From the Absolute to Metamorphoses: 10 Egypt at the Epicenter of transmodernity[1]

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Beyond Modernity and Postmodernity: Transmodernity Revisited

It is challenging to construct an assessment of an epoch that is overwhelmingly present (Harvey 1989). But we live in a transmodern world where evidence can no longer be avoided. Observing current world events and cultural experiences, we might declare that modern and postmodern eras seem to have become simply historical records of the past. There is considerable evidence that our world is experiencing unparalleled social movements that are characterized by cognitive revolution, cultural metamorphosis, spiritual awakening, decentralization of human endeavors, and mutual interconnectivity. This assertion can be found in recent works such as *Blessed Unrest, How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw It Coming* (Hawken 2007); *The Great Turning: From Empire to Earth Community* (Korten 2006); and *WorldShift 2012: Making Green Business, New Politics, and Higher Consciousness Work Together* (Laszlo 2009), where the year 2012 marks a new beginning.

However, one might ask, what does the notion of the Absolute have to do with transmodernity? And why do I place Egypt at the epicenter of transmodernity? In order to respond to these questions, I opt to focus on a particular phenomenon, that is, the movement from absoluteness to metamorphosis, of which the Egyptian Uprising is an unmistakable manifestation. My choice is not only an obligation toward my birthplace, Egypt, but also due to the opportunity to reflect on these specific events that have been going on in the Middle East for nearly a year now. I want to illustrate how significant this shift has been in placing Egypt at the epicenter of transmodernity.

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[1] An earlier version of this essay, "Phenomenological Challenges of Transmodernity: From Absoluteness to Metamorphosis", was a keynote presentation at the International Conference: *Phenomenological Perspectives on Social Change and Environmental Challenges,* Vilnius Gediminas Technical University, Vilnius, Lithuania, September 22, 2011.

The Egyptian Uprising has been introduced to the global community as a part of the so-called Arab Spring. And despite the ongoing struggle, and fear that this "spring" might be hijacked and turn into a "hot summer" or "frigid winter", the Egyptian Uprising hints at something much greater and has remarkably far-reaching consequences. But how does the Egyptian Uprising relate to transmodernity? Before we answer this question, it is imperative to revisit the notion of "transmodernity" and draw attention to its inclusive characteristics, which distinguish it from modernity and postmodernity.

While some consider the term transmodernity to have been coined by the Spanish scholar Rosa Maria Rodríguez Magda in her essay *La sonrisa de Saturno: Hacia una teoría transmoderna* in 1989, it was, however, the Latin American philosopher Enrique Dussel who in 1985 introduced the idea of transmodernity as a philosophical, theological, and social movement, in his work *Philosophy of Liberation*. His project was to transcend modernity and postmodernity, as a call for social change—for de-alienation, demarginalization, and decolonization. Dussel (2011) alludes to the fact that transmodernity is trying to recover the prephilosophical qualities that Greek thought and philosophy have obscured, particularly ethical and spiritual issues. Dussel's prephilosophical qualities seem to find their roots in Jean Gebser's seminal work, *The Ever-Present Origin*.

According to Gebser (1949), the philosophy that began with the Greek thinkers, and deviated from an earlier mythical wisdom, is coming to a close. Through the philosophical lens of "Occidentalism", the West has positioned all other cultures as primitive and premodern. The irony is that this biased perspective—a common occurrence among different religions—frequently becomes the basis for aggressive politics for the defense of Western culture through military action against Islamic fundamentalists; yet, this perspective overlooks a comparable scale of Christian fundamentalism, especially in the United States (Dussel 2011).

There are scholars, such as Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, and Michel Foucault, to name a few, who convey explicitly or implicitly that we are still living in a postmodern epoch. In this sense, postmodernity seems like a convenient catchall for amalgamation in which "anything from absolutism to anarchy can be labeled postmodern" (Grudin 1990). Others do not make a distinction between postmodernity and transmodernity, claiming that transmodern thought that developed from modernism is a variant of postmodernity. But transmodernity is not synonymous with or equivalent to postmodernity. The shift from postmodernity to transmodernity seems to be not too striking; nevertheless, as Harvey (1989: 358) has predicted, postmodernity has been going through a subtle evolution, "perhaps reaching a point of self-dissolution into something different". That being said, what characteristics make transmodernity different from both modernity and postmodernity? Might we distinguish between transmodernity and postmodernity?

First and foremost, the term transmodernity explicitly *transcends* the concept of postmodernity. As Dussel (2011) pronounces, postmodernity represents a final moment of the five-centuries-old development of modernity, or we may consider it as a natural conclusion of modernity. In a sense, postmodernity represents a linear trajectory that starts with colonialism and ends with postmodernism (Sardar 2004). We can conclude with David Harvey (1989: 116) that "there is much more continuity than difference between the broad history of modernism and the movement called postmodernism".

And yet, transmodernity allows the integration of premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity; and in this sense, both traditionalists and modernists have a place in the transmodern world. However, as we shall see, transmodernity embodies many more qualities than Enrique Dussel may have anticipated.

What catches our attention in the term transmodernity is the prefix "trans", which comes from the Latin *across*, means beyond and through—in short, transparency. This seems to be the rationale behind Dussel's favoring of "beyond" and "through" over "post". This leads us to draw some important connections between transmodernity and other relevant concepts, particularly, as we shall see, the concept of the Absolute. Transparency, or seeing through and beyond, is what the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser (1949) calls "diaphaneity", and it is the hallmark of transmodernity, which is inclusive of modernity and postmodernity and, in this sense, resonates with Gebser's "aperspectival world".[2] Transmodernity does not reject the characteristics of either modernity or postmodernity. Both Dussel's transmodernity and Gebser's aperspectival world share the same quality of transparency or, to use a term from Gebser, "diaphanous perception". Gebser (1949: 412) reminds us that we need "to overcome rationality in favor of arationality, and to break forth from mentality into diaphaneity".

