Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation

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This paper argues that, in many ways, both particular writers within the Theology Without Walls (TWW) program and the whole endeavor fail to meet the requirements of critical scholarship. While raising important issues of contemporary relevance, its search for a TWW is reminiscent of older perennialist ventures and seems to fall prey to many of the same failings. It is largely and often grounded within white, Western, colonial, male, and Christian norms which are taken as representing a universal base for theorizing without concern for power dynamics or decolonizing scholarship. It is suggested that the related field of comparative theology offers a far more sophisticated and viable platform for exploring religious difference that can attend to both theological and critical concerns. The impossibility of being without walls, or our inevitable locatedness, is argued as part of this.

Key words: Theology without walls, comparative theology, Robert Neville, theology, religious studies, critical religion, scholarship, spiritual but not religious (SBNR), decolonization

Introduction: What is TWW?

Theology Without Walls (TWW) is a recent, primarily North American (even US), program that has academic foundations but is more concerned, as I see it, with practitioner and insider theological questions, many of which can be seen as quite out of step with contemporary academic theology as a whole. Its prime moving figure has been the philosopher Jerry Martin who has helped define it via a recent landmark book.[1] TWW originated as an interest group in 2014 at the American Academy of Religion (AAR), later becoming a specific Group organizing its own panels, though also often in conjunction with the Comparative Theology (CT) Group. Nevertheless, I would argue that TWW lacks CT's academic credibility, and also differs from the latter's "crossing and returning" motif.[2] Martin's conception is that we seek to freely learn from every tradition, and he insists that "translating... insights into the terms of one's own tradition risks narrowness, distortion, and misappropriation."[3] Martin also states that: "The subject matter of theology is ultimate reality, not one's own tradition," and while he says there may be specific sub-sets, i.e. "Christian... Hindu... Islamic theology, etc.," he stresses that also "there is just

[1] See Jerry Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020). While TWW is not a single program, nor with one agenda amongst its various contributors, I will nevertheless speak below of the TWW program as a somewhat monolithic entity. This is because at least as enunciated by Martin, and as seems inherent in some other key writers and thinkers, there is something of a clear sense of what the movement stands for. It should be noted that not every essay in the TWW book should be seen as representing a TWW voice, because various authors were simply responding to the movement or had been asked to contribute specific essays. Being an author in the TWW volume is not therefore in any sense to suggest that the person accepts the TWW ideological schemata I set out here.

[2] Two key descriptive texts of what CT is, are Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

[3] Jerry Martin, "Introduction," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 1–4, 1.

Theology, the *logos* of *theos*, of ultimacy."[4] In this, I find Martin's project leading beyond the walls of the academy into some form of perennialism and confessional project.

I see this as a friendly critique, seeking to influence the ongoing development of a young project rather than as a damning rejection, though I will speak quite harshly of much that I see as misguided. Further, I will address its relationship to the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) phenomena, which it seems to see itself in relation to. One argument of at least some parts of TWW is that we see a move from what may broadly be termed "religion" to "spirituality" in contemporary society, with "religion" standing for more rigid and institutional belonging to a specific tradition, and "spirituality" signifying a more fluid and non-institutional engagement with various techniques, practices, and beliefs in an ad hoc manner.[5] For some at least, TWW is seen as capable of providing a theology for the SBNR community, but I will suggest that TWW is not able to do so.

As a last introductory note, I see TWW exemplifying a recurring theme (certainly within the Western world but maybe also more widely) over the last one hundred and fifty or so years. A perception that the world has many religions[6] and that we cannot, without recourse to strictly unprovable confessional claims, show that one is correct has led many towards seeking a unity of all religions. In the nineteenth century, F. Max Müller believed that we would see a future global Christianity which combined the best of all religions, while Theosophists planned a new religious formulation drawing from many religions, again the perennialists of the mid-twentieth century had such views.[7] We could even see Ninian Smart's talk of a world or global theology as part of such a worldview.[8] As Jeffery Long notes, such views could also be found in the work of

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[4] Martin "Introduction," 1.

[5] The classic study of this purported move is Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). This distinction of "religion" and "spirituality", while a popular usage, is not analytically valid if we imagine a distinct split between two arenas, but may stand as a descriptive marker of a certain form of contemporary discourse and practice. See Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 128 box 5.6, and Anna King and Paul Hedges, "What Is Religion? Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?," in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Hedges (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 1–30, 22–24.

[6] I return below to this contested term and the notion that the world "has" religions.

[7] See, e.g., Blake Smith, "Counter-Revolution and Cosmopolitan Spirituality: Anquetil Duperron's Translation of the Upanishads," in *The French Revolution and Religion in Global Perspective*, ed. Bryan Banks and Erica Johnson, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 25–48. The perennialist position is essentially itself an unprovable faith claim that there is an inner unity centered on experience that unites all religions. This can be countered on various grounds which includes but is not limited to the following three: it is either simply a confessional claim and so not an academic one and so rests upon a faith claim which is not evidentially proven; it is an overly strong pluralism and so is not a scholarly form which advocates an "interpretation" rather than, as in the last point, a strong confessional claim (see the discussion of Hick and pluralism in what follows); its assertion of the primacy of experience is based in a Romantic and Schleiermachian framing which ignores the counter arguments that experience is, in part at least, linguistically constructed and so develops from within the system rather than being prior to it, a point which, arguably, cannot be proven either way absolutely but in the typically strong espousal of this as the "essence" of religion ignores the significance of doctrine, tradition, and formation and so offers at best a lop-sided view.

