mobilise their immanentist dimensions in order to make breakthroughs. When expanding into regions untouched by the world religions, missionaries had to prove that the new religion was better at doing what the old cults had already aimed at.

To be sure, there was no guarantee that such demonstrations would be forthcoming. The play of fortune and misfortune – as seen most dramatically in the case of Japan – might well turn against them. Missionaries did not have infinite reserves of conceptual control with which to rationalise unwanted outcomes. Moreover, even where missionaries were associated with unusual supernatural powers, this might arouse suspicion as much as any admiration – given the way that the immanentist mind need not associate such powers with moral status. This is most explicit in the case of Kongo. But over the longer term, transcendentalism did indeed bring new and powerful forms of conceptual control that tamed the economy of ritual efficacy. It was, then, *what followed* the conversion process that ultimately gave transcendentalist systems a competitive edge over purely immanentist

<sup>56</sup> UP 234–6.

<sup>57</sup> This form of iconoclasm was unknown in immanentism. Immanentism could generate two other forms, however: ‘auto-iconoclasm’ and ‘warrior iconoclasm’ (UP 239–44). These played a role in the Kongo, Japan and Hawaii cases.

traditions. Eventually, as a new mentality took root, the whole question of earthly fortune was subordinated to a larger soteriological vision, in which, for example, the most profound failure of death might be reinterpreted as martyrdom. On the other hand, where rival transcendentalist systems such as Buddhism were encountered, missionaries found that their opponents had not only their own immanentist machinery to deploy but also a much more formidable weapon: a shift of the cognitive framework by which immanent power might merely be rendered trivial, superstitious or demonic rather than attractive. Such would be the case in Japan and Ayutthaya, as we shall see.

### *Making States*

If, in stage two of the model, rulers sought access to supernatural power in order to shape the material world to their advantage, in stage three they deployed its social power in order to shape human communities and arrange them according to an hierarchical order. (In terms of the ancestral figures of scholarship, this is somewhat akin to moving from James Frazer to Émile Durkheim). At times, rulers recognised this most explicitly; certainly, if they did not corral this social power then rivals and rebels would.<sup>58</sup> Commanding the religious sphere was, then, an inherent dimension of state construction. Broadly speaking, immanentist religious specialists tended to be much less centralised and their moral authority much less distinctively realised. This had its benefits: It meant that rulers could aspire to create state cults and place themselves at the pinnacle, uniting temporal and spiritual authority in their own persons. But these cults only overlay a somewhat atomised and heterogeneous religious landscape, especially where expansive imperial states had developed.

One possible attraction of a top-down conversion process was, then, the opportunity to establish a more unified or ‘consolidated’ religious field.<sup>59</sup> There are some rather abstract elective affinities to consider here. It is difficult to avoid noticing a striking isomorphism between transcendentalism and the project of the state: The former effects an unusually comprehensive form of dominance on the religious plane to

<sup>58</sup> I do not, then, invoke a classic form of functionalism here, for the social power of religion could be used to break down larger social orders: *UP* 116.

<sup>59</sup> The consolidation of the religious field refers to the process of bringing religious activity under central control.

match what the ruler hopes to achieve on the political one. On a more concrete level, Christian churches brought with them various technologies of administration that were not yet in evidence in some parts of the world, including literacy, law making, and a centralised patronage system. Given the great risks that conversion often entailed, hard-headed rulers surely identified certain political advantages that would accrue in their lifetimes. An intriguing statistical analysis of the conversion among the many societies of the Pacific has shown that Christianity spread significantly more quickly among societies that had already generated political leaders than among more egalitarian ones.<sup>60</sup> The swift conversion of the nascent kingdom of Hawaii in the 1820s is paradigmatic.

But the chiefs of Hawaii were among some of the most divinised of human beings in the world . . . Let us not overlook the paradox here. Conversion could entail a diminution of the sacrality of one's being while also introducing a new institution, the clerisy, whose independent moral authority must now be contended with. The various dimensions and nuances of this question are explored at length in *Unearthly Powers*, but, for now, we may recall that the two modes of divinised kingship both had their frustrations. In its pure form, heroic claims were inherently unstable, insofar as they were related to the active generation of charisma. Cosmic kingship, on the other hand, might evolve into the ritualisation trap by which the office holder becomes increasingly secluded and removed from the day-to-day operation of executive power. Righteous kingship, by contrast, established the ruler's sacrality on something other than the revelation of their unparalleled success or their transformation into living idols. By no means, however, were such potential problems of divinisation bound to arise, and in practice converting rulers tended to find other ways of retaining divinised qualities as they recast themselves into the mould of Christian kings.

