Theology Without Walls's Potential as Decolonial & Democratic Praxis: A Response[1]

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Following brief reflections on the papers in this issue, I offer a vision of Theology Without Walls (TWW) as a "beloved community of religious diversity." I argue for such a community as an appropriate, and needed, aspect of "secular" university life in a religiously pluralistic, democratic society, where multiplicities of perspectives and approaches toward the nature of reality can engage in transformative existential encounters, intimate dialogue, and healing interpretive praxis. With help from civil rights leader and scholar Vincent Harding, as well Chicana, lesbian, race, and gender theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, I discuss the importance of imaginary, liminal spaces for decolonial, democratic praxis. I then introduce a new term of discourse, rhetoric of the secular, to denote ways in which such perspectives are domesticated, disregarded, and/or disqualified from academia. I also discuss a penetrating analysis from Global Majority Sikh scholar Arvind Mandair, on the ways in which secularist stances enact a "repetition of the colonial event." Finally, I respond in depth to Paul Hedges's critique of TWW found in this issue, highlighting how his critique engages in "rhetoric of the secular," and actively works against decolonial and democratic praxis. My response to Hedges's critique has salience far beyond the TWW project, opening up a wider discussion around issues of coloniality, academia's place within religiously diverse democracies, and the politics of what counts as "scholarship" in such milieus. I argue throughout that to grant a diversity of perspectives and orientations the moniker of "scholarship" is also to engage in decolonial and democratic praxis.

Keywords: religion, Gloria Anzaldúa, decolonial, democracy, secular, religious studies, beloved community, imagination

[T]he labor of imagining the human—and that after all is what both secular theories of religion and religiously informed theories of religion seek to do—enjoy equal epistemological status. Neither can reasonably claim to be neutral or to enjoy privileged standing. Neither can credibly claim to possess a critical self-consciousness lacking in the other.
—John Thatamanil, "Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich"[2]

For I say at the core of democracy, finally is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there.
—Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas"[3]

I would like to thank Jeanine Diller and Linda Mercadante for putting together this panel at the 2021 American Academy of Religion annual conference, and Mark Heim for suggesting it. I would also like to thank Jerry Martin, for his tireless work on the Theology Without Walls (TWW) project. A great deal of appreciation is due as well to my fellow panelists, who provided a welcoming atmosphere in which to explore these thoughts. Finally, an acknowledgement of

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[1] Much of this essay is adapted from a book-in-progress based upon dissertation research, tentatively titled "*Towards a Beloved Community of Religious Diversity*"

[2] John J. Thatamanil, "Comparing Professor's Smith and Tillich: A Response to Jonathan Z. Smith's 'Tillich('s) Remains," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (December 2010), 1178.

[3] Walt Whitman, "Democratic Vistas" (1871, reis., *Walt Whitman: Complete Poetry and Prose* (New York: Library of America, 1982), 949.

gratitude to Bin Song, our guest editor for this series, and to Axel Marc Oaks Takacs as editor-in-chief of JIRS.

The AAR panel explored possible relationships between spiritual but not religious folk (SBNRs) and the nascent TWW project, offering a diverse and reflective group of papers to respond to. As a scholar who thinks and writes generally from a critical-contemplative-philosophical perspective with liberative leanings, they resonated strongly with questions I myself have been pondering lately. These questions revolve around issues of democratic and decolonial praxis, as well as my context as a citizen of the United States. I must apologize ahead of time for being unable to cover the breadth of these essays in depth, and for the ones that receive short shrift (or no shrift) from me. Sections of my response had to be removed as it grew overly long.

The essay begins with reflections on a number of the papers presented, followed by a discussion of TWW as a scholarly inflected "beloved community of religious diversity." I then consider matters of democratic and decolonial praxis as aspects of TWW's potential. In the penultimate section, I offer a sustained rejoinder to Paul Hedges's broad critique of the TWW project found in this issue of JIRS. Though I disagree with Hedges's line of approach, his critique serves as an opening for TWW to confront head-on the issues he raises. I find that a response to Hedges's critique has salience far beyond the TWW project, opening up a wider discussion around issues of coloniality, academia's place within religiously diverse democracies, and the politics of what counts as "scholarship" in such milieus.

A Question for Kate Stockley's "Consciousness Hackers"

Kate Stockley's essay highlights areas of exploration between technology and spirituality, among so-called "consciousness hackers" and "enlightenment engineers." Utilizing various technological feats—such as mapping the brainwave patterns of advanced contemplatives and then aiming to recreate a semblance of these brainwave patterns in others, virtual reality (VR) experiences, neurofeedback loops, and even AI spiritual guides—these avant-garde practitioners are hoping to accelerate the spiritual maturation of humanity. I was heartened to hear Stockley mention the motivations behind these efforts is not simply a desire for a "spiritual high," but rather to serve others and the planet through hearkening a spiritual evolution. That does seem like a worthwhile calling, or vocation.

I must admit to being somewhat hesitant about the efficacy of such efforts. Yet I was surprised to learn about Shinzen Young, a Shingon monk with fifty years of meditation practice who found his meditation deepened through the use of such technologies. This seems to be a promising sign. I think close collaboration between advanced contemplatives, who (at the current time at least) will likely come from within religious traditions, and interspiritual adventurers exploring the frontiers of emergent religio-spiritual possibility, is something of a *sin qua non* for a healthy ongoing development, and part of the promise of TWW. As an example of how such partnerships might be fruitful, I wonder how a technologically induced brain state in a beginning practitioner—which might arguably result in a radical departure from one's everyday consciousness, perhaps in some sense akin to psychedelic drugs—differs from what might be experienced more as a gentle nudge, or perhaps a subtle opening of possibility, for an advanced contemplative. That is, without the discerning eye of fifty years of meditation practice, how do technological boosts function and play out over the long haul of a spiritual path? These are

important questions that can only be answered over time, with guidance from those who bring decades of practice and experience to bear. Such partnerships are at the heart of the interspiritual endeavor, as I see it, and appeared to be important for a number of the "consciousness hackers" Stockley discussed, such as Jefferey Martin.

Katherine Janiec Jones' "Efficacious Mishmash" and Hans le Grand's Theology for "Religious Seekers"

Katherine Janiec Jones' paper brought up what I find to be an essential point when discussing an SBNR-TWW connection: naming the *pedagogical* importance of these discourses for public life. Jones sees in "student's demands for a better world" a sentiment that resonates with TWW's call for a "theological method that loosens its vice-like grip on walls." Many students, not just in theology, but also in secular departments such as religious studies, contemplative studies, and philosophy, are interested in exploring what a spiritual orientation might mean for them, as well as for the broader society in which they live. Religious studies scholar Linell Cady, for instance, worries about an "impoverishment of religious studies" if the drive to push out all "theological" reflection was ever successful, mainly in making it "unresponsive to the clearly existential motivations and concerns that drive most of its students."[4] Cady also points out that traditional religious institutions no longer have the legitimacy, for many, to address such existential concerns.

The ability to explore and develop one's own religious, secular, or spiritual orientation in conversation with, perhaps even guidance from, humanity's experiments over thousands of years in enacting a spiritually efficacious life—and to do so amongst an interested group of peers involved in similar projects—seems to me an eminently reasonable, and democratically important, function of the "secular" (think "pluralized") academy.[5] I would argue that the need to be "caretakers"—not for any specific religious attitude or ontological orientation, but for our *democracy*—means caring for students who enter into university life with a longing to explore for themselves, *and for society*, a greater depth and meaning to life. To do so is to strive for the multifarious democratic becoming that I find irresistibly championed by Walt Whitman, among others, to nurture the impulses of those who wish to think reflectively, responsibly, and ethically about matters of religious, spiritual, and socio-political importance, especially in dialogue with one another.

I found convincing Jones's point that what is of most importance is not necessarily a coherent *methodology* for such students, but rather a willingness to live into the experiment itself. Perhaps one might return to the etymological roots of "methodology"—*met/hodos,* "in pursuit of a way," or even "with on the way," connoting a sense of the companions accompanying one along a "way." What Jones calls the "efficacious mishmash" that results from years of involving oneself in such interspiritual impulses, is then less about having a particular experience or understanding as about gaining a spiritual "know-how" that can serve others, spontaneously, in the unique

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[4] Linell E. Cady, "Territorial Disputes: Religious Studies and Theology in Transition," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University: Conflicting Maps, Changing Terrain,* ed. by Linell Cady and Delwin Brown (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002), 111.

[5] By reframing the secular as pluralistic I follow a number of other scholars, for example see Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007); and Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

context of *this* moment, *this* situation. Such transformative explorations may work almost unconsciously, manifesting their efficaciousness only intermittently throughout our lives, and this generally parallels the teachings of many contemplative traditions.

The goal then is not necessarily a dogmatic description of the nature of reality to which one assents (or "believes"), nor a particular experience, mystical or otherwise—but rather an embodied, transformational process through which one develops over time a kind of a contemplative know-how that can serve others in any situation. The idea of "experience" as embodying pragmatic "know-how" is well-developed in the classical American philosophical tradition. Here, experience is related to the idea of "being experienced," like a sailor who brings with her a wealth of knowledge that guides spontaneous action in the face of various circumstances confronted upon the open seas. Religious studies scholar Jefferey Kripal suggests below that comparative work within the professional study of religion provides some introductory "experience" in this regard, offering "navigation techniques" for those who find themselves adrift on an open sea of religious and spiritual possibility.

It was interesting to ponder the juxtaposition between Hans le Grand's presentation on our panel, which concentrated on the importance of developing efficacious theological frameworks for "religious seekers," and Jones' emphasis on the messiness of life—and how frameworks may matter less when the need for action in the moment arises. I think both have role to play, and the importance of developing individuated, efficacious frameworks for spiritual maturation is one of the most important labors for interspiritual practitioners, and perhaps the most fecund connection between TWW and SBNRs. I wonder, though, might there also be a place for messiness and even incoherence within an efficacious framework? I have percolating in the back of my mind teachings from numerous contemplative traditions about the value of unknowing, even incoherence, for spiritual growth itself, such as a Zen koan or the "dark night of the soul" as explicated by St. John of the Cross. Can one strive to become aware of incoherencies, and yet learn to live within the tensions, perhaps eventually learning to live within a liminal space itself? Of course, such contemplative teachings also assume the full commitment of practitioners for years, decades, perhaps even lifetimes, of practice. Such teachings also bring up substantive questions as to what the nature of reality actually *is*, as well as what is the role of concepts and frameworks (as well as spiritual experiences) in orienting one within it.

Jeffrey Kripal's "Underdeveloped Mysticism" in Comparative Keys

Panelists received two essays by Jeff Kripal, as well as a wonderful panel presentation from him. Unfortunately, Kripal was unable to prepare a formal essay for this journal issue, but given that his essays resonated strongly with my own recent thinking—particularly in his desire to open up academic thought to more capacious ontological possibilities—I have included my brief response to them here. In the first essay, "Changed in a Flash: Kabbalistic Motifs in a Modern Jewish Visionary," Kripal discusses otherworldly, synchronicitous experiences of a contemporary "Jewish visionary" that ask us to "query our present flatland metaphysics."[6] Kripal's rendering of Elizabeth Krohn's near-death experience, and its subsequent eerie connections with the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, is but one example of quite literally thousands, even millions, of experiential

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[6] See Elizabeth Greenfield Krohn and Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Changed in a Flash: One Woman's Near-Death Experience and Why a Scholar Thinks It Empowers Us All* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2018).

examples that challenge the preferential treatment given to certain ontological orientations within academia (usually revolving around a hard social constructivism or scientific materialism). Kripal believes that such ontological straitjackets "prevent us from seeing, much less understanding, the fantastic comparative patterns that are in fact everywhere in the history of religions." For his part, Kripal sees extraordinary experiences happening everywhere, and thus feels it is our job, as scholars, to normalize them through the use of imagination, where the study of religion can serve as a "philosophical tonic" that challenges materialistic ontologies.[7]

In a second essay on the logic of comparative studies and SBNRs, Kripal sounds a similar theme, questioning "unquestioned dogmas and unexamined philosophical positions" that block roads of academic inquiry.[8] He sees negative consequences not only for research directions, *but also for our public life*, and this is a crucial point to make that resonates with Jones' and Cady's insights above about serving the spiritually sensitive students who find their way into secular university classes. Kripal touches here on a vital link between TWW and SBNRs, describing how the sensibilities of SBNRs and other interspiritual practitioners may shepherd a return of constructive, comparative logic back into academia, challenging ontological reductionisms in the process.