[8] Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

Vivekananda,[9] while there were also Muslim perennialists.[10] Such thoughts, typically said to be new each time they emerge, generate much excitement amongst those who believe they are on the verge of a breakthrough to a new religious consciousness or age, yet they all fade away and the problems of grand claims to system making founder on many grounds – one thinks, if nothing else, of Jean-Francois Lyotard's dismissal of metanarratives.[11] TWW will, I suspect, in the *longue durée*, prove to be another such fad.[12]

Why TWW, as Scholarship, Can't Talk about Ultimacy

I would distinguish between at least three ways in which the sphere we term religion may be studied. These, it should be noted, represent Durkheimian ideal types which are perhaps not as neatly demarcated in actual practice as set out here. First, confessional theology, which speaks within the confines of a specific tradition (in the Western academy this has traditionally been Christianity [normally either Catholic or Protestant]). Given the heritage of Western universities, many theology (sometimes divinity) departments were originally confessional departments, and such an organization remains in many places (e.g., Germany). Confessional theology will assert its own claims about "ultimacy",[13] for instance, that God is revealed in the person of Jesus as the Logos incarnate and second person of the Trinity, or that Swaminarayan was an Avatar of Vishnu. While I employ (confessional) "theology" to speak about the ideological truth claims of various traditions, many of them would not use this term, or even have a *logos* about a *theos*. As such, it should be understood as a shorthand signifier for various discourses, though I will also problematize it somewhat below. Second, academic theology, which studies the claims of confessional theology, and intersects with it, but employs the tools of secular disciplines as the primary methodology and guide. It speaks about the way traditions make claims about ultimacy, and how these are constructed. Third, religious studies, which is the purely secular study of many forms of religion via such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, feminism, etc. Again, it may study particular claims about how traditions perceive ultimate reality. The particular nomenclature deployed will vary upon context (e.g., history of religions, divinity, etc.), while these three do not represent, as noted, distinct and clear markers, but rather represent a range of points where each slides into the other. For instance, religious studies about Christianity crosses over to academic theology, while a Buddhist who studies Buddhism within religious studies may also make, at times, more normative claims about their own tradition in a confessional mode. Again,

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[9] Jeffery Long, "A Hinduism without walls? Exploring the concept of the avatar interreligiously," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 227-33.

[10] This latter camp would apply to such figures as William Chittick and more recently to Reza Shah Kazema, who have sought to defend a pluralist stance in relation to the Quran and Islamic tradition. On the perennialist tradition in general, see Harry Oldmeadow, "Metaphysics, Theology and Philosophy," *Sacred Web* 1 (1998). On Muslim perennialists in relation to the theology of religions, see Haifaa Jawad, "A Muslim Response to the Christian Theology of Religions," in *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospective and Future Prospects*, ed., Elizabeth Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiararchi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 328-58.

[11] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on the Condition of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

[12] I would like to add a note inspired by one of my anonymous reviewers that another way of reading TWW is as part of a tradition that seeks to move beyond an us-vs-them tribalism, which the reviewer notes includes "Locke and Schleiermacher, F. D. Maurice and Max Mueller, to W. C. Smith and John Hick." My reviewer also notes that this points to its being less original and groundbreaking than its proponents imagine.

[13] This term is deployed as an emic marker, as a TWW signifier of such things—it seems—as deity claims, nirvana claims, Brahman claims, etc. See Jerry Martin, "Introduction to Topical Issue Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries," *Open Theology* 4 (2018): 506-10, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0039.

an atheist may teach Christian theology and identify as a theologian, while a belonging-believing Sikh may identify with religious studies and teach and research Sikhism in an entirely "secular" way. I stress this because there is no absolute marker between what some may identify as a secular discipline of religious studies and a confessional discipline of theology. Nevertheless, pragmatically within the academy, there is a real difference, and as a non-confessional discipline, the study of religion sits solely within academic theology and religious studies.

Before proceeding, I should note that what I have said so far may appear to represent "religions" as distinct traditions each with their own claims and identities. However, this is not the case and amongst voluminous debates some key points should be noted here: the term "religion" itself bears a history of Western, (Protestant) Christian, and colonial imposition in terms of its deployment; all traditions are inherently relational and syncretic rather than sitting in siloed bunkers distinct from each other; confessional claims can be made outside of specific traditions in terms of the typically historically delineated "religions" as we typically name them, i.e. via perennialist style theologies; theological and belief markers have never normally been key, and doing, practice, and strategic participation in rites and practices have been normative ways of doing "religion" through history.[14] TWW helps make clear that religions do not live in isolated and divided territories marked by clear borders; however, it is far from alone in such a claim and has not as yet added substantially to our understanding of this (though, as a young and growing program, it is perhaps a tall order to ask for it to have done so).

I have drawn a basic distinction above to separate confessional claims from scholarship: making truth claims versus examining and exploring such claims. In so far as the academy is a secular place (of course, there are religiously affiliated universities, but the study of religion may occur within a religious studies or academic theological framing), confessional claims about belief are left at the door. This distinction is actually not so simple; but, for now, I will park it here.

While it may be unfashionable these days to stress Enlightenment principles in academia, Immanuel Kant did sterling service in distinguishing between noumena and phenomena. Or, in terms meaningful here, between the metaphysical realm of claims to know that which falls outside human comprehension and relates to ultimacy, and that which falls within the limits of human socially constructed language and the realms of our embodied senses. Scholarship within the academy falls solely within the latter.[15] Now, I am of course aware, that various types of "postmoderns" (whatsoever that may mean) and "critical theorists" (in which number I would count myself) have subjected the Enlightenment legacy to severe critique, importantly from postcolonial, feminist, and other angles.[16] That goes as read.[17] But, the point is how would we—in any academically credible way—seek to study what the TWW project has sought to define as

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[14] For a contemporary overview of many of these key critical debates, see Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).
[15] This draws from Paul Hedges, "Encounters with Ultimacy? Autobiographical and Critical Perspectives in the Academic Study of Religion," *Open Theology* 4: 355–72.
[16] For some discussion of these terms, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 9–15, 50 box 2.5.
[17] Though, a great many of these post-Enlightenment types do seem to hold great store by a devotion to G.W.F. Hegel who they say validates their critical theorizing, despite him being the arch-metaphysician and unrepentant Orientalist, but that is another debate. On Hegel's orientalist legacy see, especially, Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

"ultimacy". All we see are competing forms of discourse. These may be identity claims or power claims and relate to such things as gender and colonialism.[18] In particular, claims to special experiences may be treated with suspicion in academic study, though confessional study may treat them with reverence, with a methodological agnosticism being arguably key in scholarly discourse.[19]