This idea of transparency is particularly significant in reassessing transmodernity, since Gebser's notion of aperspectival consciousness is concerned with diaphanous perception of the whole; such consciousness cannot disregard the characteristics of simultaneity and reciprocal perception that go beyond space-time limitations. *"Only through this reciprocal perception and impartation of truth by man and the world can the*

[2] The aperspectival world, according to Jean Genser, "is a world whose structure is not only jointly based in the pre-perspectival, unperspectival, and perspectival worlds, but also mutates out of them in its essential properties and possibilities while integrating these worlds and liberating itself from their exclusive validity" (1985: 294). In others words, this aperspectival world is not an exclusive mode of consciousness; rather, it is inclusive of four-dimensional consciousness, evolving from the prior stages of archaic, magical, and mythical consciousness.

world become transparent for us" (Gebser 1949: 261). Similar to Gebser's diaphanous perception is Charles S. Peirce's extraordinary triadic conception of semiotic signs, where a sign or "representamen" brings its "object" and its "interpretant" into a continuous and transparent relation. This makes our perception of the Absolute utterly open, interpretable, and transparent. This transparency or diaphaneity, which is a quintessentially transmodern quality, can only be attained by integration. However, integration does not imply mixing and dissolving differences; rather, it reveals the transparency between differences, particularly in the practice of religion and the perception of God.

Unlike modernity and postmodernity, which place an emphasis on the polarity of secularization and religions, transmodernity puts a strong emphasis on spirituality and alternative religions. One of the most interesting and controversial concepts in our time is the proposition of "theistic evolution" or evolutionary creation. Undeniably, theistic evolution is a transmodern concept that makes the idea of God compatible with scientific domains, urging the understanding that evolution is simply a tool for God to guide the unfolding process of life and the development of human beings. Coupled with theistic evolution is the worldwide spiritual awakening, the "interfaith" movement. Although the idea of interfaith understanding has historical roots, it has recently (particularly after September 11, 2001) permeated the entire world on both the individual and institutional levels. In this sense, religions are not closed systems but are perceived transparently through the lens of transmodernity. And since this transparent perception is essential for the dialogue among different religions, it is, as Hans Küng (1987) advocates, necessary for peace in the world.

It is through this interfaith dialogue that members of different faiths can reach an interpretative understanding of theological biases and thus discover high-leverage points to transform the Absolute. As Charles S. Peirce anticipates, such an understanding might be the upshot of discourse between self and others, in which each reaches an approximation of the reality of the other (Nöth 2001). Optimistically, as one of the most significant aspects of transmodernity, this transparent perception has the potential to move religious centrality to a polycentric world religion.

Moreover, it is obvious that all main Western monotheistic religions are formulated on monarchical, imperial, and patriarchal patterns in which "man" has been considered superior over "woman" and all other creatures. These patterns, as the great chain of being, result in "God over the secular king, the secular king over men, men over women, and humans over nature" (Korten 2006: 259). However, the notion of the human being as a "semiotic animal" not only marks the transition from modern to postmodern thought (Deely 2002) but also transcends modern and postmodern paradigms of patriarchy and fem-

inism (Deely 2010). Transmodernity promotes women's rights and emancipation. Undoubtedly, this is an important characteristic of the new paradigm that is inclusive of and beyond gender differentiation and exclusive domination (cf. Deely 2010). This exclusive identity in modern and postmodern worlds—moving from rational animal to symbolic animal to abstract animal—has been transformed into an inclusive semiotic animal worldview in the transmodern world.[3]

All of the above observations explicitly convey a transformational process characterized mainly by transparent perception. In this transmodern world, we cannot survive by holding on to the Absolute God and tolerating the absolute political power. Only through integration can human beings thrive. In this sense, as indicated above, integration does not imply mixing and dissolving differences; rather, integration reveals the qualities of transparency and the metamorphosis of the Absolute God, absolute political power, and absolute religions.

The Fallacy of the Absolute God and Inflexibility of Absolute Religions

Generally, the concept of the Absolute was introduced into philosophical discourse[4] primarily in the work of Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz during the Age of Absolutism. As an ontological and cosmological argument, this philosophical discourse attempts to prove or disprove the existence of God (e.g., Rudolf Otto's notion of the "Numinous" and Friedrich Nietzsche's declaration "God is dead", respectively). However, Otto's idea of the "holy" (*whole* and *heal*) is not restricted to the religious domain, nor does it point to an exclusive and absolute God; rather, it is an inclusive notion of the numinous that grasps the primordial whole experience with the divine essence (cf. Gebser 1949; Otto 1917).

A different interpretation of Nietzsche's declaration, which is based on the notion of "the will to power", offers the challenging, yet rewarding, possibility of looking at God and the world through healing lenses and imaginative interpretations. One can also argue that Nietzsche's declaration of God's death has been misunderstood; for even gods and goddesses, who died to make room for God, did not die, they returned

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[3] Although beyond the scope of this essay, it is worthwhile to note that in transcending gender and all sorts of superiorities, transmodernity seems also to have overcome the anthropocentrically biased and disingenuous separation between the realms of zoosemiotics and anthroposemiotics.

[4] While the concept of the Absolute goes back to pre-Socratic times, it was G. W. F. Hegel who re-introduced the concept into philosophy in 1807 in his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit*.

home (Gebser 1949) where human beings dwell.

Paradoxically, the Absolute cannot be defined, since any definition etymologically delimits or set up boundaries to a term that has no boundaries. Among many other challenges, the nature of the Absolute is (or can be) regarded as a semiotic paradox (Nöth 2010) and, in some sense, is self-negating (Taylor 2007). However, this contradiction and self-negation can be tolerated if we consider, for instance, the mathematical tactic of *reductio ad absurdum,* which proves the falsity of a premise by demonstrating that its logical consequence is contradictory or reduced to absurdity. Imaginative interpretations of the notion of the Absolute God require what Gebser (1949: 259) calls "paradoxical thinking", which contains both rational and irrational elements, as the most excellent form of religious utterance. Like all other paradoxes, however, the paradox of the Absolute is not to be solved or resolved (Seif 2005), but to be steadily and relentlessly pursued through imaginative interpretation, creative thinking, and innovative action.

