

Walls and Borders: Theology and Regionalism After Religion

Paul Bramadat

*Although it is difficult to object to the openness of mind and generosity of spirit one can observe in *Theology Without Walls* (TWW), both the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and critical scholars of religion may find the tone and ambitions of the movement somewhat alienating. I outline two key features of the SBNR cohort: First, while there are certain very common values, practices, and assumptions one can expect to see, one also encounters a resistance or even just indifference to speaking of a coherent set of practices reflecting a consistent perspective. Second, the way individuals define themselves and establish patterns of belonging suggest SBNR people are just as site-specific as members of conventional religions. I illustrate the second observation through some reflections on the Cascadia region of North America. Forms of secularization have flourished here to such an extent that the region may well not just resist the liberal theological orientation associated with TWW, but might also provide an opportunity for movement members to think outside of the conventional boxes of religious identity.*

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I appreciate very much the opportunity to reflect on the ramifications of the broader project sketched in *The Transreligious Imperative* (and evident in *Theology Without Walls* [TWW] as a general approach) for our understanding of the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) cohort. My own work has been securely moored in the harbour of religious studies, with enriching excursions into the world of policy-makers and religious insiders. The conversation at the American Academy of Religion and in this special issue creates an opening to think critically about potential conversations we might imagine between people who intentionally place themselves outside of existing conventional religious structures and those animated by broadly ecumenical or interreligious impulses.

TWW and SBNR

It is encouraging to see the efforts of those in this—admittedly rarefied—discussion to move beyond naïve expressions of the virtues of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, and comparative religion. The commitment to think seriously about what it might mean for people raised in one religion, or more broadly one comprehensive interpretive scheme, as John Thatamanil puts it,¹ to engage, adopt, adapt, and perhaps also to practice another religion, is surely welcome in a period beset by so much tribalism and xenophobia.

In my reflections, I want to suggest that proponents of TWW, as an emerging field or approach, may find it useful to think not just about walls, but also borders. One way borders matter in thinking about religion in the contemporary period is that they remind us that all of the religious traditions, practices, and claims we study are situated somewhere, and unfold at some time. This seems fairly obvious, but what might it mean to advocates of the spirit and key

¹ John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

intellectual problematique of TWW? After all, TWW intentionally prioritizes the ways “the divine” or “the sacred” might be manifest in traditions an individual might consider not-their-own. As a friendly outside observer of this undertaking, the thinking and writing of TWW seem to me to be mostly apolitical; or to put it positively, TWW’s interest in politics seems mainly to focus on the ways that implicitly authentic and liberal Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, etc. manifestations of the divine (just coincidentally) seem to have a predilection for complementary (liberal) ethical and theological stances. In any event, TWW was not invented for me or other religious outsiders, so it is not at all surprising that I might feel somewhat estranged by its internal logic.

It seems entirely reasonable that TWW theologians begin with the assumption that there is a divine that might make an appearance in or be sought in a variety of places. In addition to this initial assumption there is a conviction that it is the job of TWW theologians to think about how they might properly combine or interact with these diverse expressions of the divine. But why might they wish to do this? Well, this is desirable so that they might, as Jerry Martin (2020, 49) puts it, “know God, not merely about God.”² From the perspective of a religious studies scholar who is himself (I guess) SBNR, but who pursues his research and teaching in a “secular” and “humanistic” manner,³ I do not think about my research as a means by which I can experience, know, or even or learn anything about God. Rather, I am far more interested in how a given Christian got interested in meditation in the first place; what practices appeal to them and why; how much they know about the history of the kind of Buddhism they want to practice; what kinds of conflicts within the larger Buddhist sphere resulted in this person coming across this sort of Buddhism in a bookstore or on a website; to what extent are their interests, tastes and aptitudes produced by a certain ethnic, class, gender, racialized, national, and able-bodied set of intersecting identities.