What is this comparative logic? Kripal argues that comparative logic itself can "function as a kind of inarticulate comparative spirituality or underdeveloped mystical practice."[9] Comparative work relativizes every worldview, culture, and religious orientation—much like certain postmodern tropes—yet does not demand fealty to Western-trajectories of secularized ontological orientations. Hence, comparison is often deconstructing and leads practitioners into liminal spaces, or as Kripal describes it, we "lose all stable ground" and become "lost at sea."[10] Kripal recognizes that many students who enter religious studies classrooms are already "out to sea." They no longer adhere to institutionalized religions, yet still come with spiritual inclinations and perhaps even mystical intuitions, yet "have really no idea what to do at sea and how to take advantage of the winds and currents." The professional study of religion, and comparative work in particular, Kripal believes can provide orienting techniques for such students. "If there is a sustainable future in all of this, I think it lies somewhere here, out to sea but with some reliable navigation techniques, which, I would argue, we already possess in the academy and in the classroom."[11] Indeed, according to Kripal, the professional study of religion in comparative keys can even lead to new types of religio-spiritual practices and embodiments—ones that willingly orient its practitioners into a land of "nowhere" (or is it now/here?), learning to live within the aforementioned liminal spaces enacted in an interspiritual drifting out to sea.

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[7] Jeffery J. Kripal, *Secret Body: Erotic and Esoteric Currents in the History of Religions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2017), passim. For "philosophical tonic," 244; for use of imagination, 228–42.

[8] Jeffrey J. Kripal, "'Comparison Gets You Nowhere!' The Comparative Study of Religion and the Spiritual But Not Religious," in *Being Spiritual But Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s),* ed. William B. Parsons (New York: Routledge, 2020), 253.

[9] Ibid., 255.

[10] Ibid., 253. Elsewhere in the essay Kripal writes, "comparison done well leaves the typical student in a kind of existential crisis, in that aforementioned 'nowhere' in which every culture is enacting its own world but in which no such single world can function as a stable, permanent, or absolute place" (257).

[11] Ibid., 255.

In reflecting upon Kripal's position, one might question whether purely academic-comparative techniques are up to the task of safely orienting students within the ontologically expansive realities Kripal speaks of. It is here that a rapprochement of religious studies, contemplative studies, and comparative theology in academia could be helpful. Contemplative traditions, for example, have been working with so-called "anomalous" experience for thousands of years, passing down their findings from generation to generation (and in this sense—as generational communities of inquiry into the nature of reality and human knowing—are not so different from academic disciplines). Perhaps more importantly, contemplative traditions have (most often) engaged in such exploration not to simply gain knowledge or to have anomalous experiences, but rather to harness the transformative potentials of human life to enact expansive, inconceivable acts of love, compassion, harmony, justice, wisdom, etc. into our world. These traditions have long warned of negative consequences such explorations can wreak, and thus have developed sophisticated methodologies and frameworks to help keep disciples safe and headed in fruitful directions. A grounding in ethical training and guidance from advanced practitioners are some of the ways such dangers have been addressed (almost universally) in contemplative traditions. Thus, I would argue these traditions can be of great value to students in comparative religious studies and need not necessitate relinquishing one's critical perspective nor giving them an unquestioned authority. Enhanced partnership between contemplative traditions, academic study, and interspiritual exploration can also be helpful for navigating complex questions of appropriation.[12]

TWW as a Beloved Community of Religious Diversity

Paul Hedges, in his critique of TWW in this issue, seems to describe TWW as a kind of attempt at a systematic theology "without walls." For instance, in describing why TWW is not applicable to SBNRs, he states: "if SBNRs wish to forge…their own individual spiritual pathways, does not a single (or any?) theology also run counter to this?" Later, in the same section, Hedges ostensibly accuses TWW of "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." In as much as I have been present in numerous TWW planning meetings and panels since 2015, such a description does not strike me as an accurate portrayal of the spirit of TWW. As I understand it, TWW situates itself amongst the world's religious, spiritual, and contemplative traditions as a *community of inquiry,* loosely gravitating around a wager that, as Jerry Martin articulates it, "if revelations, enlightenments, and insights into [ultimate] reality are not limited to a single tradition, then what is called for is a theology without confessional restrictions, a Theology Without Walls. … It is a question of subject matter. The subject matter of theology is ultimate reality, not one's own tradition."[13] The audacious "goal" of TWW, as I see it, is not so much a

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[12] Appropriation is really a question of *right relationship*, as opposed to merely intercultural or interreligious borrowing, which we are all involved in one way or the other (for a discussion of how we are all "interreligious," see John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2020), especially Chapter 5). Efficacious relationships can maintain a sensitivity to issues of appropriation without falling into the trap of positing non-porous entities that are being "appropriated" from. Such relationships are mediated through respect and dignity for one another, deep learning, humility, patience, and a striving for balance within a creative, synergistic give and take that is willing to be in community across radical difference—as well as an openness to transformational existential encounters within such communities. Comparative theology in general is exemplary of these types of relationship.

[13] Jerry L. Martin, "Introduction," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. by Jerry Martin (New York: Routledge, 2020), 1.

systematic understanding of ultimacy as the creation of what I call a *beloved community of religious diversity*.

A "beloved community," first coined by classical American philosopher Josiah Royce, and significantly developed in decolonial directions by Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr. during the civil rights era, was described by Royce as fundamentally a "community of interpretation."[14] Royce placed his ideal of a beloved community within the semiotics of Charles Peirce and a general theory of inquiry, one which posited "interpretation" as a third type of cognition (Royce felt that the entire history of Western philosophy had been dominated by a stubborn refusal to consider only two possible acts of cognition, namely that of "perception" and "conception").[15] Interpretation, as a unique cognitive act, served the purpose for Royce of "uniting in some community the separated lives of…two distinct ideas,—of ideas which, when left to themselves, decline to coalesce or to cooperate, or to enter into one life."[16] Given the amount of religio-spiritual experimentation happening today in the United States and elsewhere, among comparative theologians, SBNRs, multiple-religious belongers, interspiritual practitioners, and others, Royce's articulation of contrasting ideas entering into "one life" rings true.

For example, Hyo-Dong Lee's autobiographical description of his theological journey into a "Confucian-Daoist-Donghak-Christian Theology of Qi," found in the flagship TWW volume, offers one example of how contrasting ideas enter into "one life" through an existential, comparative, decolonial, and democratic theological praxis.[17] Lee describes the many religious influences on his life, from growing up in South Korea with Confucian rituals venerating his grandparents, to the chanting of Buddhist monks during Sunday picnics, to his baptism as an evangelical Protestant. Lee's multifaceted religious journey was further complicated by a tension between the "cultural-religious milieu of 'diffuse religion' that assumed a loose sense of multiple religious belonging" in which he grew up—and the non-porous, exclusive, Westernized character of 'religion' he found embodied in evangelical Protestantism.[18] Due to such complexity, Lee admits feeling challenged by an oft heard comparative theological dictum to be "rooted in a single home tradition."[19] Instead, Lee has chosen a theological methodology that grants equal epistemic value to multiple religious traditions in his life, hewing closer to the cultural environment in which he was raised.[20]

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[14] See Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (1913, reis., Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2001); For further development of beloved community by King and Thurman see Walter E. Fluker, *They Looked for a City: A Comparative Analysis of the Idea of Community in the Thought of Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: University Press of America, 1989); and Kipton E. Jensen, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2019). See also Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground* (1973, reis., Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1986), especially Chapter 6, "The Search in Identity"; and Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Community or Chaos?* (1967, reis., Boston: Beacon Press, 2010).

[15] Royce, *Problem*, Chapter 11, "Perception, Conception, and Interpretation," 273–96.

[16] Ibid., 303.

[17] Hyo-Dong Lee, "My path to a theology of Qi," in *Theology Without Walls*, 234–42.

[18] Ibid., 235.

[19] Ibid., 234.

[20] Lee writes that he rejects "the universal applicability of the idea of asymmetric belonging so as to allow for a bidirectional conception of the operational logic of comparative theology" (Ibid., 240).

Lee's deeply relational and empathetic comparative theological account found in his monograph, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude: A Comparative Theology for the Democracy of Creation,* offers an example of how comparative theological work can further both decolonial and democratic impulses. His work is guided by the labor of constructing "theological and philosophical underpinnings for the idea of democracy—this is, what may be called a *metaphysics of democracy.*"[21] His use of the Donghak tradition ("Eastern Learning," today known as Choendogyo)—a syncretistic, indigenous, and oppressed religion of Korea that led the "first attempt at democratic revolution in Korean history"— serves not only as a rich resource of theological ideas for bridging the theistic tradition of Christianity with nontheist traditions of Confucianism and Daoism. Donghak also represents a "voice 'from the underside of history,'" answering Lee's "liberationist impulses" that have always been part of his "theological quest."[22] Lee's sensitivity to numerous religious traditions, as well as to postcolonial, decolonial, and democratic praxis, offers an exemplary approach of comparative theological work that is non-appropriative, respectful of traditions, and liberative in its leanings.

Further, Lee's emphases on existential, embodied, lived experience as a locus for his philosophical and theological thought offers a nuanced version of TWW that aligns with democratic and decolonial praxis. This version of TWW embraces a theological self that is "encumbered and propelled forward by the weight of the historical layers of traditions accumulated and embedded in [our bodies]," and which remains "tethered to…concrete teachings and practices as a result of one's existential and historical embeddedness in particular traditions."[23] It is the personal, existential, embodied nature of Lee's journey that grounds his theological thought in the flesh and blood of our complex interreligious, intercultural contemporary lives—struggling to enact better versions of human society and understanding. Lee's religious and theological journey is existentially and historically unique, yet in his willingness to undergo such a continuing religious journey, and in his courage to share its theological fruits with all of us—*I* become enriched, inspired, and enlivened. Even though the "concrete teachings and practices…of particular traditions" that I imbibe may remain different, my own religious journey is nonetheless now informed and affected (positively) by Lee's journey, through a shared interpretive praxis grounded in experience, receptivity, historical embeddedness, profound respect, and transformative encounter. This type of intimate interpretive praxis, performed in empathy, love, compassion, and courage, is at the heart of a beloved community of religious diversity—both as a religio-spiritual-political community, and as a scholarly community of inquiry.

Royce's ontology of beloved community emphasizes that our capacity for such interpretative praxis does not arise from sense data or abstract concepts, nor from pragmatic leadings, but rather from a deeper place residing in the human being, the place from which poets and prophets and sages spring forth. Such a place, for Royce, is the true source of guidance and

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[21] Hyo-Dong Lee, *Spirit, Qi, and the Multitude: A Comparative Theology for the Democracy of Creation* (New York City: Fordham University Press, 2013), xii. Lee is not referring to "democracy" in this sense as the particular Western expressions of democratic society, but rather an idealist version of democracy as "a cipher for the notion that people and ultimately all creatures have the power to rule and to create themselves" (Ibid).