### Cultural Glamour and Intellectual Encounter

These three areas of motivation may have been the most consistently relevant, but they are not, of course, comprehensive. Two further dimensions are briefly discussed here in order to underline that they would benefit from further theorisation and because they surface

<sup>60</sup> Watts et al. 2018: 560–1.

intermittently in the case studies: the question of broader cultural flows and the intellectual appeal of the new faith.<sup>61</sup>

The first of these refers to the sense in which religion may be absorbed by royal courts as part of a more general stream of prestigious culture including clothing, tools, names, poetry, food, music, court protocol, legal systems, languages, forms of politeness, administrative offices and so on. In terms of emic conceptions, recall that immanentism does not tend to isolate ‘religion’ from other cultural processes. But how are we to understand such cultural flows? By what means do people lose their sense of the naturalness and superiority of their own cultural forms and aspire to those associated with others? This is particularly noticeable of elite groups, who may occupy the highest rung of an internal status system but are somehow induced to feel keenly their lower position within a much larger setting.<sup>62</sup> Why did elites on the political or geographic periphery of ancient Rome or China come to feel that they were also somehow culturally peripheral to the extent that they adopted Latin and Christianity, or Chinese and Confucianism – at once signalling an elevation in their standing vis-à-vis local rivals and a prior cultural inferiority vis-à-vis the ‘centre’?

Thus, we are beckoned towards a large analytical vista that scholarship now rarely feels able to contemplate. Once upon a time, it would have swum into view all too readily, when societies could be imagined as occupying different positions along a single line of civilisational development from barbarity to civility.<sup>63</sup> In the 1950s, a work such as Robert Redfield’s *The Primitive World and Its Transformations* could happily speak of more or less advanced cultures.<sup>64</sup> That this discourse has lost its power is of course to be applauded, but a certain explanatory vacuum has been left behind. Hence Sheldon Pollock can argue that,

The comparative study of premodern processes of cosmopolitan transculturation – of how and why people may have been induced to adopt languages or life ways or modes of political belonging that affiliated them with

<sup>61</sup> These themes are less acutely and consistently germane, however, and so not included in the model.

<sup>62</sup> This may even amount to a sense of humiliation. Robbins 2004: 9.

<sup>63</sup> Voltaire 2009, III: 273, for the principle by which the more civilised society will impose itself in cultural terms on the less civilised, even if the military dynamic is the reverse.

<sup>64</sup> Redfield 1953.



the distant rather than the near, the unfamiliar with the customary - is very much in its infancy, even for a phenomenon as significant in the creation or construction of the West as Romanization.<sup>65</sup>

What is required, it would seem, is a politics of cultural glamour – and evidently modern assumptions of ethnic and national feeling are a poor guide to the dynamics involved. Mary W. Helms and Marshall Sahlins are unusual in investigating this comparatively and systematically.<sup>66</sup> They have drawn our attention to the tendency of ruling elites to establish means of distinguishing themselves from their subjects, asserting their unique status as opposed to their shared identity. In their struggle to distinguish themselves from the people beneath them and from upstarts lurking in the wings, rulers are given to flourishing foreign markers of status – rituals, priests, objects, titles, clothing, correspondence – that others cannot attain. As Arjun Appadurai noted, rulers were heavily invested in encouraging and controlling the flow of luxury material culture.<sup>67</sup> Indeed, in general terms, the traffic of high status items was an aspect of the encounter in all the case studies: the shift from red feather cloaks to British apparel in Hawaii; the incorporation of Portuguese firearms, cloaks and other items of clothing, and royal regalia, in Kongo; Chinese silk and firearms in Japan; and a host of French clocks, mirrors and other luxury items in Ayutthaya.<sup>68</sup>

Naturally, the appeal of foreign ways and things was multi-faceted, encompassing the advantages of trade discussed under religious diplomacy and even the enticements of immanent power. To pause on the latter, Sahlins has drawn our attention to the way that certain rulers or whole societies may excite the admiration and jealousy of faraway peoples who attribute them with magical power. (If Frazer and Hocart argued that there were ritual kings before political kings, Sahlins argues that there were ritual empires of soft power before there

<sup>65</sup> Pollock 2006: 10.