What We Can Study and How to Study It

TWW, it seems to me, would wish to dismiss the claims I have made above and opt instead to claim a direct access to knowledge about ultimate reality. Now, we could argue about whether Kant is correct about his noumena-phenomena distinction. There may be, assuming a certain posited form of ultimate reality exists (and let's not forget that we actually can't prove or disprove this one way or another—if TWW writers have the magic key to do this, perhaps they would be so kind as to enlighten the rest of us?), the potential for unmediated direct access to it, such that, for instance, certain religious/ mystical experiences may really be giving us knowledge of it. But how would we know? And, how would we know which ones to trust? In a far more sophisticated philosophy of religion approach than I have seen in TWW writings, John Hick sought to develop a theory for making sense of how a pluralist position could be posited assuming that an ultimate reality exists.[20] Note Hick's caveats that keep his work, I believe, bounded within scholarly discourse: he does not make a confessional claim but advances "an interpretation"; this interpretation is bounded within a hypothesis of how this would work if there were a common Real to which all these traditions responded (it was never in his scholarly works a claim that such a Real existed – his personal views advocating for pluralism go beyond this); and the claims made are within the claims made by the traditions about their access to ultimate reality, not claiming to be saying what ultimate reality itself is.[21]

Further, I am aware that at least some supporters of the TWW project will push back against these ideas, suggesting that normative claims could be clearly grounded within religious

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[18] See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapters 6, 5, 10, and 7, respectively

[19] See Hedges, "Encounters with Ultimacy," 360–-62, see also Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 197–99, on "mystical" experiences, and on methodological agnosticism, 49 box 2.4.

[20] The main mature outworking of Hick's pluralist hypothesis was John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), but this should be read alongside nuances, defenses, and alterations he made to his hypothesis over the years, most importantly in John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism* (London, SCM, 1995).

[21] It is often, erroneously, asserted that Hick's usage of Kant was posited upon a stark division of humanly knowable phenomena and an entirely unknowable and inaccessible noumena, however, a careful reading of Hick in his earlier work, and as clarified in his later work (see previous note) makes clear that his division is not the same as Kant's. Rather, for Hick, we have access to human traditions as phenomena about their experiences of a noumena as our main scholarly data. The noumena he believed, if we assume it exists based on reports, can be accessed, but is only known to most of us in terms of tradition-specific claims and reports about it. His usage drew from Kant's terminology to draw an important distinction, rather than manifesting a hardline Kantian division. This is explicated clearly also in Hick's sympathetic and fair commentators (against those who seek to draw an "easy" rhetorical score against Hick's ideas because this false representation makes Hick's hypothesis fail), see, for instance, Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 2010), 122-24, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Pluralisms: How to Approach Religious Diversity Theologically', in Paul Hedges and Alan Race (eds), *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (London: SCM, 2008): 85–110.

studies.[22] I would thank Bin Song for noting that one of these, Robert Neville, taught normative, i.e., confessional[23], philosophy of religion under the remit of religious studies at Boston University. (Indeed, philosophy of religion as a whole may be more inclined to normative judgements than I allow, but I think may also be done as a critical discipline.[24]) Neville has formulated the extremely impressive Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP). At least part of this sits comfortably within a religious studies remit, where the discourse of traditions is compared, and as Neville and Wesley Wildman note what they uncover is "what the religions we studied say about ultimate reality,"[25] rather than any claim about "ultimate reality" itself. Nevertheless, Neville's own more philosophical comparative work perhaps veers towards a confessional tone, though it is extremely rigorous and philosophically sophisticated.[26] But,

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[22] Some parts of this argument were first sent as an extended critique by email to the TWW book authors and has appeared on my blog.

[23] I realize that both Neville and Song would contest my representation of Neville's project as "confessional" as they present it as "normative" but not confessional (see Bin Song, "Robert C. Neville: A Systematic, Nonconformist, Comparative Philosopher of Religion," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 40.3 (2019): 11–30). However, I see Neville's project as "confessional", in my usage of that term, on two counts. First, Song argues that because Neville bases his enquiries upon a notion of fallibilism, whereby a supposedly open-ended investigation is undertaken, it is not limited to a single confessional norm. However, it starts very clearly within a Christian basis as its guiding norms and then calibrates this by comparison with other traditions. An argument herein is that such initial grounding is both inevitable and unavoidable, we are "confessional" in this sense whether we want to be or not. However, supposing that Neville's system allows him to avoid this locatedness of embodiment and tradition, this would make his work a form of perennialism, that takes as a starting point the belief that "ultimacy" (howsoever it is defined) exists across all traditions and that we simply combine these to reach the higher truth. As such, it takes a particular committed stance to begin. This must be seen in line with the second point, which is that by being normative, Neville presents his work as speaking about the truth of ultimacy, and so assumes that this noumenal (used in a Hickian sense, see note 20) is a quality or phenomena that exists or can be captured by such investigations; it makes what we may term, however inadequately, a religious claim. However, here, against Hick it rules out a priori the equally plausible hypothesis that there may be no noumenal reality, the atheistic or materialist interpretation may be correct. Hence, it locates itself within a confessional worldview. While it goes beyond the limits of this paper to discuss this, a further weakness of Neville's approach is its grounding in American Pragmatism (see Robert Neville, *Beyond the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 161 and Song, "Robert C. Neville," 12, 18). Such pragmatist philosophy, as well as being unable to internally ground its own definition of "usefulness" which is central to its *raison d'être*, lacks any internal mechanism to reflect critically upon its own categories, assumptions, and power dynamics, meaning that it needs to be supplemented by the kind of critical discourses that I mention herein. However, it would be the work of at least another paper to unpack these issues.