[22] Lee, "My path," 238, 239.

[23] Ibid., 240.

inspiration for the human family.[24] Interpretation then becomes "the great humanizing factor in our cognitive processes," ultimately allowing for the flowering of love within communities. The "will to interpret" becomes a prime motivating factor in building beloved community. As Royce put it, the Beloved Community, "whatever else it is, will be, when it comes, a Community of Interpretation."[25]

Royce's embedding of his notion of beloved community within Peirce's semiotics also allows for a fairly seamless transition to envisioning a beloved community of religious diversity as a community of inquiry. Peircean semiotics assumes that signs refer back to something real.[26] The "truth" of any particular sign (or symbol) lies in its ability to orient the interpreter around the reality lying behind the sign. Thus, that which religious symbols point to can maintain their reality (or realities) within Peircean semiotics, and a beloved community of religious diversity is a community of inquiry that labors to orient its participants more surely around the nature of reality as it is. This latter feature aligns such a community more generally with stated or assumed outcomes of science and other academic disciplines. One can also see how such an endeavor might necessarily include analyses that go beyond religious symbols of ultimacy. For instance, postcolonial, decolonial, and other modes of social analysis and critique are helpful for orienting us more surely around reality as it is (as are scientific disciplines). This can be acknowledged, without discounting the fact that many religious or contemplative traditions might place such analyses within a facet of reality that exists alongside other facets of reality, such as transcendent, immanent, harmonious, sacred, divine, and/or empty or awakened facets of reality.

Royce's beloved community is, of course, rife with Christian theological overlay, not a problem in itself but perhaps making it suspect from the get-go. Nevertheless, provided it is properly mitigated with decolonial labor,[27] as seen in its further development by Thurman and King, as well as pluralized in the sense of adopting at least an openness to ontological pluralism, it seems to me *one* possible source for a fecund philosophical and epistemological framework for orienting a diverse community of inquiry that is undergirded by ultimacy (certainly Peirce's

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[24] Royce, *Problem*, 312. Royce critiques William James's notion of pragmatism, as the "usefulness" or "cash value" of a concept, as still beholden to a binary understanding of cognition as either "perception" or "conception" (Ibid., 297–319).

[25] Ibid., 318.

[26] This contrasts, for example, with various dyadic semiotics such as that from Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, which became foundational for postmodernism more generally, and was developed prominently by Jacques Derrida in his philosophy of "deconstruction."

[27] This is a good place to mention, in the spirit of decolonial praxis, that Royce may have held at least some problematic ideas on race, though this is a somewhat mixed matter among scholars. Royce clearly ran ahead of his time in his racial views, and was the only classical American philosopher, along with W.E.B. DuBois (a student of Royce's who influenced his views on race) and Jane Addams, to directly and substantially address race issues during his time (early twentieth century). Royce refused to essentialize notions of race, saw race as a social kind, and (according to Dwayne Tunstall) has been read as an "antiracist" philosopher by numerous scholars, including Cornel West, Eddie Glaude Jr., Alain Locke, and Jacquelyn Kegley. Royce has also been read as tacitly expressing support for antiblack colonialism by Dwayne Tunstall. For competing articles on Royce's positions on race, as well as Royce's original writings on questions of race, see Josiah Royce, *Race Questions, Provincialisms, and Other American Problems: Expanded Edition* (1908; reis., New York: Fordham University Press, 2009); Dwayne A. Tunstall, "Josiah Royce's 'Enlightened' Antiblack Racism?" (*The Pluralist* 4, no. 3, 2009, 39–45); and Jacquelyn Ann K. Kegley, "Josiah Royce on Race: Issues in Context." (*The Pluralist* 4, no. 3, 2009, 1–9).

semiotics have proved to be a fecund source in general for academics).[28] Hence my reference to TWW as a beloved community of religious diversity. Such a community of inquiry orients one towards coming face to face with the *other,* not in a sense of hegemonic domination—nor with a naïve pluralistic openness—but rather in mutual responsibility for creative and healing interpretative praxis. For TWW, the potency of such acts lies not merely upon human conceptual apparatuses, but are also undergirded by the referent TWW pursues, namely "ultimacy." Thus, the TWW project is not so much about creating a Hobbit-crushing "systematic theology to rule them all," but rather a beloved community of religious diversity, where our interpretive praxis is undergirded by the referent we seek—namely the nature of reality as it is—in all of its subtle manifestations in and through embodied human consciousness.

In the spirit of further exploring the notion of a beloved community of religious diversity beyond a Christian basis, I would like to briefly note resonances this idea has with philosophy and religion scholar Bin Song's articulation of a Ruist (Confucian) form of comparative theology.[29] Bin Song's search for a comparative theological method more amenable to his Ru identity leads him into a postcolonial reading of Aristotle, one that refuses to anachronistically separate theology and philosophy. He shows how Aristotle has been domesticated by a Christian and then secularized world that "took away the rich spiritual and religious significance of ancient Greek thought, and accordingly displaced philosophy as a subservient analytic tool." Aristotle's notion of a liberal arts education always included theology, where "faithful, noble-minded and open-minded learners can flourish simultaneously their spiritual and intellectual life within varying educational communities." Yet membership in such an educational community did not revolve around "unalterable faith statements." Neither did it "exclude overt religious affiliates as long as these affiliates do not absolutize and reify their own determinate understanding of faith, and hence, would like to incorporate the practice of their faith and the learning of the world into an organic way of life."[30]

Bin Song's pre-Christian reading of Aristotle opens up avenues for other religious traditions to develop their own versions of comparative theology apart from Christianized categories. These categories tend to revolve around a Westernized understanding of 'religion,' where Christianity serves as the reference point (hence notions of religiosity as "confessional," for instance). In contrast to this, a Ru identity is described as "non-confessional," and unable to be defined by a "commitment to any unalterable faith declaration or performance." Ruism is also "not an exclusive membership tradition," and remains ever open to new forms of knowledge. Bin Song develops his Ru perspective through readings of Ru philosopher Wang Longxi (1498-1583 C.E.), and calls this orientation a "'seeded, open inclusivism,' undergirded by a pluralistic consciousness." Ruism as a tradition embraces an ontological orientation that encourages practitioners to "incorporate elements from other traditions through a prudent judgment of their efficacy…thereby synthesizing them into a growing, organic body of human wisdom which nevertheless maintains continuity with classical Ruism." Bin Song also shows how a Ru perspective is aligned with the goals of liberal arts education more broadly. In fact, he characterizes a Ru comparative theology "as a liberal art *par excellence,*" allowing for its inclusion

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[28] For a recent example of a fully developed theory of inquiry utilizing Peirce's semiotics and notions of inquiry, see Wesley J. Wildman, *Religious Philosophy as Multidisciplinary Comparative Inquiry: Envisioning a Future for the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010).

[29] Bin Song, "Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 31 (November 2020), 92–113.

[30] Ibid., 101

within a "broader community of whomsoever are intrigued by shared problems and issues in human lives. In a more concrete term, this community will be potentially extended to the entire humanity and include anyone who cherish the value of liberal arts education."[31]

Bin Song's work shows how a binary understanding of religion as "confessional," and the secular as "non-confessional," is a product of the unique historical trajectory of the West, and simply cannot be applied to a Ru religious orientation. In other words, his work makes a convincing argument for the inclusion of *something* like a beloved community of religious diversity within 'secular' academic studies. Such a community, I suggest, would likely hold quite a bit of significance for SBNRs, and for many of those engaged in philosophical reflection and religio-spiritual experimentation amongst multiplicities of religious and secular orientations. Comparative work in general, especially when dovetailing as a spiritual practice, seems an essential aspect to TWW as envisioned here. Importantly, TWW has also proven to be a welcoming and spiritually efficacious community for those who walk more confessional paths yet hold an openness towards other religious and spiritual modes (e.g., comparative theologians). Thus, TWW can provide a communal space of scholarly inquiry in which one's orientation towards the nature of reality, as well as toward the socio-political realities of our lives together, might be worked out in a dialogical manner with a great variety of religious, spiritual, and secular orientations. Indeed, one of Martin's main claims is that, "In TWW, works of literature, philosophy, psychology, anthropology, and the natural and social sciences, as well as personal experience, may become important sources of theological insight."[32] Such spaces of supportive openness is one of the greatest needs and desires of SBNR-types, at least in my experience of working with many such oriented folk over the past two decades. In today's world, where we see the coming together of many disparate cultures, religious traditions, semiotic systems, and competing human values, I find that holding acts of interpretation as a communal and healing praxis for greater understanding seems more than appropriate. In fact, I find it to be essential for democratic and decolonial praxis.

Contextualizing Multiplicitous Modes of Decolonial Praxis

All of which brings me to a few extended musings emerging from my most recent work, which are in solidarity with many of the points made in these essays. These musings have to do with the current state of our democracy and the need for decolonial work in co-creating the future of democratic norms together. We must struggle to enact a democracy that is reflective of the diversity that has always been present in our country—yet historically disregarded, actively repressed, and often brutally oppressed—as well as the growing diversity due to vast demographic changes (and here I contextualize myself as a citizen of the United States, speaking to, from, and for "our" democracy).[33]

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[31] Ibid., 111-113.

[32] Martin, "Introduction," 1.

[33] My contextualization is not meant to connote any sense of "American exceptionalism," other than in the sense that all peoples, cultures, etc. are 'exceptional' in their own, unique ways. My talking to, from, and for my country is a practice of what I call "embodied philosophy." It is a way of acknowledging and speaking into my own context, into the land and soil and society that has bred me, into my 'flesh and bones.' This land claims mysterious obligations upon me, to which I consent…at least for the time being.

This contextualization of myself is also a way of speaking into my own "local history." Many decolonial scholars adopt fundamental stances of opposition, critique, and the theorizing of constitutive difference. I take a different track here, leaning into decolonial praxis that emphasizes a common humanity politics, intimate dialogical praxis amongst difference, and emerges from democratic struggles within my own local history, particularly within the African-American tradition. Yet I wish to acknowledge the decolonial work of Global South theorists such as Walter Mignolo and Boaventura de Sousa Santos, as well as influential Caribbean thinkers such as Franz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Édouard Glissant, and Sylvia Winter, who employ a strong oppositional consciousness towards Western ideas and subjectivities.[34] These discourses often employ Marxist readings and postmodern critical analyses of power relations, and range from heavily analytical, secularized-materialist theory to more poetic inclinations, such as found in Glissant. Rarely, though, do they articulate religious or spiritual perspectives (Global South scholar An Yountae's *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* is a notable exception to this trend).[35]

I share with these theorists a firm belief that decolonial praxis is itself multiplicitous and pluralistic. That is, it cannot be contained within particular trajectories or theoretical constructs, and by necessity will include under its banner sometimes fundamentally different approaches. Neither do I believe that decolonial praxis must of necessity begin with a fundamental rejection of ideas that have emerged from Euro-Western trajectories. As history of religions scholar Charles Long points out, Black Americans have often critiqued the West "for not *being* the West, for not living up to its cultural ideals."[36] That is, the question of how one lives into one's professed ideals—the question of *praxis,* "philosophy as a way of life," and/or the *transformation of the human condition*—is, in my mind, radically pertinent to decolonial labor.[37]

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[34] See for instance: Walter Mignolo, *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021); Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice Against Epistemicide* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers, 2014); Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism,* transl. by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000); Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* transl. by Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2005); Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation,* transl. by Betsy Wing (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1997); and *Sylvia Winter: On Being Human as Praxis,* ed. by Katherine McKittrick (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

[35] An Yountae, *The Decolonial Abyss: Mysticism and Cosmopolitics from the Ruins* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017). Yountae combines readings of the mystical abyss within Western mystical and philosophical traditions with notions of a "colonial abyss," as found particularly in the Carribbean thinkers mentioned above (Fanon, Césaire, and especially Glissant). Yountae also utilizes readings from other decolonial Global South theorists, such as Mignolo, as well as employs a Whiteheadian, process-oriented approach as seen in the work of Catherine Keller. Yountae's broad use of theoretical resources approaches more closely the type of critical-integrative-transformative "post-oppositional" theorizing articulated by AnaLouise Keating (see below), developing a decolonial version of cosmopolitics that remains vigilantly aware of problematic colonial formations and the horrific suffering such formations have and continue to inflict.