In their efforts to *absolutize* the Divine, inflexible religions have isolated God from human beings and human beings from God.[5] To absolutize, in Gebser's words, is to think "perspectivaly", which is the ultimate focus of an individual perspective of God's image that, ironically, opens up as it closes space at the vanishing point.[6] As a reaction to this perspectival isolation and absolute separation, the notion of God has either become negated and even marginalized, or grown to be a dogmatic image.

The claims for the existence of God in all monotheistic religious traditions have gone beyond mere existence into absoluteness and separateness, exemplified by the notion of the only "True God", where the rest are characterized as paganism, heathenism, and polytheism. For example, the Christian interpretation of Jesus' declaration "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life" has, for some, rendered Christianity a religion superior over all others (cf. Otto 1917) and, in some traditions, made Christianity a Christocentric doctrine. And the Islamic slogan "There is no god but Allah"—which is based on the principle of oneness of God

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[5] In fact, to absolutize (*ab-solutum*) is to separate and isolate (Gebser 1949: 235). The word "Absolute" itself drives from the Latin *absolutus* (*ab*, "away from", and *solver*, "to loose"). According to the American Heritage Dictionary, the Absolute is "perfect in quality or nature, complete; not mixed, pure, unadulterated; not limited by restrictions or exceptions, unconditional; not limited by constitutional provisions or other restraints; unrelated to and independent of anything else; not to be doubted or questioned, certain" (cf. Taylor 2007: 355).

[6] Jean Gebser (1949) draws on the concept of "perspective" advanced by the Renascence artist Leonardo da Vinci to articulate his term of "perspectival thinking" and make a distinction between this way of thinking and what he calls the "aperspectival" form of realization, which is integrative and whole.

("Tawhid"), where the numinous is "absolutely preponderant over everything else" (Otto 1917: 90)—has created a dogmatic stance and antagonistic attitude toward others who do not share the same faith.[7]

Granted, it is impossible for a society to exist without religion (Girard 1972); like all cultural systems, religion brings order to the chaos of human experiences (Geertz 1973). But when religion becomes the only thing people take seriously, where the Bible or the Qu'ran becomes the absolute source of human knowledge, Muslims and Christians act unreasonably; and consequently, both groups slip into the realm of fundamentalism (cf. Deely 2011). Fundamentalists seem to have overlooked the fact that *religions are only metaphorical representations of spirituality*. As William James (1902) argues, religion does not necessarily mean belief in the Absolute God.

An exclusive, excessive, and static religious order encourages radical fundamentalism and an unhealthy religious experience, which James (1902) describes as "the sick soul". In fact, the polarization between the two sacred paths—the doctrinal exoteric way and the mystical esoteric way (Anderson 1990)—has led to an inflexible reality and, worse yet, has produced many dictatorial political powers around the globe. Almost in any country in the world, religion is hardly separated from government. Although religion might disappear behind a new language of politics, it unveils itself in times of social crisis and war. Religion, like the words "God" and "democracy", is often only a veil to conceal the monstrous forces of murder, oppression, and exploitation (El Saadawi 1983).[8] And when a situation combines the exoteric religion of the Absolute God with absolute political power, the result is what I call *the tyranny of absolutism*.

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[7] Rudolf Otto shares the same understanding where he writes, "the numinous in Allah, nay, even his uncanny and daemonic character, outweighs what is rational in him. And this will account for what is commonly called the 'fanatical' character of this religion. Strongly excited feeling of the numen, that runs to frenzy, untempered by the more rational elements of religious experience—that is everywhere the very essence of fanaticism" (Otto, 1917: 91).

[8] The Egyptian writer Nawal El Saadawi emphasizes this point. She writes: "A president or head of state might be an atheist, but on the podium in front of the masses, this leader grasps hold of the scripture—whether it be the Gospels, the Torah, or the Qur'an—and reads the verses that support the practices of war and murder, or, alternatively, those of conflict settlement, negotiation, and peace. In election campaigns, how often and how loudly candidates for the highest offices claim that God is with them". She claims, "Even Hitler used to assert that God was with him—and how often were the Gospels his companion, in life and in death?" It was unthinkable for the late Egyptian President Anwar Sadat "to begin or end a speech in any way but with the recitation of verses from the Qur'an" (El Saadawi, 1983: 201–202).

Unfortunately, our age seems to have overlooked the truth that "God is to be conceived as one and as many in the converse sense in which the World is to be conceived as many and as one" (Whitehead 1929: 349). The irony is that while religious insight serves as a goal, once achieved, it "cancels the apparent reason for the quest" (Hall 1982: 222). Religions are never static or unchangeable. Like ecosystems, religions are forever in transition. Even our entire universe is not absolute: there are many universes and hundreds of billions of stars (Hawking & Mlodinow 2010). In this complex universe, where everything coevolves and is codependent, there is no place for absolutism. Absolutism must give way to "relationalism"—in other words, within this "infinite web of life, nothing is absolute because everything is related" (Taylor 2007, 355). Everything is in relations. "We look upon a world where relations, invisible to sense, which sees only related things, have become central to any hope of advance in philosophical understanding" (Deely 2011: 17).

Both Christians and Muslims believe the Bible and the Qur'an, respectively, to be the literal and absolute "Word of God"—that is, the Bible and the Qur'an are not just *about* God but also are the word *of* God (Miles 1995). But how do we validate the word of God to be literally true? The word of God and the word "God" deserve some elaboration. It has been suggested that monotheistic Western religions can be viewed as literature that has exceeded beyond any writer's greatest expectations. Like the character of Don Quixote who models himself on popular literature of his own time (Miles 1995), Christian and Muslim fundamentalists seem to fight each other in the name of an illusionary Absolute God.

