

***Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative.* Edited by Jerry L. Martin. New York: Routledge, 2019. 250 pp. ISBN: 9780367028718. \$160, hardcover.**

Since its launch in 2014, the novel research program “Theology Without Walls” (TWW), coordinated by Jerry Martin, has witnessed its robust growth. An increasing body of scholars and religious practitioners, whose work is mainly embedded in the north Atlantic western society, convene periodically in the American Academy of Religion for TWW, giving rise to this flagship volume “Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative.”

As a cosmopolitan Ru (Confucian) scholar, I am whole-heartedly embracing the program, not only because its “no walls” brand fits well with the non-creedal nature of Ru spirituality, and hence, similar to what Jeffery Long explicates in Chapter 20 for Vedanta Hinduism, I can claim Ruism (Confucianism) is always a theology without walls. More importantly, the idea of “theology” of TWW runs contrary to how “religions” have been conceptualized and practiced globally since the establishment of Christianity in medieval Europe, and therefore, TWW is cleaving a genuinely new path for humanity to envision a prospect of “world spirituality” alternative to the entrenched “world religions”. Given the convergence of global humanitarian crises in 2020 which are by no means unrelated to religious matters, this emerging vision hints hope.

There is no better way to understand what exact kind of “walls” TWW intends to tear down than studying its sceptic, Dr. Francis Clooney. The marvel of Clooney’s work consists in that through his meticulous reading and exquisite writings on two major world religious traditions, Clooney revives a dormant subdiscipline in theology, and has ignited a global interest in exploring it from various perspectives. In this sense, TWW can be seen as a deviant of Clooney’s definitive work in comparative theology (CT).

In Chapter 19 titled as “Strong walls for an open faith,” Clooney emphasizes the necessity of doctrinal commitment to one’s home tradition for interreligious studies while quoting the words of Wesley Hill: “The Creed safeguards the mystery and wild freedom of God; it does not box it in and tame it. The point of the Creed isn’t that its words are satisfactory. It’s that those words refuse our inveterate preference for premature theological satisfaction.” (p. 219) Since the Creed aims for “ruling out bad alternatives,” Clooney believes “We would be foolish to reduce the mystery of God to what we can say about it by the best words of theologians. But we would not be better off were we to decide that our encounter with truth is better fostered by leaving behind even the positive doctrines of traditions, as if unlimited verbal and mental fluidity would be a better base for taking other traditions seriously.” (p. 220) After engaging Clooney’s works for years, I find this recent statement constitutes a clearer, more self-explanatory, yet unconvincing argument for his approach of CT. As implied by the statement and his own comparative works, Clooney embraces two assumptions before studying Hindu texts as a Catholic theologian: 1) there is the best, unalterable understanding of God’s mystery articulated by the Creed of Catholicism, and 2) there must be equally the best, unalterable understanding of Hindu faith stated in authoritative Hindu texts. Since each of the mentioned understandings central to one’s faith is unalterable, a conceivable result of Clooney’s comparison is to appreciate the sublimity of religious experience expressed by each tradition separately, and thus, to enhance their respective doctrinal commitments while juxtaposing them. Characterized more accurately, this type of comparative study of religions is not

“comparative theology,” but “comparing theologies,” since no further implication is drawn into one’s pre-established theology after the mutually enhancing juxtaposition of two theologies.

Nevertheless, doesn’t the value of interreligious studies consist exactly in the outcome that a pre-established, standard understanding of God’s mystery can be reevaluated by individual theologians as either more or *less so* due to the new wisdom they learn from other traditions? Isn’t it a question worth asking by a comparative theologian whether the same creedal attitude towards one’s faith prevails in non-Catholic traditions as well? In other words, the creation of new paths to CT including TWW depends upon how scholars reexamine the aforementioned two assumptions of Clooney’s CT, and furnish considerate responses to the two questions just asked. This is exactly what the cohort of TWW advocates do in this flagship volume.