[36] Charles H. Long, *Significations,* 9. Long was ahead of his time as a decolonial, Africana thinker working alongside other co-founders of the History of Religions discipline (of which he was one, along with Mircea Eliade and Joseph Kitagawa) at the University of Chicago. In his work, Long pays exquisite attention to the ways in which colonial powers enacted processes of "signification" upon conquered peoples, as well as the consequences of such signification. Long's approach finds that once "[t]he languages and experiences of signification can be seen for what they are and were…one might also be able to see a new and counter-creative signification and expressive development of new meanings expressed in styles and rhythms of dissimulation." For Long, "religious experience is the locus for this resource." (Ibid.)

[37] For "philosophy as a way of life," see Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life: Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault,* ed. Arnold I. Davidson. trans. Michael Chase (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995).

My own contemplative leanings draw me away from placing oppositional discourse at the center of my thought, while still recognizing its necessity and importance (just not its sufficiency). I also note a kind of functional collaborative synergy that can exist between differing decolonial approaches, similar to how some scholars have described the varying approaches of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., for instance.[38] I see resonances of my own approach to decolonial praxis in various scholarly work as well.[39] Womanist AnaLouise Keating's "post-oppositional politics," for instance, offers an articulation of decolonial praxis in explicitly contemplative keys.[40] Keating concentrates on transformative dimensions of a post-oppositional politics, which she contrasts with an "oppositional consciousness" that adopts binary formations of resistance, such as that between "oppressed and oppressor," "center and periphery," or a fundamental "colonial difference."[41] Instead, she concentrates on women-of-color voices to develop "nonoppositional theories and relational methods that insist on a realistic politics of hope," while enacting "a variety of multidirectional, multidisciplinary, multivoiced conversations, [and] provocative dialogues in which all parties are transformed."[42] Such an approach to decolonial praxis also resonates strongly with the notion of a beloved community of religious diversity as described here.

A contemplative perspective engages in democratic and decolonial praxis more in a mode of 'calling in' than 'calling out,' paying attention to the wounding and trauma we have all suffered. In suggesting a 'calling in' as opposed to 'calling out,' I am citing in particular the work of Black feminist scholar Loretta J. Ross. It is important to recognize that such an orientation does not mean refusing to call out problematic behavior or systemic oppressions, but rather does so in modes of genuine openness, and even love. As Ross describes it:

> Call-outs are justified to challenge provocateurs who deliberately hurt others, or for powerful people beyond our reach. Effectively criticizing such people is an important tactic for achieving justice. But most public shaming is horizontal and done by those who believe they have greater integrity or more sophisticated analyses. They become the self-appointed guardians of political purity.

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[38] See James Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), and Peniel E. Joseph, *The Sword and the Shield: The Revolutionary Lives of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr.* (New York: Basic Books, 2020).

[39] See for instance: Thurman, *Search,* especially Chapter 6*;* Thatamanil, *Circling,* especially Chapter 4*;* Song, "Comparative"; Lee, *Spirit;* Cone, *Martin;* King, *Where;* Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark/Luz en lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality,* ed. by AnaLouise Keating (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015); Jane Bennett, *Influx and Efflux: Writing Up with Walt Whitman* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2020); Eddie Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020); Catherine Keller, *Political Theology of the Earth: Our Planetary Emergency and the Struggle for a New Public* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018); Theodore R. Johnson, *When the Stars Begin to Fall: Overcoming Racism and Renewing the Promise of America* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2021); Romand Coles, *Beyond Gated Politics: Reflections for the Possibility of Democracy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Fred Dallmayr, *Democracy to Come: Politics as Relational Praxis* (Oxford, Ocford University Press, 2017); AnaLouise Keating, *Transformation Now!: Towards a Post-Oppositional Politics of Change* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012); and William E. Connolly, *Aspirational Fascism: The Struggle for Multifaceted Democracy under Trumpism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017).

[40] A number of authors above, such as Thurman, Anzaldúa, Lee, Song, Keller, and Thatamanil, also express contemplative perspectives in their decolonial praxis.

[41] Keating, *Transformation,* 2. Keating finds such modes of resistance to be "too limited to bring about the long-term transformation we need" (Ibid.).

[42] Ibid., 5.

Calling-in is simply a call-out done with love. Some corrections can be made privately. Others will necessarily be public, but done with respect. It is not tone policing, protecting white fragility or covering up abuse. It helps avoid the weaponization of suffering that prevents constructive healing.[43]

Democracy, the Imaginal, and Decolonial Praxis

The unique historical moment we find ourselves in—a moment where new democratic publics are struggling to take emergent forms—has great need of lively spaces within which multiplicities of ontological orientations can be in dialogue and community with one another, practicing what Cornel West calls a "jazzy fluency" of democratic musicality.[44] While questioning assumed norms that have perpetuated structures of systemic racism, patriarchal prejudices, and colonial thought patterns, we must also constructively imagine together new forms of democratic becoming. Scholar and civil rights leader Vincent Harding said the following about democratic praxis:

> In a truly creative democratic encounter, we were able to hear each instrumental voice in its own integrity, in its mutually respectful and attentive listening to the others. And out of that seriously playful engagement, new creations constantly emerged, some quiet and thoughtful, others filled with powerful energy and unexpectedly soaring structures of life. For me, this was another model of new American possibilities at their creative best.[45]

I think such democratic sentiments are also applicable to the TWW project. That is, cultivating academic spaces in which we might—as *dêmos*—have an opportunity to do some of the deep, reflective, critical work informed by history, science, the humanities, current socio-political cultural formations, *and* religious and spiritual orientations, is not just a need but also a responsibility. This imaginative work of democracy entails a reorientation in our understanding of both the Western, constructed notion of "religion"—as a bounded, non-porous entity that revolves around dogmatic belief structures—as well as its co-constructed notion of the "secular."

Harding argues that imaginative, liminal, and constructive work is absolutely necessary for decolonial labor, given that African-Americans "have insisted that the most authentic American dream is of a nation that does not yet exist." The "dream of America," which Black Americans have carried and contributed to more surely than anyone, for Harding "cannot be fulfilled, cannot be deepened, until it enters into a creative, transformative engagement with the best dreams of humankind."[46] Imaginative dreams and visions become "powerful mechanisms in

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[43] Loretta J. Ross, "I'm a Black Feminist. I Think Call-Out Culture is Toxic," *New York Times,* August 17, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/17/opinion/sunday/cancel-culture-call-out.html (accessed October 21, 2021). See also Loretta J. Ross, "What if Instead of Calling People Out, We Called Them In?" *New York Times,* November 19, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/19/style/loretta-ross-smith-college-cancel-culture.html (accessed October 21, 2021), and adrienne maree brown, *We Will Not Cancel Us: And Other Dreams of Transformative Justice* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

[44] Cornel West, "Prophetic Religion and the Future of Capitalist Civilization," in *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere,* ed. by Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2011), 92–100.

[45] Vincent Harding, *Is America Possible? To My Young Companions on the Journey of Hope* (Kalamazoo: The Fetzer Institute, 2007; Reprint 2018), 26. Citations refer to 2018 reprint.

[46] Ibid., 8, 9.

the creation of new realities," especially when they are embodied, taking on flesh and blood in the concrete circumstances of life, such as they did in the civil rights movement, and are currently doing in the Black Lives Matter movement.[47] This is why Harding's insistence on creative, imaginal work connected to the heart, as a key for decolonial labor, does not subsist upon an airy sense of transcendence, but rather stems from conviction based upon "rugged, often blood-stained hope, hope fiercely breaking out of the dark-womb beauty that I have experienced."[48] There is a great need in democratic practice for listening deeply to multiplicities of voices and orientations, granting them the integrity necessary for creatively bringing forth new, and better, structures of democracy. In fastidiously upholding an anachronistic religion/secular binary, pathways essential to decolonial labor become blocked. I believe we need visions of religious studies, philosophy, academic theology, and the 'secular academy' that better align with democratic practice—as creative, imaginal, constructive work amongst multiplicities of ontological orientations, undertaken with an awareness of our embeddedness in the social contexts of our democratic life.

A kindred voice to Harding's can be found in the work of activist Chicana, lesbian, queer and race theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, who has written extensively along 'borderlands' of decolonial praxis, democratic becoming, imaginal liminality, and spiritual transformation. In *Light in the Dark/Luz En Lo Oscuro,* written during the final decade of her life, Anzaldúa offers a decolonial vision of democratic possibility predicated upon an ontologically expansive vision. AnaLouise Keating describes *Light in the Dark* as offering a decolonial ontology and epistemology, based upon an "aesthetics of transformation" and a "metaphysics of interconnectedness."[49]

With ancestral indigenous thought as foundational to her theorizing, Anzaldúa enfleshes imaginative ideals of democratic possibility in her concepts of *nepantla, nos/otras* (us/other), and *las nepantleras*. Nepantla, a Nahuatl word that connotes "in-between-ness," is described as a liminal space—a shamanistic bridge between worlds—often entered into through brokenness and vulnerability. It is "a mysterious type of dreaming or perception," one that can register many different states of consciousness. "Shaman-like nepantla moves from rational to visionary states, from logistics to poetics, from focused to unfocused perception, from inner world to outer. Nepantla is the twilight landscape between the self and the world, between imagination's imagery and reality's harsh light."[50] Nepantla is also a way of knowing, a way of being in the world as well as a way of bringing a world into being, a *dasein* and not only a place. Imagination has a soul dimension that "bridges body and nature to spirit and mind, making these connections in the in-between space of nepantla." Shamans live forever "betwixt and between. . . journeying beyond the natural order or status quo and into other worlds."[51]

Las nepantleras, then, dwell in liminalities, in in-between states that cannot be circumscribed by singular cultural locations, whether racial, social, sexual, theoretical, religious, or even species-centric. Their ability to shift perception allows for "alternative forms of selfhood," reconfigurations of identity and knowing, where paradoxically the stability of one's perspective

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[47] Ibid., 39.

[48] Ibid., viii.

[49] AnaLouise Keating, "Re-envisioning Coyolxauhqui, Decolonizing Reality: Anzaldúa's Twenty-First Century Imperative," editor's introduction to Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark,* ix–xxxvii.

[50] Anzaldúa, *Light,* 108.

[51] Ibid., 29–31.