Language, either written or spoken, is "a way of modeling the world according to possibilities envisioned as alternative to what is given in sensation *or* experienced in perception" (Deely 2002: 141). In fact, for Peirce, "God" is a vernacular word that is invariably "vague" likewise all other semiotic signs, which represent reality, necessarily fall under the logic of vagueness (Raposa 1989). Since the conceptions of God and the Absolute differ in meaning, Peirce has implicitly rejected the idea of identifying God with the Absolute. For him, although both God and the Absolute are real, the Absolute is "nothing like God" (Raposa 1989: 59). Actually, from a semiotic point of view, God, as a sign, is not an absolute power but is spontaneous, changeable, and creative (Nöth 2010). Thus, God is far from being the Absolute.

Furthermore, God can be conceived as one character expressed in an amalgam of several personalities. Undoubtedly, while the tension among these personalities makes God compelling and, in some way, addictive, it creates conflict (Miles 1995). And throughout human history, this addictive habit of fixation on the absolute personalities of God has lead to fundamentalism and intractable religious conflict. But from the ancient Egyptian civilization to the present time, God has been

objectified in numerous signs and has been recognized by many different names and interpretations. For instance, the esoteric religions of Buddhism and Hinduism have no one creator god and the absolute God has no place; many Jewish prayers use various names of God several times within the same paragraph; and in the spiritual tradition of the Kalahari Bushmen in Africa, God may be given a different name as often as everyday! And since every sign has unlimited numbers of interpretations, the rigid notion of God as Absolute has no validity (cf. Peirce 1908; Raposa 1989). Hence, the Absolute is really a continuous fluid dynamics—an open and infinite semiosis.

We can observe the metamorphoses of the Absolute and how our sense of God has changed over time. The Absolute has been transformed from mythological gods and goddesses in ancient Egypt and classical Greek, to the mighty Yahweh in the Old Testament, to many names in the Hebrew Bible Tanakh, to Christ in the New Testament, to the Allah of Islam, and into technology that seems to possess the power to influence all aspects of cultural and social conduct in our time. Technological innovation, particularly digital technology, has become the new god—the absolute of our time. Ironically, while technology is being elevated to the status of the god we tend to forget that technology is our own creation—we humans have created this absolute power.

Religions in premodernity, modernity, and postmodernity are perceived to be the "truth" that has been trusted to humans by the Absolute God; such "truths" have triggered many devastating crusades and holy wars. This form of perceived truth seems to be triggered by what Robert S. Corrington (2000) calls the genus projection of the "transference". Certainly there is no religious life outside of those who accept the transference, and this fixation on the unequivocal image of religion "is the main reason why religious fanaticism is the most dangerous form of obsession", precisely because the experience of an absolute religion and meaning of God "seem to transcend any need for validation or even restraint" (Corrington 2000: 63).

The rivalry and debate—which in many situations become vicious fights—between agnostics and atheists, between evolution and creation, between esoteric and exoteric religions, or between Muslims and Christians seems to lead nowhere. In fact, conflicts are not just between different religions but also inside each religion. Differences do not necessarily lead to clashes or conflict. The clash of civilizations is not a direct result of long-held differences of history languages, cultures, traditions, and religions, as Samuel P. Huntington (1996) has indicated; rather, the clash arises as a result of the fixation of different civilizations on their absolute identity—specifically, the absolute God and absolute religion.

But even if differences trigger intractable conflict over the absolute God between two frames of reference, such as Christianity and Islam, handling this conflict creatively, as we observe in the Egyptian

Uprising, may lead to an unexpected outcome where the Absolute can be transformed. For now, it suffices to mention Arthur Koestler's notion of "bisociation", as he reminds us that when "two frames of reference have become integrated into one it becomes difficult to imagine that previously they existed separately" (Koestler 1964: 658). *The metamorphosis of the Absolute is certainly the way to integrate the absolute God and the absolute Allah.*

Clearly, there is a philosophical problem with the conventional understanding of the nature of the Absolute and the meaning of God. On the one hand, if the Absolute is the only worshiped God, it denies humans' capacities to create and transform, and therefore paralyzes them from performing the very nature of God's image—the act of creation. On the other hand, if this entity exists for its own glory, indulging itself by human worship and idealization, then it is self-observed, self-indulgent, and codependent on human beings for its existence. Interestingly, ambiguous Judo-Christian-Islamic scriptures speak of God as masculine and singular. But if this masculine God has a divine social life among other gods and goddesses, he is not telling us about it. If this is the case, then God "seems to be entirely alone, not only without a spouse but also without a brother, a friend, a servant, or even a mythical animal. His life is about to become hopelessly entangled with the determination of his image to make images of its own" (Miles 1995: 29).

This notion of God as the absolute power puts humans at a crossroads of conduct: whether to obey the mighty God or his representative in all their conduct, and consequently be rewarded by receiving the gift of heaven, or to be thrown into hell for their disobedience (Taylor 2007). Such a God is far from being the loving God, or the merciful and companionate Allah.[9] The merciful and compassionate God does not seek self-fulfillment. Theologian Jack Miles (1995: 89) suggests that God relies on human beings for working out of his intentions to an extent that is "almost parasitic on human desire". If human beings want nothing, it is difficult to comprehend how God discovers what God wants. Miles writes:

> Once we recognize God as dependent on human beings in this way, we may appreciate why, for him, the quest for a self-image is not an idle and optional indulgence but the sole and indispensable tool of his self-understanding. (Miles 1995: 89)

I believe the relationship between humans and God is a relationship that constitutes the desire for seeking mutual fulfillment.