[24] It goes beyond the scope of this paper to engage what philosophy should or should not regard as its proper realm of discourse. However, one of my anonymous reviewers mentioned that TWW may fit within the philosophy of religion. Certainly, in as far as it addresses such things as arguments for the existence of a deity, religious pluralism as a stance, and other such matters, some philosophers of religion may see it as their aim to determine the truth or otherwise of statements and claims, and hence what may be normative or confessional truth claims. However, I would suggest that philosophy of religion when it is not stuck within the rut of a Western-centric, analytic epistemic frame would acknowledge (at least after Wittgenstein, if not after Kant) that language does not in and of itself grant us access to the reality denoted, and hence normative truth claims are not within the grasp of the philosophy of religion, hence its aims are more modest debates about the coherence of discourses and such matters.

[25] Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman, "Comparative Conclusions about Ultimate Realities," in *Ultimate Realities* (Comparative Religious Ideas Project series), ed. Robert Cummings Neville (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 151-85, 178.

[26] See Robert Cummings Neville, *The God Who Beckons: Theology in the Form of Sermons* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), Robert Cummings Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), and see also Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 14, 19. However, as I read it, Neville's work in this fashion is grounded in how traditions speak and so does not permit (though he may disagree) the jump to speak of ultimacy per se.

Neville's Comparative Religious Ideas Project only speaks about how human traditions speak about ultimate reality. This comparative work shows much commonality across traditions in terms of the human discourse they have created, and the possibility for speaking meaningfully across these traditions, including in constructive terms. This, notwithstanding pushback from some scholars in his Comparative Religious Ideas Project who believed that the traditions they spoke of (in this case, specially the Chinese ones) were not duly represented by the categories proposed, suggests the possibility of viable comparative work as I have argued elsewhere.[27] What, however, it does not do is provide us with access to "ultimacy", which is in part down to the limits of language, the power matrix of the traditions explored (primarily elite, male, etc.), and the fact that a non-religious answer makes as much sense of the world in which we live.[28] Indeed, while Neville suggests two reasons why TWW is important, I do not see this as overcoming the issues raised here. His reasons are: first, if we do it "*with* walls," then we only get "sociological" comparison of each community's claims, but he says "Most theologians are not satisfied with that and want their claims to be true"; second, we need people asking big questions about why the world exists, what matters in life and what is an ideal life, etc.[29] Yet, as to the first, I doubt that most "theologians", as Neville calls them, would be happy being told that they must blend their ideas into some form of common denominator in which their walls don't matter. We won't reach the truth by finding some liberal consensus on such questions.[30] All we have access to are the narratives of specific groups, in Brubaker's sense,[31] so variably socially conditioned narratives about ultimacy.

To go beyond this examination of human traditions is, I would suggest, with Kierkegaard, to take that leap of faith. It is to assert a particular version of claims as being true. Fine. Nothing wrong with this. But it is a confessional claim, not an academic one. One particular issue with such things as the TWW approach, which haunts much work in attempting to assert a pluralist theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, and needs unpacking by scholarship,[32] is that it takes a liberal approach in which it assumes that the "nice", "comforting", and "peace-loving" approaches represent "true religion." But, employing Scott Appleby's well-known phrase, what happens when we consider the "ambivalence of the sacred," the fact that these texts and traditions also give us justifications for war, slavery, genocide, and terrorism—and not simply in some aberrant forms, but in mainstream ways as we see in, as but one example, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the Doctor of Love of the Catholic Church, telling us that we should

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[27] See Paul Hedges, "Comparative Methodology and the Religious Studies Toolkit," in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*, ed. Perry Schmidt Leukel and Andreas Nehring (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 17-33, and Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 255-70.

[28] Paul Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue* (London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2017).

[29] Robert Cummings Neville, "Paideias and programs for Theology Without Walls," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 7-13, 12, italics in original.

[30] We may also wonder whether there is any "truth" out there, certainly in any big "T" sense, but rather may not whatever truths we find be relational and based in community and provisional as we learn more and develop?

[31] Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups," *Archives Européenes de Sociologie* 43.2 (2002): 163-89. Brubaker uses the term "group" to refer to the way that we, as humans, create specific "in-groups" and "out-groups" and assign identity to them. He notes the tendency in human thinking to what he terms "groupism", that is to ascribe permanency and reality to what are borders and barriers that only exist in human discourse (for instance, different racial or ethnic groups). Something similar, I think, occurs in the slippage we see in TWW thinking, where human claims about ultimate reality are then treated as direct experience and access to ultimate reality such that we can talk about it directly.

[32] For a critical assessment of interreligious dialogue, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 14.

slaughter Muslims without mercy as a Christian duty.[33] The exemplar of love mysticism it seems, did not have much love for many of his fellow creatures! While TWW may tell us about all the common "nice bits" and about a deity they want to believe in, it will not remain credible as scholarship as long as it keeps itself to its selective cherry picking (of course, all confessional claims do this, so it is not a particular fault of TWW, but it points to its lack of scholarly rigor).

That TWW's stated aims fall outside any critical or credible form of religious studies – as it is generally understood—I think goes without saying. Let me, nevertheless, note that there is no single and clear "secular" that can be identified apart from how we also define the realm of "religion", with these two terms acting as important markers for how contemporary society is classified.[34] While secularism is not, *per se*, hostile to religion—and may even embrace certain forms of religiosity[35]—the distinction between accepting confessional claims as a basis for ordering society and thinking, and not accepting such confessional claims for this is widely accepted. In this sense, in as far as it wishes to make normative claims about some form of ultimate reality, TWW is doing something which lies outside the academic religious studies remit within the contemporary academy as I have noted above. Of course, an argument could be made that the secular-religious divide is problematic, based in a Western and distinctly Protestant milieu and does not reflect a wider global picture of how religion may or should be studied, and I would fully accept the basis of this argument. Indeed, this may be the one major failing of my argument here: that I demand of TWW adherence to a specific secular-religious divide which demarcates the study of religion as non-confessional from confessional theology, a divide which I have elsewhere sharply critiqued because of its colonial and neocolonial prejudices, and also for its imposition of white, Western, masculinist norms.[36] Nevertheless, I believe that this is not the only rationale on which we must make the distinction I am arguing for here. Indeed, from these liberative lenses I will argue that TWW fails. Moreover, while space does not permit me to make the argument at length, I see the work of religious studies as I envisage it here as part of an important separation of society from the power claims of specific elites (typically, but not always, founded in those discourses we would term "religions" which would delimit human freedoms). I suggest that even without the secular-religion divide we must still be able to critically analyze truth claims (claims to ultimacy, truth, or the sacred, variously conceptualized) rather than only substantiate such claims or simply support specific ones. Even without positing secularism, an analytic distinction exists between promoting certain normative claims, and the open-ended and critical enquiry into such claims. I should stress here that, in part at least, my argument is a pragmatic one rather than one that may be fully analytic. That is, if the religion-secular binary is itself constructed and not stable, any distinction between confessional (insider / religious / theological) and scholarly (outsider / non-religious / not theological) will itself be unstable. However, there remain what I would term "real" differences in terms of the praxis and in the