"relies on liminality and fluidity." Las nepantleras become "spiritual activists engaged in the struggle for social, economic, and political justice," nurturing "psychological, social, and spiritual metamorphosis."[52] Imagination serves an incarnate function here, and *nepantla* becomes an efficacious liminal space where the idea(l) of democracy is *alive*, and enactive. For Anzaldúa, it is a place from which new communities and cultural conditions can be born:

> It is precisely during these in-between times that we must create the dream (el sueño) of the sixth world. May we allow the interweaving of all the minds and hearts and life forces to create the collective dream of the world and teach us how to live out ese sueño. … May we do the work that matters. Vale la pena, it's worth the pain.[53]

Anzaldúa's orientation is one that would have difficulty, perhaps, finding a home within current academic disciplines (certainly within the 'secular' academy), yet resonates strongly with the idea of a beloved community of religious diversity. The interweaving of hearts and minds to form a collective "dream," one that is ameliorating of the human condition, would be an apt description of beloved community from the viewpoints of Royce, King, and Thurman. According to AnaLouise Keating, the key to Anzaldúa's decolonial praxis is that she "does not simply write *about* 'suppressed knowledges and marginalized subjectivities'; she writes from *within* them, and it's this shift from writing about to writing within that makes her work so innovatively decolonizing."[54] While such a methodology is often seen in writings that emerge from oppressed and racialized communities (e.g., in Anzaldúa's influential earlier work, *Borderlands / La Frontera*), Keating emphasizes that in *Light in the Dark* Anzaldúa radically expands her decolonial praxis through her explicit engagement of ontology and epistemology:[55]

> Through empirical evidence, esoteric traditions, and indigenous philosophies, she valorizes realities suppressed, marginalized, or entirely erased by the narrow versions of ontological realism championed by Enlightenment-based thought … Anzaldúa does so by writing from—and not just about—these subaltern ontologies.[56]

TWW can provide a fecund space for such theorizing, especially when it is framed as a beloved community of religious diversity and works to connect ontology to praxis within contemporary socio-political realities. Such an orientation allows for a spaciousness where scholars can utilize multiplicities of ontological orientations for theory. The community of inquiry learns from one another through diverse vectors of encounter—intellectual, affective-emotional, spiritual. Thus, a beloved community of religious diversity encourages varying perspectives and ontological orientations to be in dialogue and praxis with one another, finding (perhaps) better ways of theorizing our human predicament together, and supporting one another's unique religio-spiritual journeys. As I have argued, I see this as an important aspect of decolonial, democratic praxis.

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[52] Ibid., 82, 83.
[53] Ibid., 22.
[54] Keating, "Re-envisioning," xxix; the quote within the quotations (as cited in the introduction) is from: Ernesto Martínez, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).
[55] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987; reis., San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).
[56] Keating, "Re-envisioning," xxix.

Anzaldúa believed fiercely in "indigenous thought as a foundational, vital source of decolonial wisdom for contemporary and future life on this planet and elsewhere," arguing that indigenous philosophies offer us "alternatives to Cartesian [and Kantian]-based knowledge systems."[57] Such philosophies, if they are to perform their decolonial praxis, should not then be cordoned off into "area studies," which arguably reduces them to "relics" to be studied, as opposed to living philosophies from which to theorize from (a critique we will encounter in-depth below, in the work of Arvind Mandair). Of course, this in turn may bring up complex and uneasy questions of appropriation. However, the unease of such questions is also precisely what allows them to become points of liminality. As Anzaldúa might put it, "cracks" (*rajaduras*) between cultural identities serve as openings into the 'in-between'—the liminal, spiritual worlds of *nepantla.*[58] Utilizing accusations of "appropriation" in ways that mitigate the lure of such liminal spaces, is arguably a way to domesticate the decolonial potential of Anzaldúa's work.

Whether or not one wishes to believe in shamanic-inflected decolonial praxis, or further whether or not one engages in the actual experience of the spiritual realities Anzaldúa conveys— I submit there can be no academic "consensus," other than that of a colonial guise, that can reasonably discount such experiences and possibilities. Thus, there is simply no ground to say that scholarly theorization, reflection, critical thought, research, etc. cannot or should not stem from such philosophical orientations. Rather, *it is incumbent upon academia to provide space for such theorization as part of its* own *decolonial praxis.*

I do not mean to suggest that any particular ontological orientation gets run of the mill, simply exchanging for instance a scientific materialism for the syncretistic, spiritualized, indigenous-inflected, contextual, linguistically aware, liberative, and embodied ontology of Anzaldúa. It does mean, however, that multiplicities of ontological orientations are allowed to exist as acceptable scholarly points of departure, and that one can theorize from, be in dialogue with, and form communities of inquiry amongst multiplicities of them. It also means letting go of a colonial itch to domesticate such ontologies, or to make them pass a (colonial) "test for scholarship" that begins and ends with Enlightenment trajectories in Cartesian or Kantian forms. Anzaldúa's decolonial praxis is predicated upon opening up scholarly thought to experience and theorization from ontological orientations that exceed a Western Enlightenment trajectory.[59]

Therefore, in support of such decolonial praxis, I now turn my attention to scholarly tropes and trends that work to domesticate, disregard, and even disqualify such orientations from

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[57] Ibid., xxxiii.

[58] See Anzaldúa, *Light,* especially Chapter 4.

[59] Anzaldúa makes explicit that she is speaking to academia, and thus her work could reasonably be described as a *contemplative perspective directed towards academia in the name of decolonial praxis.* The following brings this point home: "How do those of us laboring in the complex environments of an academy indifferent and even hostile to spirit make our professional work into a form of spiritual practice? By joining intellectual work with spiritual work into a spiritual activism. We must build a practice of contemplation into the daily routines of academic and professional life. Contemplation allows us to process and sort out anger and frustration; it gives us time for the self, time to allow compassion to surface. La compasión es una conversación sostenida" (Ibid., 92). Translating the final sentence, "Compassion is a sustained conversation," in many ways captures succinctly the idea of a beloved community of religious diversity. In order to sustain a conversation, in order to embody compassion, one must allow a diversity of cultural orientations, religious orientations, ontological orientations, and ethical perspectives to be present to one another within the conversation itself.

the halls of academia. To do so is to work against the democratic and decolonial praxis outlined thus far.

Rhetoric of the Secular

I am concerned that certain terms—such as *secular, rational, academic, scholarly*—have become uncritically linked as metonyms of one another, forming an unconscious bond that perpetuates itself through rhetoric. This bond serves to inculcate certain Westernized forms of knowledge production as the only acceptable modes of academic labor. Such "rhetoric of the secular" not only hampers decolonial labor, but actively works against it by (re)inscribing a colonial gaze into our educational system and culture. I am interested in reassessing the ways such terms are employed, specifically in light of scholarly work, as well as emergent religio-spiritual practice, in ways that destabilize a religion/secular binary. I also aim to place such a discussion within the context of the role of the academy as the locus of vocations for professional thinking and education within a religiously diverse democracy. I should note that many of these arguments are part of a current book-in-progress, and I must apologize for the terseness of the arguments as presented here.

My hypothesis is that today (as opposed to past historical moments) the secular as a term of discourse capitalizes on its association with democratic practices and cherished forms of constitutional norms, in order to fund a normative ontological reductionism under the pretense of objective neutrality. This reductionism appears most often (in the humanities) under the guise of social sciences and encompassing critical theories of power relations, based respectively on analogies with the hard sciences or with a hard constructivism (and often these two work in tandem), and functions so as to discredit and ostracize anything that doesn't fit into such reductive ontologies as threatening and "non-academic." Hedges' critique of the TWW project as failing a test of "scholarship," which I address directly below, offers an example of this, or what I call *rhetoric of the secular*.

A "hard constructivism" essentializes the notion of social construction, conceiving of social construction as an encompassing reality that is definitive of what it means to be human. By "social construction," I refer to the various ways in which we undergo cultural conditioning. A hard constructivism is a flatland ontology that sees forms of cultural conditioning as more or less encompassing of—rather than as merely *one* aspect of—human consciousness.[60] In this sense, a hard constructivism is an orientation towards the nature of reality, and thus I will often refer to it as an "ontological orientation." It might also be considered in this sense a *religious* orientation, in as much as it denotes a particularized view of the nature of reality and humanity's place within it. I may also use terms such as "secularist" or "secularist gaze" to refer to such an orientation, particularly when it is wedded to the attempt to make such an orientation the only normative one for academia. A secularist gaze is also found within scientific materialisms, in both cases denoting a type of flatland ontology, lacking religio-spiritual depth dimensions. It is important to note that it is not the ontologies of a hard constructivism or scientific materialism I am arguing against here, nor am I implying that decolonial praxis doesn't take place within materialist orientations (much of it does). Rather, I am interrogating the need to make such orientations normative for a

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[60] And thus, a hard constructivism may make claims such as "all we have access to is discourse," a claim whose theoretical origins can arguably be traced to Kant, as seen in Paul Hedges' critique of TWW below.

'secular' academy, as well as a desire to utilize them as hegemonic tests for what counts as "scholarship."[61]

On the one hand, the secular is utilized to refer to the democratic values we have grown accustomed to taking for granted, such as the separation of church and state, the freedom to engage in religious practices without coercion, the right to not be discriminated against for engaging—or not engaging—in such practices, and the freedom *from* religion in the sense that the coercive powers of the state cannot be utilized to endorse or provide preferential treatment for any particular religious orientations. These democratic values I aim to uphold and even extend.

On the other hand, the secular becomes conjoined to form the term 'secular academy,' whose development has a particular history related to Western academia's long running, complicated relationship with religious authority and theology.[62] Here the secular academy gets juxtaposed with a kind of theological imposition or evangelization; it becomes 'not-theology.' This use is fundamentally different from (though not unrelated to) the democratic values described above, though this change in semantics is rarely stated explicitly. We can recognize

[61] To get a better sense of the delineation I am attempting to make here, Robert Neville's trenchant discussion of the insights and reductionisms of various scientific, phenomenological, and postmodern/critical discourses in the study of religion is helpful. See Robert Cummings Neville, *Religion: Philosophical Theology Vol. 3* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015), Introduction (p. 1-20), and especially Chapter One, "Science and Culture" (p. 25–46). In Chapter One, Neville skillfully narrates how various discourses in the study of religion apply reductive modes of analysis that bring about the important insights they provide, while also carefully critiquing each one for what they leave out, namely a more ontologically expansive view of the study of religion (such discourses include cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, phenomenology, social science, and linguistic/textual-focused ["discourse only"] approaches). As a result, they remain unable to address so-called "first-order" questions in the study of religion. My articulation of a "beloved community of religious diversity" is nuanced from Neville's project in the following sense: the imagined teleological outcome for Neville's community of inquiry seems to be something like a shared understanding of reality through a study of the many ways human beings are religious. While I remain open to such a possibility, I can also imagine an ontological pluralism that wouldn't necessarily result in a shared understanding as much as shared sense of solidarity and mutual support and learning across diverse perspectives. That is, as a community of inquiry orients more surely around the nature of reality in "the infinite long run" (as Charles Peirce put it, noting that Neville places his theory within a Peircean semiotics), a reality that is itself multiplicitous may be uncovered, one productive of innumerable pluralistic and enactive ontologies. I remain indebted to Neville's long-running work in the field, and find my own thought resonates with many of his arguments. Neville's three volume *Philosophical Theology,* for example, provides a long-running argument for the acceptability and even necessity of first-order theorizing about religion within secular academic disciplines, especially philosophy, as discussed further below. See Robert C. Neville, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology, Volume One* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013); Robert C. Neville, *Existence: Philosophical Theology, Volume Two* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014); Neville, *Religion.*
[62] See also Bin Song's discussion of the separation of theology and philosophy as a result of Christendom, Song, "Comparative," 97-102. The secular academy remains beholden to the joint ontologies of a hard constructivism and a scientific materialism mainly due to such a split. Along this trajectory soteriological concerns had to be ceded to big "T" Theology due to Christendom, while philosophy could only pursue its agenda as a "handmaiden to theology." Eventually philosophy could be considered a legitimate discourse on its own, but only at the cost of ceding soteriological concerns to the Church, and then staying more or less within the confines of an ontologically reductive understanding of reality. This is how most contemporary Western philosophy still functions today, and became the normative stance of 'secular' education. However, we do not live in Christendom today, and the need to apply reductionistic ontologies as normative for professional thinking needs reconsideration. Once a religion/secular binary is undermined, and secularity recontextualized as living amongst religious pluralism, then there is no longer any legitimate reason for philosophical discourse to claim ontologically reductive orientations as normative for its practice. (For "big 'T' theology," see William D. Hart, "From Theology to *theology:* The Place of 'God-Talk' in Religious Studies," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University,* ed. by Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 93–109.)

that the historical development of the secular academy might reasonably be characterized as an attempt to uphold democratic principles, specifically freedom *from* an encompassing Christendom as regards the public education of citizens. Key to the present argument, however, is what has not yet even entered into the conversation, mainly any sense of the reductive ontologies we now so easily inscribe as academic norms. Reductive ontological gazes however, and democratic practice, are *not* the same thing.