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[9] In fact, both adjectives "Merciful" (al-Rahman) and "Companionate" (al-Rahim) are frequently used in the Qur'an to describe Allah. Both terms refers to the tender and benevolent qualities of God.

Everything draws out everything else and is a means for the fulfillment of everything else (Wilshire 2000). In Peirce's view, God's creative activity is an ongoing continuous process (Raposa 1989). In fact, God's directive command to Adam and Eve to "be fertile and increase" is not only a magnanimous invitation to seek the act of creation in all human endeavors but also an implicit call to multiply the Creator's image—making God as one and as many. Nearly 100 years ago, the American philosopher William Ernest Hocking offered a similar ontological argument for the existence of God, which stated that God is near and remote, one and many, and personal and impersonal. Or, this mysterious and paradoxical entity is, to quote Mark Taylor:

> Neither here nor there, neither present nor absent . . . God is not the ground of being that forms the foundation of all beings but the figure constructed to hide the originary abyss from which everything emerges and to which all returns. (Taylor 2007: 345)

This primordial water from which life emerges and to which it returns is not a new concept, however. Based on the ancient Egyptian creation myth (and to some degree, similar to the Book of Genesis), the God Ra (sun) of all creation was lying dormant within the fluid dynamic Nun (waters) until the beginning. An all-powerful creator, this entity was able to fertilize *itself* and give birth to other deities and all aspects of life. In this sense, both nature and culture depend on this created cosmology. And all natural phenomena are conceived in terms of human experience—that which is envisaged in terms of the created cosmic events. Hence, the ancient Egyptians, as the makers of signs of life, seemed to transform the Absolute and connect with and be co-creators of the larger, more-than-human context of the cosmos.

The entire ancient Egyptian experience can be seen as a crossing act between two great phenomena: the natural phenomenon of the sun path and the Nile flow, and the cultural phenomenon of the ongoing practices and people's daily conduct. And both natural and cultural phenomena were expressed transparently in remarkable art and architecture. Egyptian art and architecture integrated both the physical form and its idea into a totality that not only enabled the ancient Egyptian mind to transmit and comprehend abstract metaphysical concepts (Seif 1990), but also provided the appropriate context to engage in the process of metamorphoses of gods and goddesses. Interestingly, modern and postmodern Egyptian scholars have long been aware that beneath the dominant Islamic/Arabic monotheism lies another ancient Egyptian experience of polytheism.

Moreover, this transmodern cosmology, or, to borrow a term from Jean Gebser (1985), the "ever-present origin", contradicts the Kantian claim that God, the soul, and nature are "unknowable" (Kant 1790) and

are beyond the comprehension of the human mind. Then again, this semiotic cosmology has changed in Judeo-Christian-Islamic monotheism, where God is the absolute creator of the universe. But if God is the creator of this "grand design", then the nagging question is, who created God? Where does God come from? These questions are not to suggest the absence of God. On the contrary, since the entire universe is continuous relations, everything is potentially a sign of God's presence (Raposa 1989). And while Stephen Hawking admits that the universe carries the appearance of a "grand design" and argues that the universe spontaneously created itself from nothing (Hawking & Mlodinow 2010), there is certainly no design without a designer; design implies a "designer", that is, God with various names. In fact, religious faith, as John Deely (2011) argues, is not mainly about the existence of God; rather, it is about human beings' relations with God.

The above statement by Mark C. Taylor also brings to mind the radical notion of Whitehead (1929) that God created the world and the world created God. And it should be noted that this world "is not out there", but its presence moves through us, "fluently and regeneratively" (Wilshire 2000: 6). Therefore, the concept of the absolute God as an entirely static permanent entity is a fallacy that separates God from humans and, consequently, constructs inflexible religions and, in turn, fabricates a deficient reality.

Even though Judaism is a monotheistic faith, it is not a religion of the Absolute. And in Christian tradition, the very nature of God consists of the relations of father, son, and the holy spirit which embraces the whole of creation; not only are these relations within God, they are between God and human beings and among interacting human beings (Deely 2011). These relations are not static. The Creator God changes along with everything else. As Whitehead (1929: 349) asserts, "God and the World move conversely to each other in respect to their process". Nonetheless, God is still God and human beings are still no more than human beings. Yet, paradoxically, in a mysterious way, human beings and God exchange roles (Miles 1995).

The human capacity for "divination"—the direct apprehension of the manifestation of the holy (Otto 1917)—has nothing to do with the actual experience of the absolute God; rather, it has to do with intuition, feeling, and imagination. As indicated above, the Absolute is purely imaginary, which makes the Absolute without absoluteness. In other words, the Absolute is a reciprocal fluid dynamic. Hence, we might conclude that *there is a kind of ever-present reciprocity in which God created human beings and human beings created God*. And this reciprocity, in the words of Bruce Wilshire (2000: 146), means that "the universe celebrates itself through us as God—becomes home to itself—and shows itself perfectly adequate and self-sufficient in doing so".

So what does all of this tell us? Beyond any doubt, the Absolute is

constantly and persistently transforming. And whether or not the Absolute (God) creates and transforms itself or is being created and transformed by humans makes no difference whatsoever. Why? To expect or wait for the Absolute to transform itself is a paralyzing codependency and gives away the very purpose of creation. This point is significant. Because of today's complex and rapidly changing world, there is a strong desire for an imaginative and radical reconceptualization of the Absolute (Taylor 2007), a reinvention of the sacred (Kauffman 2008), and a fresh divination of the idea of the holy. I believe the reconceptualization, reinvention, and new divination are what William Ernest Hocking (1912) urges us to understand in his famous book *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*.

Building on Whitehead's notion of "God and the World", this relation between humans and the world implies an active transformation of the Absolute. Therefore, the metamorphosis of the Absolute is our way to intuit and reinvent the sacred in a manner that implies unison of physicality and spirituality, consciousness and cosmology, order and chaos in an open-ended semiotic process. But our transmodern world seems to be facing epistemological and ontological challenges in dealing with the nature of the Absolute. Certainly, the Egyptian Uprising faces this challenge, yet at the same time represents a remarkable cultural phenomenon that seems to transform the notion of the Absolute and places Egypt at the epicenter of transmodernity.

