

Transcendence in the Small Gestures of Life

Attention and Care for Nature and Humans
in Religious Traditions

Fondazione Giorgio Cini



Sunrise over Lake Laanemaa at Orkjaärve Nature Reserve, Estonia [Public domain, Wikimedia Commons]

Call for Papers

2 — 3 October 2025

This symposium aims to explore those spiritual states that in different religious traditions are searched for to awaken attentiveness and care for the world, other humans, and creation, paying attention to how they can inform the way we study religion and interpret the challenges humankind faces in the contemporary world, particularly the ecological crisis. Cultivating attentiveness and care requires awakening modes of relating to the existent based on contemplation, surrendering, remaining silent, seeking tranquility, and peacefulness. These are all modes that have been generally counted as “passive,” but which have long been cultivated in religious traditions as “gateways” to what can be called “glimpses of eternity:” moments during which humans long to reconnect with a transcendent principle of reality by experiencing nature, humanity, and the world. The main questions that this call wants to address are the following: How do religious believers cultivate attentiveness toward “glimpses of transcendence” in what we call the “small gestures of daily life”? How can the extraordinary, the miraculous, and the transcendent become present and experienced in these daily moments and not only during specifically designed religious rituals?

Our attention to these apparently passive modes of feeling and experiencing human relations with the world in daily life contrasts with the central place that in the social sciences and the humanities has been conferred to ideas of agency, emancipation, and autonomy in scrutinizing human life. According to such models, humans strive to become agents of their lives by seeking autonomy and refusing to submit to authority. In contrast, this symposium aims to investigate what a wide spectrum of acts and attitudes related to surrendering to God, a transcendent principle, or nature itself can teach us about how humanity can deal with contemporary ecological and other crises. The focus on the small gestures of life also calls for attentiveness towards the sensorial aspects of a connection with the world, nature, and transcendence, as found, for example, in culinary experiences, the care given to plants and animals, the use of perfume during a funeral ceremony, or the reliance on voice and music in Sufi *sama* ceremonies. Another related question concerns the methodological and epistemological implications for the researcher and the research process when these topics are explored from such a different perspective.

Some possible topics to be addressed by the papers include, but are not limited to:

- How do religious believers experience the connection with transcendence, God, and nature in their daily occupations, beyond the ritualized space of prayers and religious ceremonies?
- What does it mean to perform daily activities while sensing the presence of God and experiencing “glimpses of transcendence”? How does the cultivation of these experiences color and shape daily life?
- Through which techniques do people cultivate care and attentiveness for the world? Do such techniques demand entering certain states, cultivating specific ways of being, or engaging in dedicated sets of disciplines?
- What does it mean to be connected to the world, nature, animals, or other human beings? How is this connection experienced through daily reflection and practice?
- In what ways does engaging with certain objects and substances – such as food, perfumes, sound, plants, places, and animals – and related sensorial experiences enhance the state of being connected to the world?
- How do contemplation and the state of passivity and surrender that researchers might experience when studying religious communities impact their methodological and theoretical approaches beyond secular-inflected paradigms?
- Beyond strictly conceived spaces of religious cultivation, is there a longing for contemplative states and the cultivation of tranquility in contemporary societies? How is it expressed and searched for? And, though not eminently religious, can it be thought of as related to some experience of transcendence?

Organizers

The conference is organized jointly by the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilisations and Spiritualities (Fondazione Giorgio Cini) and the Muslim Worlds Network of the European Association of Social Anthropologists (EASA).

Abstracts and Texts

Abstracts up to 300 words, accompanied by a short bio, should be submitted in English by May 15, 2025, to civilta.comparate@cini.it

Timetable

1. The call for papers opens on April 1, 2025.
2. Abstracts (300 words) and short bios are to be received by May 15, 2025.
3. Notifications of acceptance will be given by June 5, 2025.
4. The conference will be held on October 2-3, 2025, in Venice (Italy).

Practicalities and Funding

The organizers will provide accommodation on San Giorgio Island, coffee breaks and lunches during the conference days. Participants will arrange and pay for their own transportation. Extra funding may be available to cover the travel expenses of a limited number of scholars who cannot obtain funding from their own institutions. If extra funding is needed, please indicate this in the email with which you submit your abstract. The Library of the Centre for Comparative Studies of Civilizations and Spiritualities would appreciate it if participants could bring and donate one book they authored or to which they have contributed.

Contacts

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