[33] See Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 73. Also, Paul Hedges, "Identity, Prejudice, and Mysticism: Exploring Sustainable Narratives of Peace Across Religious Borders," conference paper delivered at "Mystical Traditions: Approaches to Peaceful Coexistence" conference, Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and Nazareth College (24 May 2021, online).
[34] For a recent, critical survey, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 373-88.
[35] See Paul Hedges, "The Secular Realm as Interfaith Space: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Multicultural Nation-States,' *Religions* 10.9.498 (2019): 1-15
[36] These arguments are made variously within Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, see especially Introduction and chapters 5, 7, and 10.

lived, material dynamics of the varying approaches, which justifies a pragmatic distinction that is adequate for analytic purposes.[37]

TWW, CT, and Scholarship

To some extent the above discussion may be seen as moot, as TWW does not claim to be religious studies, but places itself as theology. As an academic discipline, theology plays within the rules of scholarship, though, with Wittgenstein, we may note a variety of games of scholarship rather than there being a single one. I have above noted the distinction of academic and confessional theology, but we can expand and ask: as an academic subject what does it do? I will note a number of possibilities: exploring the historical trajectories of traditions as intellectual and social formations (historical theology); engaging philosophically with the claims of a particular tradition in terms of its rationale and beliefs (systematic theology); engaging philosophy as the primary tool to assess religious claims without recourse to such things as revelation (philosophical theology); seeking to engage with ways that social-psychological well-being may be enhanced by engaging traditional resources and human understanding (pastoral theology); exploring the philosophical limits and boundaries of traditions with a view to suggesting what further claims may be made about the beliefs and teachings of that tradition (constructive theology); engaging in in-depth readings of another tradition to suggest constructive philosophical formulations of the tradition (comparative theology); engaging with various disciplines to equip theological traditions with tools to engage a specific context or issue (e.g. feminist, postcolonial, contextual, etc.). This list is by no means definitive. Now, in all of these, theology engages the claims made by a tradition in relation to forms of academic reasoning. What it does not do *qua* scholarship, is claim that it is making direct claims about ultimacy, or whatever it says that is.

Now, and here the waters get muddy, what happens when somebody working as an academic theologian grounds their work in certain norms, e.g., a Roman Catholic or Muslim theologian (i.e., doing confessional theology). As an example, I would note the work of Francis Clooney who, following Anselm, has said that his CT is "faith seeking understanding."[38] Now, in this mode, CT combines comparative religion, academic theology, and confessional theology. Clooney may, for instance, work through the commentarial tradition of Srivaishnava and Catholic texts, comparing them as an expert scholar. Indeed, he stands as one of the world's foremost scholars of Srivaishnavism, and what often marks his work out is an incredible knowledge of the tradition to which he does not belong. Compared to the CT of Keith Ward, which may be said to be more like comparative religion, Clooney's is arguably marked both by a strong scholarly depth within religious studies but is also confessional. (That the work of many we may see as confessional theologians is sometimes more scholarly sophisticated than the work of some who may claim to be strictly secular religious studies scholars is another entanglement here.) However, even while placing himself within a confessional frame, I find much of Clooney's work passing muster as academic theology (though I realize that others may wish to draw the line

[37] The arguments behind this can hardly be unpacked here. But, roughly, as finite, embodied creatures evolved for hunting and gathering on the plains, forests, etc., we are not designed to accurately and definitively establish truth claims, but this does not mean that we cannot, as embodied creatures, make good enough assumptions about our world. For some wider epistemic and hermeneutic thinking on this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, while I am working on a future monograph exploring the theoretical parameters behind the possibility of the study of religion that will address such questions.

[38] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11. But CT need not be confessional, see Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 10-14.

differently) as his work explores the claims of these traditions. While he may make some normative suggestions or take devotional inspiration from this, he does not venture to make claims about where "ultimacy" sits in all of this. (There may be a pragmatic aspect in this given his role as a Catholic theologian.) Like Hick, perhaps, he offers a theory, or a reading, from his evidence.

There is no stark division between somebody doing theology, as a confessional act, and somebody studying religion, as a secular act. Indeed, the division between what we term religion and many other worldviews or ideologies is a porous and thin one, such that we cannot neatly delineate theology/ religion as wholly distinct from many other forms of human meaning making. Nevertheless, as I have indicated, I think we still have an important distinction between work grounded at its base in claims to be able to know about some posited reality *per se*, working as such within a confessional boundary which shuts off certain limits (which, despite its claims to be "without walls" is exactly what TWW, it seems to me, does), and open-ended enquiry into human traditions, discourse, and praxis. Moreover, what I would see as important in the latter is an engagement with contemporary scholarly tools to look at power claims, critical voices in how discourse is constructed, and the silencing of certain voices.[39]

In this sense, TWW, as Martin perceives it, seeks to make a type of claim that exceeds any scholarly discourse, and even some forms of confessional theology. Indeed, some norms must exist to make claims about what ultimacy is. Such claims, of course, are based in human and socially created forms of discourse, and are not based in some imagined sphere of "Theology" that has direct access to ultimacy *per se*. Not only is it not doing theology, or scholarship, as it exists after Kant, but TWW also fails to take account of any contemporary scholarly perspectives which show how power, standpoint, or other factors affect our perceptions and also how (even what) we perceive.[40] As such, we see various stances in the TWW, despite its supposed academic pedigree, that show a confessional or dilettante engagement with whatever theology or scholarship may be seen as today. It becomes a way for people to advance their own personal belief systems and claim them as academically validated stances.