This latter use of the secular—namely that of inscribing a normative ontologically reductive gaze onto the cultures of professional thinking and education within society—while an important historical development that admirably served certain needs of its *saeculum,* is now an anachronistic notion that no longer serves a religiously diverse, democratic society. Equating the secular academy with Westernized ontological reductionisms fails to serve a pluralized democratic society in three main ways: First, it assures the academy remains unrepresentative of the diversity of reasonable norms existing within the society it serves. Second, it fails to inculcate and develop democratic norms and practices necessary for the maintenance of a pluralized democracy, a responsibility that falls to academia in its role as society's professional educators and thinkers. Third, it circumscribes resources and actively prevents decolonial modes of thought, thereby reinscribing what Sikh scholar Arvind Mandair calls a "repetition of the colonial event."[63]

"The Return of the Imperial as the Empirical"

Mandair, a South Asian scholar with an emphasis on Sikhism, offers a broad postcolonial critique along these lines, arguing for the ability to take non-Western modes of thought as normative for academic labor, urging us to overcome our fear of "the unbearable proximity of the orient." Mandair articulates what he calls "the repetition of the colonial event" as one that leads to an inevitable objectification of the *other,* of their experiences, cultures, even 'religions,' relegating them to the status of objects or relics. To offer my own example, one way in which this might be accomplished is by consigning everything to "discourse about," thereby ostensibly objectifying alternate ways of being and knowing. Mandair calls such colonial events a "return of the imperial as the empirical."[64]

Mandair notes that pre-colonial India did not have a word for 'religion,' and that "most Indians participated in multiple religious and linguistic identities." Paraphrasing Derrida, Mandair asks, "what if *religio* remained untranslated?" For Mandair, this evokes more than just the problem of deconstructing the category "religion." The problem extends to a lack of mutuality in the so-called "dialogue" between cultures, to the differences present prior to colonization and the demand for representation: "Who are you? What is your true religion?—and the re-sponsio by the colonized—'I am Hindu/Sikh/Muslim' etc."[65]

Mandair extends this problem in a unique way by showing how the colonizing move—that of othering first and only subsequently asking for a response, and thus setting the terms of

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[63] Arvind Mandair, "The Unbearable Proximity of the Orient: Political Religion, Multiculturalism and the Retrieval of South Asian Identities," *Social Identities,* Vol. 10, No. 5 (2004), 647, doi:10.1080/1350463042000294287.
[64] Ibid., 647–49.
[65] Ibid., 650–51.

the "dialogue" that ensues—later gets embedded in the normative stances of a hard constructivism, social sciences, and critical theories of power. The assumed superiority of the "secular" over and against "religion" affects attempts to move beyond colonial mindsets, funneling them into secularized anti-imperialist critiques "that would guard against the 'return of religion' or any form of repressed religiosity." The idea behind such moves is that the mark of critical thinking is based upon an "overcoming of religion or the religious," enacting a "dogma" that remains remarkably resistant to exposure, according to Mandair, because it has become so widespread across academic disciplines.[66] Such a sentiment is also expressed in the opening epigraph to this essay, from John Thatamanil.[67]

What interests me here is the extension of this critique to forms of critical theory, and the ways in which a policing of the religion/secular binary perpetuates colonial objectification. Mandair's work highlights how making normative the secularist gaze induces a "repetition of the colonial event." This occurs by inscribing or naturalizing a fundamental ontological reductionism upon reality. Thus, the terms of "dialogue" have already been set, and a response is demanded in the already concretized terms of a religion/secular binary. A sublimated superiority-complex, once held by Christendom, can then reemerge once "religion" or "experience" has been deconstructed, as a reductionist gaze of social science or analyses of power relations. What would it mean for *religio* to remain untranslated? Then the secular (always co-constructed with 'religion') would need remain so as well. To allow the secular to remain untranslated, or to (re)translate it as a pluralizing space of democratic practice as opposed to ontological reductionism, as other scholars have, is to open up diverse, decolonial spaces of encounter.[68] As Mandair accurately states it, such spaces may enable "the opening of modes of perception, epistemologies, possibilities for thinking and especially different modes of forming and transforming subjectivity that have been repressed." Such "alternative modes of retrieving tradition. . . contest Western hegemony over the task of thinking about the futures of [humanity] and democracy."[69]

What Mandair is after, as well as myself, is a "release of differential subjectivities." He goes on to point out that it is through a "weakening of the ego as the ground of social relations," or a "*primordial* interconnectedness of the self—its essential vacuity," that is the starting point for so much Eastern "thought and ethics."[70] In a different essay, Mandair questions, for instance, the "division of intellectual labor" between disciplines such as philosophy of religion, history of

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[66] Mandair traces the underlying logic behind these colonial mindsets to Hegel. He sees Hegel as reacting to Schelling, who had brought the Orient "unbearably close" to Euro-Christian thought, and thus needed to reinscribe a distinctness and superiority in Euro-Christianity's onto-theological-historical unfolding. In Hegel's later *Lectures on Philosophy of Religion,* Mandair sees a deeper (re)inscription of this supremacist trope than in the more oft analyzed *Philosophy of History.* In *Philosophy of Religion* the ontotheological-historicity of Hegel's thought maps cultures according to their religious imagination, which is graded in hierarchical fashion according to their ability to think rightly the nature of God, "thus the spatial boundaries of a nation/culture corresponds to its spirituality-cum-historicity." In this way, 'religions' outside of European Protestantism, to whom alone the dynamic unfolding of history now belongs, become "static, frozen objects, i.e., phenomena to be known and studied by conceptually more advanced cultures. They become raw material, empirical data that can be fully understood and retrieved by those who possess the proper conceptual tools." (Ibid., 655)

[67] I am also indebted to Thatamanil's work, from which I was made aware of Mandair's. See Thatamanil, *Circling,* 120–23.

[68] For scholars pluralizing the secular, see fn 5.

[69] Mandair, "Unbearable," 659–60.

[70] Ibid.

religion, and area studies.[71] Such division allows for each to inoculate itself against contamination from the object of study. Area studies, for instance, which developed through a need to protect South Asian cultures from colonialist impulses, nevertheless "manages to avoid the truly self-reflexive moment crucial to theory and thereby repeats a key procedure of Orientalism." In setting up a "safety zone" where "secularity protects its object from the hegemonic influence of Western religions," the ability to utilize alternate modes of thought as a normative source for theory is lost. In other words, the ability to use, for example, Buddhist, Indigenous, Sikh, Confucian, Taoist, Hindu, or other ontological orientations as appropriate and normative sources for (decolonial) scholarly labor becomes marred by the need to adhere to secularist gazes. The way in which secularity has been applied to protect such traditions, "in fact repeats the design of a past imperialism." Such a secularist gaze, for instance, prevents "Indic phenomena from being used as resources for conceptual thinking rather than being regarded as relics."[72]

Bringing this tryst of musements back to TWW, it seems to me once again that TWW represents an attempt to open up spaces of scholarly labor that avoid such repetitions of the colonial event. Mandair implies that without a self-reflexive moment that has the potential to enact onto-epistemological transformation within cultural encounters, we (the West) will continue to re-enact the colonial. The more we try to build up barriers, secular or otherwise, to protect us from such encounters, even under the guise of (rightly) wanting to protect others (as well as ourselves) from colonial machinations, we will continue a repetition of the "colonial event." It is almost as if we have to risk our "selves," which includes all that we are—and hence also includes material remnants of the colonial gaze—in such encounters, rather than build barriers around them for supposedly "safe" encounters. Methodological bunkers are no substitute for transformational existential encounters. Indeed, I would argue the latter are in some sense definitional of a Whitman-ian democracy whose multifarious potentialities I aim to uphold.

Paul Hedges' "Confessional" Critique

I now wish to address somewhat in-depth Paul Hedges' critique of the TWW project, which offers an opportunity to press the above theoretical reflections into service. I am grateful for Hedges's "friendly condemnation" of TWW, in the spirit of pushing the project towards "a better TWW." My response to his critique partakes of a similar spirit, both friendly yet firm in its rebuttal.[73] If Hedges's critiques are valid, then they would seem to represent something of a death knell for TWW. Clearly, this is his hunch, as he suspects that a "better TWW" will only be found outside of TWW itself. He critiques TWW on a number of fronts, including: as a "confessional" enterprise, for failing as "scholarship," as not applicable to SBNRs, as lacking diversity, and even as a colonial enterprise. I find many of these critiques wanting, and a few quite pertinent. TWW does need to diversify its community of inquiry, and this currently is something of a point of emphasis for those who have been drawn into the project. Whether it will succeed or not time will tell, but in order for TWW to enact something like what I describe above as its decolonial cache and potential for spurring democratic becoming, diversity within the community of inquiry will be essential. TWW will also benefit from more explicit decolonial labor and postcolonial

[71] Arvind Mandair, "The Repetition of Past Imperialisms: Hegel, Historical Difference, and the Theorization of Indic Religions," *History of Religions* 44, no. 4 (2005): doi:10.1086/497801.
[72] Ibid., 279–81.
[73] I also wish to acknowledge that I have unfortunately not had an opportunity to delve into Hedges's substantial contributions to various fields in his other work. Hence this critique is based solely upon his essay in this journal.

awareness. These points seem eminently reasonable, and also are ones which I have no doubt TWW has the potential to address. Many of the theorists involved in TWW are well aware of postcolonial and decolonial work, and have extensively engaged it in other projects, including John Thatamanil, Hyo-Dong Lee, Bin Song, and others.[74] As mentioned, I am also currently working on a monograph that develops postcolonial arguments undermining a modern religion/secular binary and explicitly discusses decolonial labor and democratic praxis in contemplative keys, which this essay is modeled upon. Hence, I find the potential for TWW to address such critiques quite promising. Certainly, at this early stage of the project, such critiques are not a death knell, but rather a friendly push in decolonial directions.

I do find certain potshots Hedges takes, such as TWW being for "white, Western, American middle-class men to assert their belief that they remain unbounded by any ties and can take as they wish from any part of the world," to be not only unfair, but also demonstrably wrong. Literally no TWW theorist is claiming such a stance. The substantiation of such claims could be quite instructive and helpful to the TWW project, but to do this requires actual in-depth critiques of particular theorists and not one-off quotes or overly broad generalizations. Exposing colonial biases is a welcome endeavor, bringing awareness to issues that need reconsideration. "Call out" critiques, however, which subsist on supposed transgressions of constructed norms, serve more as "red meat for the base" (to use political jargon), rather than as reflective, meaningful critiques necessitating changes in direction. I find Hedges critiques to be mostly along the lines of the former.