After all, this imagined Christian has a name, gender, family, bank account, certain kind of education, and an aesthetic sensibility; they speak a certain language, have a certain passport, have a certain sexual orientation (or a range), and have a certain life expectancy. Some of these things are accidents of their birth in a particular city, state, country, and time period, and some of them are products of political processes that unfold over centuries, but all of these facts will help us understand why they think of the Christian divine as they do, and why they might have an interest in adopting certain Buddhist meditation practices. To put it another way, as a religious studies scholar, I am interested in the Christian person, their claims, their embodied practices, and the culture in which they live—not the divine as such.

This seems like a general and predictable critique a religious studies scholar might have of TWW in particular or even liberal theology in general. However, thinking about borders might have a bearing on the ways TWW proponents think about SBNR people as individuals or as part of a sociologically identifiable cohort. After all, as a social scientific category SBNR is notoriously hard to describe. Some “members” of this group are just passing through en route to being fully irreligious; some are en route to being conventionally religious; some are attracted to one

² Jerry L. Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 49.

³ Although I am myself of mixed-race (South Asian and Anglo-Saxon) descent, and was raised as a Unitarian Universalist, I am now most engaged by the philosophical and embodied spiritualities associated with postural yoga, especially Ashtanga yoga.

spiritual tradition while others are attracted to multiple traditions; most have very little interest in conventional institutions—some detest them and others just think they are irrelevant to their lives. There are many projects going on at the moment, trying to understand and explain the so-called religious “nones” and the SBNR component of this group.⁴ However, much of this work is in its infancy, so we need to be cautious about what we think we can say about this cohort.

Nonetheless, two relevant features of these individuals and these clusters of belief and practice stand out for me. First, there are—as many of the people in this conversation know—certain very common values, practices and assumptions one can expect to see in the lives of SBNR people. Many of them participate in a fairly recognizable though not tightly bounded “therapeutic regime” to use Thatamanil’s useful category, even if it seems to me we are a long way from identifying a coherent “interpretive scheme” that ties the group together. That is to say, while one might quite predictably find SBNR individuals in yoga studios, meditation retreats, Christmas services, acupuncture clinics, and at their local bookstores seeking a book of poetry by Rumi, one should also expect a resistance (or even just indifference) to speaking of a coherent set of practices reflecting a consistent perspective (a regime linked to a scheme). Second, the way individuals define themselves and establish patterns of belonging suggest SBNR people are just as site-specific as that Christian with an interest in Buddhism. Over two decades of teaching on and research into contemporary religion and spirituality in North America convince me that location matters: it matters if the Christian or the SBNR person in question lives in Mumbai, Montreal, or Miami; it matters if they are wealthy or poor, living among Muslims or Christians, if they are Francophone or Anglophone, women or men, and so on.

But Not Religious

Sometimes an abstract interest in regionalism becomes personal, and then professional. My own curiosity about my adopted home in Victoria—situated in a region many of us call Cascadia—inspired me to lead an international research project on the religious, irreligious, and spiritual characteristics of the Pacific Northwest bio-region. *Religion at the Edge: Nature, Spirituality, and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest*, will be released in 2022 with University of British Columbia Press.

What is it like here? This may seem like a digression, but let me say for the record, that I have never been to outer-space. Nonetheless, if I were to try to explain to a small child what it is like for humans to travel or live in space, I think I would know what to say. After all, I have been imaginatively inhabiting space for decades through pop culture and documentaries. I could describe what these media tell me about the experience of weightlessness, the danger, quiet and cold of space, and the sublime beauty of a universe seen without interference from streetlights.

Teaching religious studies in British Columbia is not unlike teaching terrestrial people about outer space. Here, in the northern half of Cascadia, the expanding majority of my students have nearly no direct experience of religion beyond what they might see in a film, and even then it is usually the backdrop for a plot that is not really about religion. I was reminded of this fact this year when I was asked to supervise a senior honours student who was a double major in History and Religious Studies. Although she had an interest in pagan forms of religion in the region, I discovered that she had *never* been inside a church (or any other religious building) of

⁴ One of the most promising is led by Lori Beaman at the University of Ottawa. See: <https://nonreligionproject.ca/>

any kind. This was not exactly on principle, although she was aware that churches had been responsible for many bad things. Rather, it just happened to be that she had a strictly academic interest in religion, and none of the social or ritual activities of her friends and family required her to darken the door of a church.