A few examples from the pages of the TWW book, may make this clear. Firstly, some writers seem to work within a deeply monotheistic frame, and so we read: "The history of every theology begins with a revelation of some sort – the deity has conveyed its presence through some natural mediation, usually oracular or prophetic, the presence of the divine word and image."[41] Clearly the Buddha's realization lies outside the walls for certain of those who claim to be without walls. But the more serious point here is that TWW seems to operate on the assumption that we readily jump from specific human discourse into claims about ultimate reality without any

[39] This takes me back to the earlier discussion about the problems of the Western and colonial construction of "secularism" and "religion" which grounded the distinction I made between what might legitimately partake in the scholarly (*qua* secular) study of religion and what lay beyond that (*qua* confessional theology). I do not wish to delimit scholarship to only those who use the "correct" critical tools, say the right "politically correct" things, or ask certain questions, but this I think helps ground my distinction in a way that avoids aspects of its colonial and racist heritage by noting that such open-ended enquiry is also a site of contestation against this heritage, even if this may be a paradoxical relationship.

[40] The sexist, ableist, colonial, and various other frames that shape much traditional "God-talk" should make it clear that many problems arise if the claim is that we jump from such claims to knowing ultimate reality itself!

[41] Kurt Anders Richardson, "Theology Without Walls as open-field theology," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 35–47, 38.

recognition of the power dynamics of the language and discourse that formulate our norms, and so fails to be alert to feminist, decolonial, or other critical perspectives. Again, for others, the naturalness of a white, middle-class, American, consumer culture dictate what religion should be, so we read that we must "formulate a theology of religions" that foregrounds "human choice" else we will "regress to a naïve religious era…in which religious traditions were reified."[42] Notwithstanding, that the author here is correct that Robert Bellah lacked the conceptual awareness of Sheila to make sense of her religious choices, and far from being aberrant such syncretic lived religion is quite normative,[43] the author seems blissfully unaware that for vast swathes of humanity, both historically and now, the limits of their potential adherence to religious traditions is prescribed by such factors as class, race, geography, family tradition, etc. Free choice may appeal to an American religious individualist as the correct way to formulate our theories, but it is not a critical lens. Even when critical perspectives in the study of religion are taken on board, they seem to be done in a somewhat simplistic fashion, so we read: "Agreement concerning belief and practices clump together," and scholars classify these into "religions" with "five large clumps: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism," (amongst other "smaller clumps") which it is noted is "not a perfect representation of human religiosity" but "does reveal an important fact of human experience" that they relate to "human communities."[44] Here, despite acknowledgement of the problem of the world religions paradigm, it does not seem to be critically understood, with an assumption being that these traditions neatly map different vectors of religiosity divided by language and geography, with little understanding of the internal diversity of each tradition, nor the history of syncretic blending that informs each one, coupled with a failure to reflect upon the fact that these have often not formed the major bonds of difference in terms of religiosity in many cases.[45]

These examples have not been picked out because they are egregious examples of bad practice, rather each one—despite other potential strengths in each essay—gives a useful example of certain issues that seem to beset TWW. As advanced, it seems to be a project that takes little serious account of contemporary critical questions in scholarship and follows a somewhat naïve Western parochialism in which patriarchal, colonial, classist, and other critiques are held to be no bar to its quest for perennial vision that can simply be grasped by white men if they are willing to move beyond their own specific religious affiliation. In these terms, I may draw upon an argument made by Willie James Jennings that certain traditional modes of Western scholarship assume what he terms "white masculinist self-sufficiency" which he describes as "a way of being in the world that aspires to exhibit possession, mastery, and control of knowledge first, and of one's self second, and if possible of one's world."[46] In other words, knowledge may be grasped and possessed decontextually by the white, male knower without concern for the locatedness of the knower, an issue I develop further below.

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[42] Christopher Denny, "Revisiting Bellah's Sheila in a religiously pluralist century," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 25–34, 32.
[43] See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 67–81.
[44] J. R. Hustwitt, "Dialogue and transreligious understanding: A hermeneutical approach," in Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls*: *The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 153–64, 156.
[45] On these issues, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, especially chapters 1, 3, 7, and 13.
[46] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 29, but see also *passim*.

TWW and the SBNR

Now, the above is not to suggest that some versions of a TWW may not be valid in other terms. The possibility exists for it to shape itself as a set of confessional theological reflections, though it may want to claim its confessional stance somewhat differently, that is to say without a particular tradition-based setting but in some free-floating realm of open enquiry; though, as noted above, there can be no free-floating realm of ideas because we all come with particular backgrounds, agendas, and preconceptions whether we recognize it or not.[47] Some have suggested that for the spiritual but not religious community (SBNRs; I use SBNRs to refer to people identified with this—as opposed to SBNR, which I use to speak about it as a concept), TWW may be a way to shape a theology. However, one question which arises is to whom this speaks? Do SBNRs want a theology? Indeed, is not the construction of a theology to account for the phenomenon of SBNR somewhat counterproductive to some aims of SBNRs to avoid a particular confessional stance. As noted above, any theology will come from somewhere and cannot be entirely free-floating and universal. Further, the idea of a "theology" may itself be something which does not appeal.[48] Moreover, if SBNRs wish to forge, it may be posited, their own individual spiritual pathways, does not a single (or any?) theology also run counter to this? Indeed, in the TWW book, Linda Mercadante deals with just this question, and concludes that "At the moment, the focus on self-authority, individualism, and distrust of institutions stands in the way of creating an SBNR theology that could be widely accepted."[49] Nevertheless, she certainly hopes that theology may in time become a tool that can be used to "excavate their buried beliefs and recognize that a disharmony… often hinders fulfilment, community, and spiritual growth."[50] Mercadante's views arise from her own fieldwork amongst the SBNRs, while elsewhere the various religious stances of those outside the folds of conventional religious belonging have been studied, who may be classed as SBNRs, "nones," or as part of non-religion.[51] Mercadante's work is part of an important body that shifts away from seeing the SBNR form of religion as illegitimate, but she seems to take a prescriptive stance in which it is assumed that to become a proper group they must veer towards having a developed theological standpoint.