Hedges even suggests that at least some non-white theorists may be hiding their heritage in order to participate in TWW. He claims (in a footnote) that John Thatamanil's essay in the flagship TWW volume "does not draw on his Indian heritage," and goes on to say this is "suggestive that a TWW agenda may encourage a more Western-centric engagement." I would contest the claim that Thatamanil's complex Indian heritage is not present in his TWW essay, which develops TWW as a "quest for interreligious wisdom."[75] Contrary to Hedges, I find such heritage present all throughout Thatamanil's essay, *even if it is not explicitly named.* I question whether it is reasonable to suggest that Thatamanil's focus in this essay—on spiritual practice, transformative wisdom, and a desire to practice across religious boundaries—somehow does not "draw on his Indian heritage" (or, for that matter, on his extensive dialogue with decolonial and postcolonial work, widely on display in his most recent book, *Circling the Elephant).* In the TWW essay, Thatamanil presents a vision of contemplative interreligious wisdom attained through multireligious participation, discussing along the way Christianity, Buddhism, and Advaita Vedanta. The latter two, of course, are both religions of India. In his biographical preface to *Circling the Elephant*, Thatamanil calls himself a "child of two worlds," and admits to being drawn to these traditions of India both from "spiritual affinities," as well as an intuition that in them could be found "a sense of what it means to be Indian in a way that being Indian Christian alone could not."[76] Given that multireligious participation and spiritual practice have been strong aspects of Indian religiosity, I simply do not see how Thatamanil's TWW essay "does not draw on his Indian heritage." A more pertinent question might be: Does decolonial praxis really

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[74] See Thatamanil, *Circling;* Lee, *Spirit;* Song, "Comparative."

[75] John J. Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls as the quest for interreligious wisdom," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. by Jerry Martin (New York: Routledge, 2020), 53–64.

[76] Thatamanil, *Circling*, xiii.

necessitate that all non-white people constantly (and explicitly) talk about their heritage in order for it to count as part of their context?

I bring this up because I think it is indicative of a deeper problem with Hedges's overall critique, namely the encompassing power he assigns to language in general and his acquiescence to a hard constructivist ontology as normative for scholarly production. The assertion seems to be that if something is not explicitly present and denotative in linguistic form, it simply does not exist, at least not for a so-called "scholar." This is true not only for Thatamanil's Indian heritage, but also ostensibly for "ultimate reality" itself. Since ultimate reality cannot be captured and objectified by "language," then it cannot be present in any form for the "scholar." This is an example of what I have called "rhetoric of the secular."

Hedges does anticipate, and even sympathizes with, a counter-critique to his own along the lines of undermining a religion/secular binary. While I think he is correct in anticipating, and sympathizing, with such a critique, I think he fails to anticipate its scope, and hence his policing of scholarship remains in a somewhat confused state. Hedges wants to apply a test of "scholarship" to TWW, one that he believes TWW fails, but seems a bit flippant on just where and when such a test should be applied. This 'test of scholarship,' at its root, is essentially a pledge of fealty to a hard constructivist ontology, which Hedges justifies as a kind of status quo consensus in academia. However, I believe his "test" fails on both fronts, i.e., it is neither an appropriate 'test for scholarship,' nor does it represent anything like a consensus—though it must be admitted that such a test *is* indicative of an ongoing play for hegemony amongst some academics today. As such, it demands a somewhat detailed response.

Hedges creates a binary for his critique between what he terms "academic" and "confessional." The academic study of religion includes "academic theology" and "religious studies," while "confessional" is relegated to theology within divinity schools, seminaries and private religious universities. The key distinction for Hedges is that "confessional theology…speaks within the confines of a specific tradition" and can "assert its own claims about 'ultimacy'," while the other two employ purely "secular" tools of analysis. The secular is explicitly wedded to the terms "academic" and "non-confessional," as seen for example in the following sentences: "In so far as the academy is a secular place…confessional claims about belief are left at the door"; and here: "pragmatically within the academy…as a non-confessional discipline, the study of religion sits solely within academic theology and religious studies."[77]

The problem lies in the delineation between what Hedges considers "confessional," and what is considered "non-confessional." One might expect that such a delineation be formed around whether one accepts a framework of open-ended, fallibilistic inquiry as an aspect of one's academic labor, for instance, or whether one feels beholden, *a priori,* for upholding particular dogmatic belief structures. This seems like a very reasonable way to place a divide upon more divinity school, "confessional" like studies, and more so-called "secular" ones. This, however, is *not* where Hedges places his marker, and hence he begins to wander into rhetoric of the secular.

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[77] Paul Hedges, "Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (this issue), 20-21.

What Hedges upholds as constitutive of passing a 'test for scholarship' is not a stance of critical, open-ended inquiry, but rather adherence to a Kantian framework of noumena and phenomena. For all of Hedges's "hedges" in the direction of decolonial praxis and postcolonial awareness, he still fundamentally looks to Kant to formulate his "test for scholarship."[78] Hedges describes such a test this way: "between the metaphysical realm of claims to know that which falls outside of 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." While briefly acknowledging postmodern critiques of Kant, Hedges simply goes on to claim, "All we see are competing forms of discourse." Later in the essay, Hedges tells us, "All we have access to are the narratives of specific groups…so variably socially conditioned narratives about ultimacy." In the sentences immediately following the latter, Hedges makes his point crystal clear, "To go beyond this examination of human traditions is, I would suggest…to take a leap of faith. It is to assert a particular version of claims as being true. …[I]t is a confessional claim, not an academic one."

One might ask, however, if it is actually Hedges, along with other hard constructivists, who are taking the "leap of faith," and who are ostensibly being "confessional." To claim that "all we have are competing forms of discourse" or "socially conditioned narratives about ultimacy," or that human consciousness is bound within the limits of "socially constructed language," or that ultimacy falls outside the realm of "human comprehension," is to make *ontological claims.* It is to inscribe human knowing within a very limited range of possibility, one that would quite clearly be contested by an almost unlimited number of human claims and experiences, whether or not one is talking about "ultimacy." To make such a claim is fine, but it should be acknowledged as but one ontological orientation among many. If Hedges' test for scholarship falls along such lines, it would eliminate a breathtaking number of scholars and discourse from academia today. New materialists, such as Jane Bennett's "vibrant materialism," would seem to be out, as would the entire discourse of affect theory, since both insist on theorizing aspects of nature and reality that exceed human social construction (without negating the importance of social construction), and those are so-called *secular* discourses. How about religiously inflected theorists?

Howard Thurman, the great African-American philosopher, mystic, scholar, and mentor for many in the civil rights movement (including Martin Luther King Jr.), would certainly fail such a test of scholarship. This is a matter addressed by Kipton E. Jensen in a new book on Thurman's importance for philosophy of religion. Jensen laments that "Philosophers have tended to dismiss Thurman as a religious mystic or a theologian, as though that somehow places him outside the scope of philosophical analysis."[79] Jensen argues that Thurman was a "profound

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[78] Immanuel Kant was not only a massively influential philosopher in the West, but also, according to J. Kameron Carter, bequeathed "to the modern world its first scientific theory and philosophical account of race" (J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 81). At least some scholars have read Kant's philosophy together with his racist theories. For some of those accounts see: Carter, *Race,* especially "Part I-Dramatizing Race: A Theological Account of Modernity"; Theodore Vial, *Modern Religion, Modern Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), especially Chapter 1, "Kant and Race"; Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), especially Chapter 5, "The Darker Side of the Enlightenment: A Decolonial Reading of Kant's *Geography*"; and Yountae, *Decolonial Abyss,* 16-24.
[79] Kipton E. Jensen, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 5.

philosopher" whose work "offers us something better than, or at least something different and more practically minded than, a philosophical system: he personified a philosophical life, one lived with courage and conviction, distinguished by service to the disinherited and downtrodden in what he understood to be a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity."[80] Jensen's description of Thurman's philosophy reminds one of Pierre Hadot's articulation of ancient philosophy as a "way of life," which has found contemporary resonance in the halls of academia (including by at least three TWW theorists).[81]

An understanding of "philosophy as a way of life" also resonates with the work of Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa, as seen above. Anzaldúa's work marks a particularly pronounced critique of Hedges' position, as she refuses to submit her indigenous ancestry and personal experiences to the philosophical straitjackets of a colonial Kantian framework. Anzaldúa situates her work directly as decolonial praxis, yet she would also fail Hedges' test for scholarship. Similar critiques of Hedges' position can be found in many decolonial works from Global South and Caribbean scholars as well, such as the aforementioned Sylvia Winter, Walter Mignolo, Édouard Glissant, and An Yountae.[82]

Even with Hedges' own examples it is not really clear just where or how this "test" is to be applied. Hedges discusses Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman's "Comparative Religious Ideas Project" (CRIP), which seems to pass Hedges' test for scholarship because "what they uncover is 'what the religions say about ultimate reality,' rather than any claim about 'ultimate reality' itself." Hedges slightly nuances his test on Neville's own more philosophical work, which "perhaps veers towards a confessional tone," but nevertheless remains "extremely rigorous and philosophically sophisticated." In a footnote, Hedges further claims that Neville's work is "grounded in how traditions speak" and "does not permit…the jump to speak of ultimacy per se."[83] Yet Hedges skillfully elides Neville's later three-volume philosophical theology, which would seem to blatantly fail as scholarship if one were to follow Hedges's line of reasoning.[84]

It will serve my own critique to make this point more explicit, as Neville's philosophical theology, it seems to me, marks an impressive challenge to Hedges' accusations of academic unworthiness against TWW. In it, Neville could not be clearer that he is engaging ultimacy and first order questions, and *not* just second or third order questions, such as "discourse about ultimacy." Neville writes, "All three volumes are straightforwardly theological in the sense that, for all their second-order methodological analyses and dialectical arguments, their intent is first order and practical."[85] Neville is equally adamant in his argument that such theorizing is perfectly appropriate for a secular academy. As just one instance, the following argues for its inclusion as philosophy:

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[80] Ibid., xiv.
[81] See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*. The three TWW theorists I have in mind are John Thatamanil, Bin Song, and myself. See Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls"; and Song, "Comparative."
[82] See fn 34, fn 35.
[83] Hedges acknowledges that Neville may disagree with him on this point.
[84] For references to Neville's three-volume *Philosophical Theology,* see fn 62.
[85] Neville, *Religion,* xvi. An introductory reading of any of the three volumes would bring this point home clearly. There are many examples of quotations one could choose from to illustrate this point. Here is but one more from the same volume: "The twists and turns of analysis in [*Philosophical Theology, Volume*] *Three* never lose sight of the first-order question … How can I or we be religious in ways that truthfully engage what is ultimate?" (Ibid.).

> *Philosophical Theology* holds that philosophy proper ought to include within itself both theological reflection on ultimate dimensions and also the experiences of ultimacy that are involved in religion. Philosophy is a way of engaging the world as its object, this includes engaging ultimate realities and ultimate dimensions of human existence. In the long run, this engagement is experientially based.[86]

In fact, Neville could even reasonably be accused of attempting to start a religion, given the focus in the third volume is his answer to the question: "How can I or we be religious in ways that truthfully engage what is ultimate?" (which is more or less precisely what religions attempt to answer).[87] The reason, however, why Neville's orientation is not "confessional," is that it is also explicitly framed as an invitation for a community of inquiry, where his musings on, experiences of, engagements with, and philosophical articulations about "ultimacy" are posited as fallibilistic hypotheses to be revised and corrected as evidence proceeds, positioned within a (scholarly) community of inquiry and a broader theory of inquiry.

While Hedges reproaches TWW for wanting "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," I believe it is Hedges who is actually trying to have his cake and eat it too, twice over. First, given Hedges's test for scholarship—one which he restates elsewhere in his essay as "to be a scholarly and academic form of theology it would not assert claims about 'ultimacy'"—is he willing to claim that Neville's three-volume philosophical theology, which obviously fails such a test, is not worthy of the moniker "scholarship?" What about other theorists mentioned above? Thurman? Anzaldúa? If the test is more about critical reflection, philosophical sophistication, broad and/or deep understanding of subject matter, etc., then so be it—and leave it at that. If the test is fealty to a Kantian-inflected hard constructivism, then the consequences of such a stance should be acknowledged. When attempts are made to slip these consequences in under the table, as it were, they devolve into rhetoric of the secular.