<sup>66</sup> Helms 1988; 1993. Sahlins's 'The cultural politics of core-periphery relations' (Graeber and Sahlins 2017: ch. 6) reminds us of an anthropological tradition of examining cultures in terms of their relations within a network, one with little in common with either old diffusionism or modern globalisation theory.

<sup>67</sup> Appadurai 1986: 22, 33.

<sup>68</sup> This is *not* to argue that such selective importations indicated a general sense of cultural inferiority: See the discussion of Japanese *nanban* style on p. 125. somewhat akin to European chinoiserie.

were political empires of hard power.)<sup>69</sup> But cultural glamour as an intrinsic element of broad geographies of status consciousness was no less real. In explaining the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, the *Nihon shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), expresses very bluntly the primary immanentist utility of the new religion, to be sure: The dharma is like ‘a wish-fulfilling gem . . . Every prayer is answered and not a need goes unfulfilled.’ But note, too, a sense of being left out of a wider order: ‘The many countries to the west all worship this Buddha. Is it only Japan (Nihon) that will reject this teaching.’<sup>70</sup>

In what circumstances do some societies acquire a powerful ‘super-ordinate’ quality, to use Helms’ term – creating a widely compelling language and aesthetics of high status – while others tend towards the acquisitional?<sup>71</sup> It is not surprising that one of the few to see the problem and attempt an answer was Marshall S. Hodgson. Wanting to explain the appeal of Islamic culture in more general terms, he posited a ‘culture gradient’ by which ‘elements of culture tended to move from the most cosmopolitan of centres to the most isolated’. This was partly to do with the concentrations of wealth and power that accumulated at those centres, but it was also because the conditions maintained there for the generation of inherently more impressive cultural forms.<sup>72</sup> However, whether cosmopolitanism itself can do the analytical work previously occupied by stadial understandings of culture is unclear. Hard power is surely an important part of the picture; it was undeniably an element of the appeal of Rome, Byzantium, China. But hard power may also appear simply barbaric. The question is how some cultural traditions generate huge quantities of soft power even where no hard power has been exercised. This is the scenario that Sheldon Pollock presents for the striking importation of the Sanskrit imaginary across South and Southeast Asia in the first millennium CE, but it also approximates to the subsequent appeal of Persian high culture across much of this region (and West Asia) as described by Richard Eaton.<sup>73</sup> Both Pollock and Eaton consider this appeal as something quite distinct from religion and as reflecting certain inherent features of the languages and high cultures in question:

<sup>69</sup> ‘The cultural-cum-political authority of dominant societies in many traditional core-periphery formations . . . is based rather on an indigenous anthropology of the metahuman sources of human welfare.’ Graeber and Sahlin 2017: 346–7.

<sup>70</sup> Deal and Ruppert 2015: 14. <sup>71</sup> Helms 1993.

<sup>72</sup> Hodgson 1974: 539–40; compare Cook 2014: 264. <sup>73</sup> Eaton 2019.

that they were unusually cosmopolitan, universalising, beautiful and endowed with communicative power, and that they were the vehicles for a range of dignifying literary traditions and cultural resources. But how might we translate this into a more generalisable principle? Such arguments raise a question that seems to have barely received theoretical attention: the extent to which modes of civility are roughly commensurable on a global scale. Are such notions of beauty and dignity somehow instinctively appreciated cross-culturally? Does something like Norbert Elias's 'civilizing process' represent in very rough and general terms a trajectory along which any society or elite group may be able to place itself – or must sensations of civility be understood in a purely relativistic manner? I do not pretend answers to these questions here. It may be that a whole set of issues to do with acculturation and mimesis may come to be understood in terms of 'evolved capacities for cultural learning' that prioritise preferential attention towards 'more successful or prestigious people'.<sup>74</sup> In any event, the whole field has yet to be considered with comparative rigour.