Egypt at the Epicenter of Transmodernity

Transmodernity is fostering an unprecedented deep transformation, and we undoubtedly live in the midst of it. The Egyptian Uprising is a manifestation of this deep transformation that has its roots in early 2005 and reached its peak in January 2011. Since its independence in 1952, Egypt has been ruled by secular nationalist parties that have degenerated into what Edward Said (1994: 39) describes as "coteries and cliques", which are rent by Islamic groups whose mandate is to restore the Islamic past. Like many Middle Eastern countries, Egypt seems to have been caught in a double-bind situation after its independence.[10] On the one hand, Egypt faces the challenge of modernization exempli-

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10 For two centuries, Egypt was dominated by two regimes: the monarchal dynasty of Muhammad Ali from 1805 to 1952, and the military regime from 1952 to the present time. The Free Officers, led by Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, deposed King Farouk on July 23, 1952 and shortly thereafter ended the British colonization of Egypt. Interestingly since that time all of Egypt's presidents—Gamal Abdel Nasser Nasser, Anwar al Sadat, and Hosni Mubarak—have come from a military background. This fact explains why absolute political power persists even after the Egyptian Uprising of early 2011.

fied in modern and postmodern ideas as a solution to all social, political, and economic problems—yet on the other hand, it seems to be at the mercy of traditionalists' influence, which often takes a militant form.

Furthermore, postmodernism has marginalized tradition, creating a siege mentality in traditional cultures. Traditionalists reject both modernity and postmodernity and this rejection encourages modernist leaders to use excessive force and persecution against traditionalists, who are viewed as living in the past. Consequently, Egyptians find themselves caught in an intense struggle between the joint forces of an aggressively secular modernity and postmodernity, set against an equally aggressive traditionalism (Sardar 2004). These forces of absolutism have been pulling Egyptians in two directions and threatening them with fragmentation.

The Egyptian Uprising, and in fact the entire Arab Spring, have been overwhelmingly secular in character, and participation has spanned the entire demographic and social spectrum. The Egyptian Uprising can be described, in the words of Paul Hawken (2007), as a movement without a leader, sage, or ideology, which emerges locally and organically in small, discrete endeavors, and in enormous numbers. The Egyptian Uprising brings a significant transformation to the entire Middle Eastern region, moving it away from absolute monarchy and autocratic political power, absolute dogmatic ideologies, and the belief in the absolute God, bringing an unexpected outcome of democracy and liberation.

Again, it should be emphasized that the root of the problem is the fixation on the Absolute, not simply on social and economic issues, which are only symptoms and not causes. The fact that many Egyptians have spent some years working in the Gulf rich-oil countries, where the Absolute Allah and absolute religious tenets are more strictly observed, may have contributed to the rise of religious fanaticism (cf. Amin 2000). The Egyptian Uprising is not about removing political or religious sectarianism; neither is it about democratization or the transfer of power. These views are Western-biased perspectives and misleading interpretations.

It has been suggested that the Arab societies were not mature enough and ready for democracy due to the influence of Islamic fundamentalism. Many Western academics make judgments concerning the compatibility between Islam and democracy (Said 1978; 1994). But again, on close examination, the Arab Spring is not about democracy *per se*; nor do Muslim extremists invoke the uprising for democracy. The Muslim Brothers are not a marginal force but a well-organized political party. However, it is not fair to reduce the Egyptian Uprising to a religious movement or the work of the Muslim Brotherhood organization.

It is true that the old guard of the Muslim Brothers found a way to influence Mubarak's regime. For many years, the absolute political power exemplified in Mubarak's police state fully appreciated the

Muslim Brothers' moral discourse; and by doing so, Mubarak's government—and previously Sadat's regime—provoked moral panic and religious clashes between Muslims and Christians. As the Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi (1983: 7) puts it, "A hidden hand was playing with national unity". The Egyptians seem to have experienced absolute political power combined with the belief in the absolute God of an extremely narrow Islamic state. Religious fanaticism and belief in the absolute God may have been the only alternative source of self-esteem, which no longer provided by the usefulness or reward of one's own work (Amin 2000). Consequently, Egyptians, both Muslims and Christians, became disgusted with the tyranny of absolutism demonstrated by Mubarak's politicization of Islam and the Islamization of his political power.

Beyond any doubt, the Egyptian Uprising is a liberation from the tyranny of absolutism. Egyptians have experienced fear and apathy from the Absolute—the absolute God and absolute political power. They have experienced fear of the absolute political power of the repressive regime and apathy with the absolute cycle of stagnation and corruption. I should, however, emphasize that while Egyptian society as a whole reclaims Islam as a way to self-governance and ethical conduct for social order, Egyptian demonstrators generally reject the political orientation of Islam, explicitly separating themselves from the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood and Mubarak's morality crusades. To further solidify and clarify my proposition, I shall attempt to offer the following characteristics of the Egyptian Uprising, which I believe place Egypt at the epicenter of transmodernity.

Strength in the Face of Absolute Power

The Egyptian Uprising seems to focus on "strength", not "power", in transforming the Absolute. This is a very important point. Power is a skillful Western construct where political rhetoric and persuasive propaganda are its explicit form. Absolute political power hangs on resistance and, in doing so, it always attracts persistence. This means that resistance and persistence are the two desperate forces of power in modern and postmodern eras that ultimately cancel each other. That is why power can always be taken away. And because of its domination, absolute political power cannot tolerate the creative tension associated with the process of transformation. In contrast, public strength, which is an intrinsic quality of the transmodern world, cannot be taken away; its nature relies on resilience and perseverance in spite of all odds. Public strength thrives on the creative tension inherent in the process of metamorphosis.