TWW advocates are remarkably consistent in articulating the conception of theology as “faith seeking understanding” in a way different from Clooney’s, which I may call a Protestant Conception of Theology (PCT). As hinted above, Clooney’s construal of theology as “faith seeking understanding” follows his medieval Scholastic predecessors such as Anselm of Canterbury and Thomas Aquinas. It requires establishing one’s faith in a determinate form of divine revelation proclaimed by the Creed at first, and then, to seek available cultural devices in the world to elucidate the revelation. During the process, the Creed functions as an unalterable standard to rule out theological alternatives. Nevertheless, per PCT, the word “faith” refers to the pre- or super-linguistic traits of transformative “spiritual experience” (Paul Knitter, p.66) which is engendered by varying “spiritual disciplines” (John Thatamanil, p. 54) and evidences individuals’ “direct encounter” (Richard Oxenberg, p. 15) with ultimate reality. Once individuals are committed to the “active cultivation” of these spiritually transformative capacities, religions are formed, and the comprehensive and deeper reflection upon the religious experience gives rise to theology. (Rory McEntee, p. 95) The order of spirituality-religion-theology expounded by these TWW advocates bears a family resemblance to how Schleiermacher views religion as rooted in “a feeling of the infinite” and Tillich’s definition of religion as “ultimate concern,” and therefore, my categorization of it as PCT.

The rapport of PCT with TWW consists in that in light of the so-called Protestant principle articulated by Tillich¹, human understanding of the unconditioned ultimacy is always conditioned, and thus, even if traditions furnish theological pointers to the ultimacy, individuals in the traditions have their intrinsic needs to experience more about the ultimacy. While individuals reach out to learn more traditions or know more about the world through varying disciplinary perspectives such as evolutionary biology (Chapter 13), cognitive science (Chapter 12), anthropology (Chapter 7), etc., the insights about the ultimacy gathered within or without traditions shall succumb to the same scrutiny per a comprehensive set of criteria of truth such as “applicability, adequacy, coherence, consistency, and pragmatic considerations such as ethical consequences, aesthetic quality, social potency, and spiritual appeal.” (Wesley Wildman, pp.122, which Jonathan Weidenbaum resonates in terms of William James’s religious thought in pp. 102) The ultimate goal of this theological expedition is a gradual expansion of “integration” (John Thatamanil, pp. 60) or “universality” (S. Mark Heim, pp. 209) of various insights and experiences about the ultimacy.

¹ See Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans., James Luther Adams (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1948): 163.

What particularly appeals to me about TWW advocated as such is that it welcomes theological voices rooted in one tradition, which the volume titled as “expanded confessional theologies.” For instance, while describing how a Christian theologian pursues TWW, S. Mark Heim (who is an ordained Baptist minister) says: “Clear where it is working from, such comparative theology has no predetermined limit on where it might go or on how much the theology and faith of the home tradition may be transformed,” a type of Christian CT quite distinct from Clooney’s. Also, Jeffery Long emphasizes that the Vedanta tradition of Hinduism “has no dogma or creed. Individuals in the Vedanta tradition are thus free to express skepticism about this teaching. ... In contrast with mainstream Christianity, Vedanta is not primarily about belief in the divinity of a particular teacher, but about the realization and manifestation of the divinity within us all.” (p. 230) In other words, individuals nurtured by the tradition of Vedanta Hinduism can broadly incorporate insights from outside and revise their preestablished spiritual visions without the concern of total conversion. As for the caution that interreligious learning may bring too much transformation to one’s home tradition to an extent that “threatens the load-bearing integrity of the entire structure,” Heim says: “My hope is that these cautions prove to be similar to the assumptions of a pre-gothic architecture, assumptions that could be definitely reversed only when the actual realization of buildings that are more window than wall.” (p. 210) Using a metaphor of life shaped by my Ru spirituality, I would reinforce Heim’s hope as follows: for those traditions that lack a creedal attitude towards the ultimacy, established theological wisdom within a tradition would be like a “seed” to assist individual’s spiritual growth, and insights gleaned elsewhere may modify the genetic expression of the seed so as to develop new epi-genetic traits of the rooted tradition in time.