It has not always been this way in Canada, or in Cascadia, of course. Once upon a time, we could assume everyone in our classes had at least a nominal, or a loosely recollected, religious (usually Christian) affiliation. But when I moved to British Columbia (from the Canadian prairies) in 2008 I came to see that the region was, in the words of one colleague of mine, “born secular.” Moreover, conventional religious institutions that do exist have quite shallow roots. A great many of my students were raised in families in which it was often the parents or grandparents who had walked away—often with a shrug rather than any spite—from organized religion. This is true of the US side of Cascadia, too, though the deinstitutionalization and secularization processes are arguably a few decades more advanced in Canada.

The survey we conducted in 2018 as part of our *Religion at the Edge* project confirmed that 49% of British Columbians and 42% of residents of Cascadia South (Oregon and Washington), would be considered “religious nones.”⁵ This makes the region nearly twice as non-religious or unaffiliated as most other parts of the continent. Among people under 40 years old, a significant majority of the region’s respondents are nones; among people under 25, I would speculate that the number of nones would be in the vicinity of 65–70%.

These are large figures, and I should point out that inasmuch as any religion is naturalized and privileged in the region, it is clearly Christianity, and usually some kind of Protestantism. As well, it is true that the levels of ethnic and religious diversity in Vancouver, for example, greatly exceed what you would find anywhere else in the region, and it is also true that Indigenous spiritualities are far more prominent on the Canadian side of the border. Nonetheless, in British Columbia, all Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Jains, Buddhists, and traditional non-Christian Indigenous people *added together* equal about 12–15% of the population.

Many nones are interested in spirituality, though what that means is something about which debates are currently on-going. Our project and the life experiences and teaching careers of the project collaborators confirm that there is a strong SBNR cohort in this region, but it strikes me that the “BNR” component of this group is not as strong within this cohort as it is elsewhere, since most of them have never rejected their own or their family’s religion. Instead, they—especially those under 40—simply *have never had* much interest in or attachment to conventional religiosity.

Let me return now to the SBNR-TWW connection. It seems to me that the individual imagined by TWW was generally raised in, and probably still belongs to, a specific religion (even if just nominally), and might now wish to encounter the (possibly same) “divine” or “sacred” as conceived by, contained in, or promoted by another religious tradition, and to do so in an intellectually credible, personally meaningful and morally conscientious manner. Concomitantly,

⁵ See Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme’s report on this survey at: <https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/13406/Cascadia%20report%20part%202%2006-2018%20combined.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y>

I wonder if (indeed it seems to me that) the SBNR person being imagined by TWW has disaffiliated with a religion at some point in the past, but lives in a city or region in which there is a comprehensible and comprehensive dominant religious form (Christianity, in this case) not very far under the surface of society; furthermore, this person might have an interest in combining the spiritual aspects of one or more capital-R religions, and they might want to think about how to do that in the best way.

The situation among many of Cascadia's SBNR's is quite—though not categorically—different than this. Within our interviews and field site visits, one could see evidence of a considerable interest in recognizable spiritual practices and perspectives. For example, in British Columbia, approximately 41 percent of our representative sample indicated that they had engaged in yoga in the last year; the frequency of practice varied between daily (4.8 percent), weekly (14.5 percent), monthly (8.1 percent), or once or a few times annually (13.3 percent). When these practitioners were asked if they experienced their practice as spiritual, fully 55 percent of them said definitely or probably yes (13 and 42 percent, respectively). This means that approximately 20 percent of all British Columbians frame their postural yoga practice as a means of increasing their spiritual wellness, wholeness, and awareness. To put the size of this cohort in perspective, it is the equivalent of *all* self-identified Anglicans and United Church Christians (the two largest Protestant denominations), *plus all* Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs in the province.