In relying on their strength, Egyptians have accepted collateral damage in their peaceful demonstrations. It was this public strength that

transformed the absolute power of the Egyptian military, as demonstrated by soldiers joining citizens in their efforts to denounce the absolute power of Hosni Mubarak. At the beginning of the uprising, the military identified very strongly with demonstrators and protected them.[11]

Humor, Tolerance, and Paradoxical Situations

Growing up in Egypt, I am aware of humor as a creative act that has been, for a long time, a "homeopathic cure" for all Egyptians, liberating them from the fears, tensions, and anxieties that are emitted by the blind faith in the Absolute God and absolute political power. Along with its criticism, the core of humor retains a spirit of sympathy, evoking within us the very impulse of liberty. Paradoxically, in laughing at the limitations of our freedom, we encounter an unlimited independence and extraordinary liberty (Grudin 1990).

Humor seems to have provided the opportunity for Egyptians to recognize unfamiliar analogies or anomalies and conceive new ways, which perhaps grotesque, yet illuminating (cf. Grudin 1990). Egyptian demonstrators in Tahrir Square seemed to tolerate the tyranny of absolutism by perceiving two incompatible forces—the coteries and cliques, and the Islamic traditionalist groups—as a paradoxical synthesis for liberation (cf. Koestler 1964). While Egyptians have used humor in the past to deal with regime corruption, demonstrators in Tahrir Square seemed to make the most of humor as a creative act to attain a higher level of transformation that defeated the old habit of submission and apathy.

Perseverance and Design

Certainly, perseverance has been the unmistakable characteristic of the Egyptian Uprising. Actually, perseverance underpins the playfulness and humor that served as effective and innovative ways for Egyptians to express their dissatisfaction with absolute political power. Egyptian demonstrators also depended on well-designed demonstrations and sensible judgment in making day-by-day decisions regarding which path to take and which path to avoid at every occasion. There was no predetermined solution, expected outcome, or certain victory—these are common products of mere problem solving in modern and post-modern times.

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[11] Interestingly, during the most terrifying police brutality in Tahrir Square on February 4, 2010, many observers noted that the military could not stop the thugs' attacks on the peaceful demonstrators. The Egyptian military were not provisioned with bullets for fear that they would side with the protesters against the remaining government exemplified by Vice President Omar Suleiman.

This quality of perseverance experienced during the Egyptian Uprising is indispensable since both the word "perseverance" and the word "design" are the same word in Arabic language—*tasmeam*. This is not surprising, however: since the act of design is triggered by passion and desire, it also necessitates endurance and perseverance,[12] which are clearly identifiable signs of transmodernity. While Egyptians suffered the consequences of the tyranny of absolutism, relying on the usual problem-solving strategies for a long time, they have conducted and continue to engage in peaceful and well-designed demonstrations,[13] motivated by a strong will and passion to transform the Absolute.

Integration of the Absolute God and the Absolute Allah

As I have explained above, and contradictory to many critics and skeptics, neither religious movements nor political parties took place on the streets of Cairo. Egyptian demonstrators have expressed an unmistakable interfaith quality—instead of the common chanting "Allah Akbar" (God the Greatest), they chanted together "Muslim, Christian, we are all Egyptian". People from all walks of life and diametrically opposing beliefs and values (Muslims, Christians, intellectuals, workers, students) peacefully shook the foundation of entrenched absoluteness exemplified in Mubarak's political power.

As a matter of fact, one of the most moving and memorable experiences which took place in Tahrir Square on Friday February 11, 2011, where the Christians (the minority) held hands and surrounded the square to protect the Muslims (the majority) during their traditional Friday prayer. This was an expression of what the German theologist Hans Küng has envisioned more than 20 years ago, where "true humanity is the prerequisite for true religion", and where "true religion is the perfecting of true humanity" (Küng 1988: 253). On this remarkable day, I believe, the "Absolute God" and the "Absolute Allah"

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12 The words "perseverance" and "design" are also connected, by inference, to the word "pathos". This word, which originally meant "to suffer or to endure", is related to the word "passion" (cf. Gebser 1949: 244). The word "desire", which stems from the same root as the Latin word "desiderate" or "*de-sidere*", means "to wish for something to happen, to long for making something", i.e., design.

13 With remarkable strength and perseverance, Egyptian demonstrators continue the struggle to overcome the absolute power now established by the military. This is a clear indication of the persistence and resistance of absolute power to hold on its controlling position. Unfortunately, demonstrators seem to have been caught between two poles of the Absolute: the absolute political power of the military, and the belief in the Absolute God exerted by Muslim fundamentalists.

became isomorphic—a realization of the shared Abrahamic source.[14]

Self-organized and Self-reliant Demonstration

The realization of the shared Abrahamic source seems to be the driving force toward interfaith collaboration, motivating demonstrators to become self-reliant and self-organized. When armed thugs were sent out by the absolute political power to create confusion and chaos by looting museums and businesses during the early days of the Egyptian Uprising, demonstrators took shifts guarding buildings and neighborhoods. Certainly, this was an *effective* transmodern approach for Egyptians to take care of themselves as opposed to relying on any authoritarian agencies as an *efficient* way to protect communities' resources. In addition to the great effort to clean up the physical environment after the demonstrations at Tharir Square, ordinary women and men provided the demonstrators with basic nourishment, first aid, and medical treatment.

Beyond Patriarch and Feminism: Women and Men Join the Uprising

As I mentioned above, ancient Egyptian polytheistic religion exhibited a rich pantheon of gods in which the female was an essential part of the divine. Many Egyptian female writers, such as Nawal El Saadawi, Doria Shafiq, and Sahar Tawfiq, have moved beyond advocating for women's rights into calling for a new ethic for women and men based on feminine values. Consequently, their efforts challenge absolute political power and the belief in the Absolute God, mobilizing women not only in Egypt but also throughout the entire Middle East. In addition, the rise of liberal and human-rights movements in Egypt during the 2000s have provided the trajectory for women and youth to reject the Muslim Brotherhood old guard's moral-cultural conservatism.