In a word, since PCT undergirds TWW, the “walls” that TWW intends to tear down are nothing but the aforementioned creedal attitude towards what concerns human individuals ultimately, as well as the institutionalized sovereign role that “religions” play in bolstering this attitude which Kurt Richardson analyzes finely in Chapter 4. However, is PCT adequate to the goal of TWW as a field of open inquiry on ultimate reality?

The Protestantization of the Christian world transpired simultaneously with the establishment of nation-states with the separation of church and state as a key structuring principle in the early period of modern Europe. During the process, although they fought against the walls of privileged priesthood between God and individuals, Protestants were put into walled institutions in tandem with Catholicism in the purportedly private area of human life. Under the influence of Martin Luther’s initial expression of the Protestant principle as *Sola Fide*, the creedal attitude towards faith in conjunction with the institutionally sovereign role played by particularly conservative denominations has been enhanced, rather than diminished. More importantly, the mentality of “world religions” which envisions non-Christian spiritual traditions as comprising similar components to Protestantized Christianity was also generated around the same period due to the process of western colonization, and it still sways a strong influence upon people’s understanding of human spiritual phenomena today. In a nutshell, although PCT furnishes a theoretical foundation for the pursuit of TWW as an open inquiry, it is extremely doubtful whether the social and political supports of this foundation, which have been entrenched in the historical process of Protestantization, modernization and colonization, are adequate to such a pursuit. So, the last question to ask before ending my review: are there alternative sources to mitigate the social and political concerns engendered by PCT while serving the same cause of TWW?

Without repeating my published works, let me briefly present my thought on this question as follows. There are at least two ideal sources: ancient Greek philosophy as a way of life (PWOL, which Thatamanil addresses tersely on p.54) and Ruism.

Firstly, theology, per its original use in Aristotle's works, is part of metaphysics integral to philosophy as a way of life, which prioritizes "spiritual exercises" aiming for the transformation of the whole personhood of human individuals over discursive analyses and argumentations on the transformative experience. The relationship between human spirituality and its theological reflection in ancient Greek philosophy is strikingly similar to the one implied by PCT. However, those philosophers' work was embedded in a political and social infrastructure completely different from the one of Protestantized modern nation-states. Therefore, I view CT as a liberal art per its original Aristotelian conception², and can readily serve people identifying themselves as "Spiritual but Not Religious" (Linda Mercadante, Chapter 17) and should be taught broadly in varying contemporary educational institutions.

Secondly, Ruism, especially the classical Ruism as interpreted by the Song and Ming Ru scholars (which current English scholarship terms as "neo-Confucianism"), is congenial to the ideas of PWOL, PCT and TWW because ultimate reality has been engaged by Ruists in a history of interreligious studies and in a rooted, yet creed-free fashion. Similar to the idea of PWOL, the theological thinking of Ruism functions in an utterly distinctive social-political environment so as to be capable of stimulating genuinely new human imagination on the future of global politics related to religious matters. Moreover, what Ruism can add to the contribution of PWOL to TWW is that Ruism has furnished a uniquely philosophical attitude toward the sacramentality of "rituals" (禮) that we have not yet witnessed in ancient Greek philosophers' spiritual exercises³. Adjusted appropriately, the Ru philosophy of ritual can contribute to a public space of TWW open to varying traditional or non-traditional ritual practices.

As a conclusion, the research program of TWW exemplified by the flagship volume betokens a significant direction of the future of human spirituality, to which I call on inspired and concerned scholars to make our collective contributions.

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² See Bin Song, "Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art," in *The Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (Nov. 2020): 92-113.

³ See Bin Song, "'Three Sacrificial Rituals' (三祭) and the Practicability of Ruist (Confucian) Philosophy," *The APA (American Philosophical Association) Newsletter on Asian and Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies*, Vol. 17 (2), Apr., 2018: 2-5. Paul Hedges in Chapter 15 of the volume touches the social phenomenon affected by the Ru philosophy of ritual.