As for matters of the intellect, on some level all conversions must be processed through the individual mind and the rationalising forces of inter-personal discussion. Did transcendentalist proselytisers hold certain advantages in argument with immanentist hosts?<sup>75</sup> This might seem to follow from some of the central features of transcendentalism *per se*, in particular the profound intellectualisation to which their traditions had been subject. Founded in texts and conveyed by a literati, they produced genres of exegetical and philosophical writing and traditions of scholarship concerned with systematising, debating and justifying their core commitments. As 'offensive' traditions, they were intent on explicitly exposing the falsity of other teachings and often produced specialists who were skilled in debate. Does this mean, however, that they held any advantage in dialogue with people holding to very different religious worldviews?

It is surely a great irony that stage two of the model focuses on immanent power, when transcendentalist traditions were defined by their exaltation of a quite different objective, that of salvation – on which missionaries ceaselessly strove to focus attention.

<sup>74</sup> Henrich 2020: 63, 97.

<sup>75</sup> This could only be sustained after more serious comparative work. For problems with deploying rationalisation theory: Hefner 1993: 15–18.

In immanentist societies this amounted to stimulating anxieties over post-mortem existence in order to then triumphantly allay them. To the extent that this did in fact happen, it would mean that transcendentalism was shifting the terms in which its arrival was construed away from the immanentist logic already in existence. Once introduced to the concept of salvation for the first time, were local societies liable to come under its spell?

None of these propositions are ruled out by this book. It is simply the case that in the two principal immanentist cases explored here, Kongo and Hawaii, neither the perceived outcomes of intellectual encounters nor a transformative awakening to salvation emerged as convincingly decisive elements. To some extent, that may simply reflect the particular cases in question. It almost certainly reflects the particular nature of the evidence, insofar as it is structurally inadequate (in terms of genre and derivation) for conveying much sense of such matters, particularly in the case of Kongo. And it probably also depends on a particular interpretation of missionary reportage, which frequently seems thin, formulaic, idealised and propagandistic when it touches on matters of intellectual exchange. Yet other readings may be possible. It is very important to note that the discussion here does not imply that rulers did not cognitively and emotionally embrace their new religion. The behaviour of some rulers – one thinks particularly of Afonso of Kongo and Ōtomo Sōrin of Bungo – is consistent with a deep interiorisation of Christianity at some point in their careers. Nevertheless, it must be considered that there was no avoiding the political implications of any change in the public religious commitments of rulers, whatever the private and intellectual journeys that lay behind them. Rulers had to have at least one eye on utility in its various guises. And they had to provide a compelling argument to their subjects for whom this-worldly matters were still the vital point of consideration. This helps to explain why the factors in the tripartite model were more significant.

What happened when Christian missionaries encountered societies where a transcendentalist tradition had struck deep roots, as in the Japanese and Ayutthaya cases? ‘Salvation’ itself did not arrive as a novelty; argument would be drawn as to what it was and how it might be attained. Missionaries would meet their own reflections, disturbingly distorted: people ready to debate on points of epistemology, ontology, soteriology and metaphysics, and to refer to sacred texts

and exegetical traditions for authority.<sup>76</sup> It is likely then, quite simply, that the whole field of debate about such things mattered more. But these equivalences cut both ways. On the one hand, shared concerns with salvation or the problem of evil or the nature of virtue and shared respect for the forms of debate might provide a bridge between different transcendentalist traditions along which the open-minded could be induced to travel. In Japan, we do at least have the case of the conversion of certain high-ranking intellectuals in Kyoto, whose decisions can indeed, remarkably, be related to formal debate. But the stories of Japan and Ayutthaya also illuminate the obverse point, that monks, Brahmins and mandarins could give as good as they got, meeting missionaries on their own terms and prevailing. Christianity had its own special form of transcendentalism to purvey, strikingly different in all sorts of ways from the Asian variants and therefore potentially appealing to certain individuals in the new vistas it opened up. But it was hardly in possession of any of the putative advantages of superior rationalisation.

<sup>76</sup> See Brack 2021 for debates between competing transcendentalisms in Central Asia.