In the transmodern world, even the Muslim Brothers fully support political pluralism and women's participation in politics as full citizens. Not only have women, wearing *hijabs*,[15] joined men to express their

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[14] An example of Muslims and Christians joining is the formation of the "Transitional Council of Wise Men" as a neutral technocratic body, including a Christian businessman, Naguib Sawiris, and a couple of nonideological members of the Muslim Brotherhood, to oversee Omar Suleiman's conduct and to lead Egypt through the transition. Whether or not this formation leads to a fruitful outcome, it is nevertheless a gesture that demonstrates the potential for collaboration between Muslims and Christians.

[15] Wearing the *hijab* did not interfere with women's intellectual emancipation and freedom. As Galal Amin (2000: 84) has observed, "Just as the wearing of the *hijab* is not an unquestionable proof of a woman's virtue, it is not an indi-

rage at Mubarak's absolute power but they have also been the leading core of the Egyptian Uprising, emerging in force by the hundreds of thousands in Tahrir Square. Despite the threat of sexual and physical violence, molesting, and rape by Mubarak's police and thugs, huge numbers of women have participated in the Uprising. What is remarkable is that women have insisted that they are not victims who need protection; with a dignified and proud manner, women have taken care of their own safety and well-being.

Tahrir Square as a Confluence Zone for Metamorphoses

The above-observed characteristics give us a clear understanding that the Egyptian Uprising that began in Tahrir Square on January 25, 2010 (and still continues) has given birth to an unprecedented transformation that put Egypt at the epicenter of transmodernity. Indeed, the world is witnessing the emergence of a new movement, a paradigm shift, and a chrysalis process as a clear manifestation of transmodernity. Perhaps the most inspiring image of this transformation is the caterpillar metamorphosing into the butterfly. Reflecting on the past, and in the spirit of Gebser's words, Egypt is now poised to return to its noble origin—to its ever-present origin. For the past splendor of Egypt holds out the audacity of hope, that future glory is latent in the present. Egyptians do not have to look to the West for freedom, liberty, and democracy.

Tahrir Square continues to maintain its function as a *confluence zone* of semiosis in which differences are interpreted, reinterpreted, and integrated, becoming transparent but not dissolved. The confluence of social, religious, and political dynamics testifies that the Egyptian Uprising cannot be reduced to mere riot or even revolution.

Admittedly, the above observations and interpretations may seem to others like an overzealous perception of the reality of what is happening and becoming at Tahrir Square. But reality, as John Deely (1994: 246) puts it, "is not what it is, but also what it will be; and in this becoming we are participants through semiosis". While the Egyptian Uprising is an immense transformation and liberation from the tyranny of absolutism—the absolute God and absolute political power—the future certainly remains challenging, traumatic, and uncertain. And yet, Egyptians seem to dwell in uncertainty and relentlessness, holding the paradox of the absolute God and the contradiction of religions. What is needed is a great deal of perseverance and design—*tasmeam*.

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cation of narrow-mindedness or fanaticism, as many people seem to think". In fact, the proliferation of the *hijab* "represents a trend toward greater movement of previously secluded women into the outside world, rather than a confinement".

What Lies Ahead

The current events in Egypt bring an eruption to our awareness. And since the ripples of "Worldshift 2012" mark a new beginning (Laszlo 2009), the timing of the Egyptian Uprising could not be more perfect. The concept of transforming the Absolute has the potential to heal the zeitgeist of our existence in spite of uncertainty. For human beings to live within the confinement of stability and certainty is to be dead even when alive (Taylor 2007). This way of life opens the everlasting desire that does not seek satisfaction but cultivates the dissatisfaction that triggers endless restlessness for making meaning and significance. To participate in the metamorphosis of the Absolute is to be open to *designing for life,* a life that does not seek complacency with stagnation but seeks meaningful transformation. And yet, societies need to be willing to engage in the process of metamorphosis, which is essential for a transmodern discourse.

Human beings are considerably more than rational animals. They are semiotic animals (Deely 2010) capable of developing awareness, relationships, and mediation toward semiosis of an undivided wholeness in flowing movement. Such being the case, humans have unlimited "semioethical" responsibility toward each other and toward more-than-human systems. This ethical implication depends on our ability to engage with the metamorphoses of the Absolute by intentional design, and hinges on our capacity to purposefully integrate nature and culture. And since the proofs of God's existence are drawn from the order of nature (cf. James 1902), transforming the Absolute can also transcend the current understanding of nature and culture. Transforming the Absolute allows us to access a different consciousness that is pregnant with ethical responsibility toward the integration and representation of nature and culture.

And since intellectual representations are unavoidably and organically attached to the ongoing experience of society (Said 1994), transmodern scholars as participants through semiosis have the ethical responsibility to lead and participate in the metamorphoses of the Absolute. This is significant for contemporary societies in order to overcome the calamity of declaring that God is dead and rendering the Absolute *obsolete.* Transforming the Absolute refers to the radical transformation that does not reject what exists: God with multiple names and forms, religions with diverse metaphorical expressions. What is taking place in Egypt now might be seen as the darkness before the dawn. However, what lies ahead is an innovative social, political, and spiritual way of life that puts Egypt at the epicenter of transmodernity. Transforming the concept of the Absolute, by rediscovering the sacred as an inclusive dimension of human beings, might be delayed but should not forestalled. I find Jean Gebser's eloquent words to be an

appropriate summation of what lies ahead:

> *The events of tomorrow are always latently present today. Tomorrow is nothing other than a today which is not yet acute, i.e. is still latent. Every manifestation of our lives inevitably contains the sum of what is past as well as what is to come.* (Gebser 1949: 277)

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