In various ways the position of SBNRs can be described, as I suggested in my contribution to the TWW book, as a perfectly intelligible and credible way of doing "religion" when seen in a wider global context. But that is very different from seeking to create a system of theology, however wall-less it may be, for this group who have not requested it, and are by their nature incredibly diverse. My argument relates the contemporary Western (and more global it

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[47] Gadamer's notion of prejudice would be pertinent here, see, e.g., Paul Hedges, "Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 4 (2016): 5–26.

[48] While somewhat tangential to my argument here, it could be argued that an intersectional comparative theology (or theology of religions, theology without walls, etc.) should be alert not just to the problems of the term "religion" in deciding its parameters, but also both "comparative" and "theology" as markers denoting particular contextual ways of thinking and doing the work. This is not the place, however, to pursue this further.

[49] Linda Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls: Is a theology for SBNRs possible?" in *Theology Without Walls*: *The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 189–200, 198.

[50] Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls," 198. Regarding this, the assumption that "belief" is the defining category may be noted as a problematic trope in thinking "religion," see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

[51] See Linda Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), see also Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Oliver Zakai Lim, "The Construction of Nonreligious Identities among Chinese Millennials in Singapore: A Qualitative Study," *Interreligious Relations* 23 (2021).

must be said) phenomenon of SBNRs to traditional Chinese (and more widely East Asian) patterns of religiosity that I term strategic religious participation (SRP) in a shared religious landscape (SRL).[52] In this context, most people did not belong to any specific "religion" (itself not a native term), but moved freely between the utilization of resources and ideas by each of the main and lesser traditions (i.e. Confucian social mores, Daoist rituals, Buddhist death rites, folk religion practices). Moreover, unlike Western notions of religion where crossing "borders" is seen as some form of illegitimate confusion or syncretism, this was just assumed as natural and normative because, to some degree, a wider cosmological theory was seen to be shared across all the traditions, hence they existed within an SRL. Notably, this applied at both elite and popular levels (while in the former there may have been a clearer home tradition, this did not disallow training, participation or learning in/from another tradition). Mercadante certainly points to aspects of a SRL amongst SBNRs,[53] however, for most people in the context of a traditional SRP in an SRL context a worked through theology was not needed. Indeed, such "theological" speculation took place within the context of the various elite traditions to a greater or lesser extent, but it related to areas where we see a more distinctly "confessional" set of borders. For instance, Buddhists would interpret the world through a Buddhist lens which would position Confucian and Daoist traditions in relation to it, and vice versa. As such, it is hard to envisage a theological system—which seems necessitated *qua* system—that does not act to exclude as much as include. TWW imagines itself without borders, but as noted in at least one example above it draws, inevitably, upon certain norms—in the case noted that a theology must have revelation imparted by a deity, which would immediately alienate many Buddhists and indeed many SBNRs.

Now, an interreligious theology that does not feel bound by confessional borders (a comparative theology "after religion", we may suggest) may be constructed. [54] But, at least two issues remain. First, to be a scholarly and academic form of theology it would not assert claims about "ultimacy" but would be working within the discourse of the traditions themselves (as in Neville's CRIP). It would be perfectly possible to construct a confessional SBNR or interreligious theology, but TWW seems to want to have its cake and eat it by being both bounded by distinct confessional claims yet also claiming to be an open-ended scholarly enquiry that just works from evidence (rather than confessional groundings). Second, as indicated above, it would perforce be a grounded and confessional work. Even if we supposed that the theistic claims of TWW noted above are taken as an anomaly, and just the preference of one person rather than speaking for the project (though that it calls itself "theology" and assumes we can readily identify a clear and absolute "ultimate reality"—"the *logos* of *theos*"[55]—tells us something about its grounding and presuppositions!), I fail to see how it would ever get to never having any walls. For instance, is an atheist stance as valid as a theistic or "religious" one? Are we all composed of *qi* (in Chinese cosmology the psycho-somatic reality out of which everything is created) or are matter and spirit different? Is a monistic (Advaitin) interpretation of reality inherently superior to a theistic interpretation? Is there one absolute or many absolutes? I could go on, but I think the point is

[52] For a more detailed study of this, see Paul Hedges, "Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model," *Open Theology* 3.1 (2017): 48-72.
[53] Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls," 192–94.
[54] See, as an example, John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020).
[55] Martin, "Introduction," 1.

made. To some extent, of course, TWW could resort to a Hickian pluralism and leave all these questions undetermined and unknowable in our current context, but assuming an equality of spiritual paths. However, TWW has determined that it can access ultimate reality and tell us about it in a way that seems to me far more resolutely than any scholarly permutation of pluralism. Meanwhile, we also see those who believe that they can learn across religious borders, but see this—legitimately I think—as inevitably grounded in a tradition. John Thatamanil has recently expounded a Christian program for interreligious learning across borders,[56] Paul Knitter has argued that Christians can learn from Buddhists and that one can be both,[57] while within SBNR one could draw from various sources without privileging a single one as a "home" tradition, but there would still be grounding beliefs and ideas. Contrary to some idealism, a TWW must, it seems, have a home.