And Not Religious

Spiritual modalities are alive and well in a province sometimes called “British California,” that is home to Eckhardt Tolle and Lululemon. For the most part, the SBNR cohort under 40 years of age might be better described as SANR, or “spiritual and not religious,” since they do not have any personal or familial memory of ever being religious and they live in a culture in which well over half of their peers would not prioritize identification with or participation in a formal religious tradition. In this space, religion truly is the exception, not the rule. These people are irreligious only in the way your life-long vegan friend raised in a family of vegans could be called a non-meat-eater. I mean, your friend does not eat meat—but that might not really capture very much about how they do eat and why.

So, what can we say about these SBNRs and, again, what is the connection to the TWW? Here I arrive at the edge of a taxonomical chasm. I started the project with a strong initial hunch that many of my neighbours in the region had an interest in spirituality and outdoor activities, broadly understood. Some describe themselves as spiritual, as I suggested. Yoga studios and meditation groups are ubiquitous; there are also some extremely interesting examples of non-denominational and post-institutional and outdoors-based forms of Christianity that we see here and there and that time does not permit me to consider. To make a long story short (the longer story will be in *Religion at the Edge*), my intuition, and many of our participants, suggested that the region (especially the Canadian side of it) is definitively post-religious in the same way your vegan friend is post-meat.

While conducting our fieldwork, interviews, focus groups, and surveys in the region, I kept expecting to find evidence of eco-spirituality, nature religion, metaphysical religion, religious naturalism, and the like. I did not, or at least these categories did not seem to capture what we

saw and heard. Nonetheless, there was something I intuited not very far below the surface, beyond the regular metaphors, that seemed to represent a default orientation to religion, nature, and spirituality. “Reverential naturalism” was the term I coined to describe the variant of naturalism that could not be reduced to a flat positivism but also did not quite resemble what we normally mean when we talk about nature religion or eco-spirituality. Throughout our study we observed the presence of an overarching meaning-conveying narrative according to which a deference to and, for many, a veneration of nature is framed as a distinctive, even definitive, feature of what it means to live well in the region. This meta-narrative seems to be the common ground on which people who might *also* be Muslims, Christians, agnostics, or atheists, can stand together. Like public health care in Canada, the beguiling beauty of the natural world binds people together and helps to explain the motto on a licence plate option offered, rather unironically, by the provincial government: *British Columbia: The Best Place on Earth*.

So, what might it mean to imagine a SBNR “theology”? To use this emic TWW concept in this region is, in my view, a lost cause. Perhaps SBNR people elsewhere might be more receptive to the overarching project of TWW, but many of the concepts at the core of the overarching project, as I read it, are rather inert in the region, especially in its public and intellectual arenas. Nonetheless, it might be fruitful for theologians, among themselves, to think about what it might mean to do theology in the Cascadian context. Taking the specific political, geographical and historical features of this place and its people seriously, though, would require paying close attention to the emergence of a galvanizing form of naturalism that is not oriented toward the divine, but may still open up opportunities for reverence. Given the precipice at which we all now stand as a species, we might learn a great deal from the ways Cascadian SBNR residents engage with an ecosystem that resists institutionalization at the same time as it entreats something akin to sacralization.



Paul Bramadat works at the University of Victoria as Director of the Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, and Professor in the Religion, Culture and Society Program. His research and teaching are concerned with religion, spirituality, and secularity in liberal democracies, with a special interest in Canada. His focus is mostly on contemporary urban settings, although he has recently turned his attention to the relationship between bio-regions and religious and post-religious phenomena. His most recent co-edited books are Urban Religious Events: Public Spirituality in Contested Spaces (Bloomsbury, 2021), and Religion on the Edge: Nature, Spirituality and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest (UBC Press, 2022).

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