Circling Back: A Decolonial Lens

In recent decades, a concern with decolonizing scholarship and the public space in the study of religion and interreligious studies has become prominent.[58] One might expect a new arising field or discipline to be alert to this, but one would be hard pressed to find much awareness about this in TWW. For instance, a critique that Leo Lefebure raises is that its arguments for the ready crossing between religious traditions speaks into the attitude, often termed appropriation, of Westerners that the resources of the world can be freely taken for their needs.[59] A situatedness of white, middle-class, American privilege seems to be the norm from which the book is written, where personal choice of religion is asserted as a norm.[60] Taking on board insights from Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller, its theoretical base remains highly white-centric, as has been noted of much scholarship in the study of religion.[61] In other words, the basic epistemic starting point for reflection operates from the presuppositions of those in the situation of global hegemonic power in ways that have been racialized by Euro-American ideology since around the

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[56] Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*.

[57] See Paul Knitter, "My Buddha-nature and my Christ-nature," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 65–72, but more fully in Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2009). I may note here that in the TWW book many of the strongest essays, it seemed to me, where by those already known for work in CT, e.g. John Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls as the quest for interreligious wisdom," 53–64, Knitter, "My Buddha-nature and my Christ-nature," 65-72, Francis Clooney, "Strong walls for an open faith," 213–26, and Hyo-Dong Lee "My path to a theology of Qi," 234–42 stand out. Other insightful essays also came from Neville, "Paideias and programs for Theology Without Walls", 7–13, Peter Feldmeier, "Is Theology Without Walls workable? Yes, no, maybe," 109–18, Johan de Smedt and Helen de Cruz, "Cognitive science of religion and the nature of the divine: a pluralist, nonconfessional approach," 128–37, Jeanine Diller, "How to think globally and affiliate locally," 172–88, and Long "A Hinduism without walls? Exploring the concept of the avatar interreligiously," 227–33.

[58] Paul Hedges "Decolonising Interreligious Studies," in *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from a Field*, ed. Hans Gustafson, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press,), 164–70; and on the public space, see Paul Hedges, "The Global BLM Movement: Public Memorials and Neo-Decolonisation?," *RSIS Commentary* CO20127 (2020), available at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp- content/uploads/2020/06/CO20127.pdf.

[59] Leo Lefebure, "Theology, Walls, and Christian Identity: A Review Essay," *Salaam* 41.2 (2020): 100-107.

[60] Mercadante delivers a similar charge of "spiritual privilege" to SBNRs but fails to note the same malaise within the TWW project, see Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls," 190.

[61] Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller, *Method as Identity: Manufacturing Distance in the Academic Study of Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019). Their critique is of religious studies rather than theology, but the point remains pertinent.

sixteenth century.[62] This relates to the notion of white masculinist self-sufficiency raised by Jennings and noted above. For instance, there seems little awareness of the problematic Western and Protestant norms around terms such as "religion", "spirituality", or "secularism". Simply engaging many religions from around the world is not the same as taking on board postcolonial or decolonial critiques, and a lack of authors, theorists, and perspectives from non-white, non-Western grounds may be noted. The exceptions to this include Jeffery Long's essay citing Vivekananda as an example from beyond the West, Hedges' essay which goes beyond typically Western ways of imagining religion, and Hyo-Dong Lee's essay drawing from his Korean context, with the latter standing as a lone explicit Asian(-American) voice.[63] It is not, of course, to say that TWW may not resonate with some scholars from Asia, Africa, or elsewhere beyond the Western world, and at least one Ru (Confucian) scholar has written in sympathy for the project for seeing it offering a perspective beyond the domination of Western, Protestant perspectives in the study of religion.[64] Of course, this is also not to suggest that the work of white, Western, males is in any way inherently less legitimate *per se* (Jennings notes that people of color or women may, as much as white men, exemplify his white masculinist self-sufficiency), hence my critique does not concern directly the fact that TWW arises within the Western and principally from male writers. Rather, as I hope has been shown above, it sits, at best, uncritically in relation to a colonial and patriarchal legacy of knowledge construction, at worst it perpetuates systems of knowing that proceed from the presumed universalism of white epistemic norms and values in which white mastery may be claimed over other ways of knowing and thinking without consideration of the locatedness of ideas and concepts.

Also, here, I must come back to my issue raised above, that a potential critique undermining my arguments is that I have started with a secular-religious divide that is implicit in exactly the forms of power dynamics which I have argued haunt TWW. Nevertheless, as I argued above, framing a space free from confessional control for open enquiry strikes me as a necessity for a liberative scholarly praxis, though the space does not permit this particular point to be argued through.

Concluding Thoughts

A certain naivety seemingly underlies the desire to create a TWW, for we can never leave behind our own walls and presuppositions. We are located and that location shapes us. Every theological speculation is located within certain boundaries, and a Western, even white, Christian sensibility that seems highly uncritical of its own locatedness (in terms of such issues as race, gender, class, geography) seemingly besets TWW's speculations. Therefore, in the area that TWW has intervened, there is already, I would suggest, far more nuanced and skillful expositions in such areas as CT, the theology of religions, and in intercultural, decolonial, and postcolonial theologies. TWW remains, largely, a place for white, Western, American middle-class men to

[62] On the development of Western racism and its imbrication with Christianity, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, chapter 5. For a wider discussion on some issues around race and religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 174–77.
[63] See Long, "A Hinduism without walls," Hedges, "Strategic religious participation," Lee, "My path to a theology of Qi." Thatamanil's essay is also by an Asian American, but he does not draw on his Indian heritage nor postcolonial thought as such in this essay, unlike in many other works—this may be suggestive that a TWW agenda may encourage a more Western-centric engagement than one critically engaged with a decolonising lens.
[64] Bin Song, review of *Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative*, edited by Jerry Martin, *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 32 (March 2021): 107–110.

assert their belief that they remain unbounded by any ties and can take as they wish from any part of the world (it is, it may be suggested, even a neoliberal and capitalist spirituality or theology[65]). This locatedness will also, I have argued, make it an unviable starting place for seeking a theology for SBNRs, who may well not appreciate the proffered attempt.

I have offered here quite a sharp critique, but I hope not an unfriendly one. I find many of its current working premises and trends to be somewhat worrying, and my call is for a better TWW, but this—I suspect—may be found beyond the walls of TWW itself.

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[65] I have not directly raised this issue above, but see, for instance, Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), and Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 135-37, for a discussion and critique of such approaches.