Second—and this is what I mean by naming this section Hedges's "confessional" critique—I believe that it is Hedges who is being "confessional," namely to a Kantian constructivism, and not TWW. TWW is not insisting on any particular way of imagining either ultimacy or the human. In fact, it is quite open as to the ways in which ultimacy might be discovered, engaged, and oriented around by human beings. TWW does not demand that anyone else adopt a preferred ontological orientation, even if it does make a wager that human beings *do* have access to "ultimacy," however that may be conceived (and TWW explicitly acknowledges this happens not just in religious endeavors, but in essentially all human endeavors, and thus embraces a broad orientation as to what might count as evidence of ultimacy). Certainly, TWW does not prioritize policing of scholarship, nor acquiescence to the status quos of discourse today (while also acknowledging the many important contributions all discourses can make to our understanding of humanity as well as ultimacy, even if many of them remain partial and reductive, as perhaps all discourse is). TWW does not accuse those who do not find its wager appealing as being unworthy of academic labor, nor does it wish to bend all others into a

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[86] Ibid., xviii.
[87] Ibid., xvi.

particularized orientation towards the nature of reality. Yet Hedges's position arguably does all of the above.

The confessional nature of Hedges's critique crystalizes when one recognizes there is no need to assume a particularized ontological orientation as normative for scholarly labor. Hedges would seem to demand assent to just such a particularized ontological orientation, in order to pass a "test for scholarship." This type of "confessional claim" simply mirrors past practices of "big T" Theology, as a dominant and hegemonic orientation towards the nature of reality.[88] Such orientations demand fealty and remain ever ready to accuse those who fail to "bend the knee" as heretics. Today, such rhetoric of the secular has implications that go quite beyond whether TWW might find a hospitable reception among academics, contributing to a substantial silencing of many voices.

When such orientations are assumed to be the only valid ones for 'secular' scholarly production, they slip rhetoric of the secular in "unnoticed below the radar screen," as Timothy Fitzgerald has stated it so well.[89] In so doing, they invent a supposedly neutral, secular space of rationality. This allegedly neutral space "naturalizes" particular ontological orientations, simultaneously objectifying all other orientations thru its normative gaze, thereby collapsing diversity into a singular ontological orientation. This is often accomplished through a secularist denial of ontology all together, thus repressing their own ontological orientations from public contestation. However, to loosely paraphrase William James, "we all have an 'ontological orientation' under our hat."[90]

To bring home this point about rhetoric of the secular, consider the following sentence from Hedges" critique: "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" (emphasis mine). At first this might strike one as a rather pedestrian statement, one that might generally be agreed upon. That is, until one considers all the people in religious studies it not only ostensibly leaves out, but also caricatures as *"fall[ing] outside any critical or credible form of religious studies."* What would Jeffrey Kripal, both a religious studies scholar and one of our panelists, who has argued for some time, armed with large amounts of evidence, for a much more capacious ontological openness in the field—feel about such a statement? Or Sri Lankan anthropologist of religion, Gananath

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[88] I take the term big "T" theology from Hart, "From Theology," (see also fn 63).

[89] Fitzgerald remains at pains to point out that when we use the term "religion", especially without an awareness of its (Western) constructed nature, we concurrently imply "something that is essentially different from the neutral, objective, tolerant, nonreligious space that today we call the secular." For Fitzgerald, one of the most important functions performed by current discourse in the academic study of religion lies in embedding "the superior nonreligious space of objective neutrality deeper into our…unquestioned assumptions about the world. We feel we are in touch with natural rationality, with ordinary reasonableness with which any normal person would agree," and thus we disguise the "persuasive role of rhetoric" secular discourse achieves, while simultaneously "concealing the origins of this rhetoric." The idea of a nonreligious, secular space is always co-constructed with the very idea of "religion," yet when we do not state this explicitly, "it slips unnoticed below the radar screen and in this way acts far more powerfully as a tacit organizer of the rhetorical flows which we inhale in our day-to-day discourse." See Timothy Fitzgerald, *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 31-32.

[90] James was referring specifically to a "philosophy." Though I seem to recall reading this quote, I can't seem to locate it. In any case, James expresses a similar notion at the beginning of his lectures on pragmatism, see William James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings* (1907, reis., London: Penguin Classics, 2000), 7.

Obeyesekere, who explicitly rejects a Westernized stance of reductive empiricism in order to think normatively from his own Buddhist orientation, refusing "to be tied down to an epistemology of empiricism?"[91] Or religious studies scholar Arvind Mandair, as seen above? Or comparative philosopher, scholar of religion, and TWW contributor Bin Song?[92] What about Raimon Panikkar, who taught his entire career in religious studies departments: is his work now deemed unworthy of the term "scholarship"? (No doubt Panikkar exuberantly fails Hedges' test for scholarship.) How about Neville? Thurman? Anzaldúa? Or even current religious studies scholar Robert Orsi, an arguably "mainstream" (whatever that means) scholar who has also begun to question the dominance of hard constructivist frameworks for scholarly production?

Orsi, for instance, worries about how hard constructivist approaches leave the field of religious studies separated from the existential lives of religious adherents, who in these times of fluidity, turbulence and great change "are looking for assistance with the real religious challenges of their local worlds and with their immediate and personal concerns."[93] Orsi also recognizes that religious studies is currently experiencing many contestations as to its subject matter, due to numerous conflicting influences, including the radically shifting sociological and demographic changes in the United States, and the establishment of a growing diversity of religious, spiritual, ethnic, and cultural voices in academia. Rather than submitting all scholarship to an anachronistic religion/secular binary, or to a Kantian constructivist confessionalism, Orsi speaks of an opportunity for "identifying new research possibilities, introducing theoretical innovations, and addressing the public's urgent questions in relevant ways."[94] He contests the turns to deconstruction and critical theory as open to accusations of coloniality, while also constructing "religious actors as mindless practitioners whose interiorities and imaginations do not matter, or matter only as a function of the social."[95] Orsi even begins to articulate a "tradition of the more" (a la William James) and the "realness of the holy," shepherding in religio-spiritual orientations that can assist scholarly work in religious studies, and which may help engender a return to "experience" and a shift away from "language."[96] Stephen Bush, another religious studies scholar, has also begun to shine a critical lens on the ascendence of hard constructivist approaches and the concomitant turn away from "experience" as a valid scholarly category. Bush makes the point, for example, that sex is different from "discourse about sex," or, I might add, the politics of sex.[97] Personally, I see no reason why scholars should be incapable of holding an awareness of both the reality (and importance) of experience, *and* the reality of social context and power relations.

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[91] Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Awakened Ones: Phenomenology of Visionary Experience* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 1. Obeyesekere develops his position in detail, going on to theorize a type of "trance consciousness" in religious experience that embodies different traits of knowing, such as multi-valent experiences of "time" and what he calls "aphoristic thinking." Obeyesekere claims, importantly for considering forms of decolonial praxis, that "every society outside the European Enlightenment held that…forms of trance were desirable experiences, even though difficult to achieve" (Ibid., 21).

[92] See Song, "Comparative."

[93] Robert A. Orsi, "Introduction," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies,* ed. Robert Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 9.

[94] Ibid., 12.

[95] Robert A. Orsi, "Belief," *Material Religion: Journal of Objects, Art and Belief* 7, no. 1 (2011), 14. As quoted in Stephen S. Bush, *Visions of Religion: Experience, Meaning, and Power* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 63.

[96] Robert A. Orsi, "The problem of the holy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies,* ed. Robert Orsi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 99–104.

[97] Bush, *Visions,* 6.

Many more examples could be offered, but this long essay must end at some point. The extent of my counter-critique (as well as the length of this essay) is due to the seriousness with which I take Hedges' critique. His position is one that might be considered prominent (though not dominant) within academia today. One reason I have spent so much time on it is because of these wider implications that extend beyond TWW. I believe that an undermining of 'rhetoric of the secular' is an important avenue of decolonial praxis, moving us towards, as Orsi puts it, "identifying new research possibilities, introducing theoretical innovations, and addressing the public's urgent questions in relevant ways." If TWW can make progress on diversifying its community of inquiry, I think it is well positioned to provide one such arena, for just such "theoretical innovation."

In Conclusion

I think there is broad overlap for many scholars in terms of decolonial concerns and hopes for better forms of decolonial praxis. How we actually do such labor efficaciously is a question whose answer is not so clear, and perhaps that is the point. Decolonial praxis brings up questions that cannot be answered simply by more "discourse" or stricter methodologies. Such questions need to be *lived into,* as "ways of life" that proceed within liminal spaces enacted by the questions themselves. My reflections here are only meant to open up conversations, and as always remain humbly open to critique, as I/we continue to navigate liminal spaces in a deconstructed world that yet remains.

In closing, I wish to return to certain points made earlier, regarding the existential concerns of students who often enter religious studies classrooms today. These points broadly resonate with sentiments seen above in the work of numerous religious studies scholars, including Katherine Janiec Jones, Linell Cady, Gloria Anzaldúa, Robert Orsi, and Jeff Kripal, which revolve around the religio-spiritual interests of students (and scholars). SBNR inclinations, along with other religio-spiritual experimentation such as multiple religious belonging and interspiritual practitioners, are clearly driving forces for such existential concerns. These emergent orientations correlate with numerous factors, including the mass influx of Eastern and Indigenous religiosities into mainstream culture over the past fifty years, a declining power of religious institutions in society, increased comparative work within academia, increasing demographic diversity in all areas of American cultural life, heightened awareness of social justice issues, and contemporary consumeristic and exploitative economic practices.[98]

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[98] Some scholars have argued that multi-religious and interspiritual practices are heavily appropriative and/or products of the consumeristic cultural conditioning of late-stage capitalism and postmodern logic. See for instance, Jeremy Carrette and Richard King, *Selling Spirituality: The Silent Takeover of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2005). I find these critiques wanting for various reasons, which I address in the aforementioned, upcoming monograph (see footnote 1). One of the most severe critiques against such stances are their inability to take into account mature and sophisticated cases of interreligious experimentation, as seen for instance in Lee, *Spirit*; Thatamanil, *Circling*; Paul F. Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2009); Som Pourfarzaneh, "The Miracle of Compassion: An Essay on Multi-Religiosity by a Buddhist Muslim," *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 33 (August 2021), 50–70; and arguably Raimon Panikkar's entire *oeuvre*. I also discuss mature examples of interspiritual practitioners in Rory McEntee, "The Religious Quest as Transformative Journey: Interspiritual Religious Belonging and the Problem of Religious Depth," *De Gruyter Open* 3 (2017), 613–29.

In a telling examination of the term "spirituality," Jewish studies scholar Boaz Huss reveals how the term has undergone a radical semantic shift in recent decades. Rather than conjuring up dichotomies of material and spiritual realities, the term now represents what Boaz calls a newly constructed social category. Pertinent to my argument, Huss analyzes this newly constructed social category as one that actively subverts a religion/secular binary that lies at the heart of the modern imaginary. He suggests this is one reason why emergent forms of religio-spiritual practice see passionate critique from both sides of the aisle, from secularists as well as traditional religionists.[99]

I imagine that this powerful binary is part of the discomfort or confusion felt by Jones in her essay, for instance, between being a "philosopher" or a "theologian." Only along the modern Western trajectory were these two separated, and perhaps a decolonial culture will not be able to make such clear-cut distinctions. I also found it interesting that Paul Bramadat's essay treats meditation groups, yoga practitioners, even an indigenous inflected reverence for nature, as all inherently "not-religious." I wonder what concept of "religion" is assumed here? My point being that emergent forms of religio-spiritual practice, from multiple religious belonging to SBNRs to interspiritual practitioners to comparativists, challenge the very categories upon which modernity is based (including the concepts upon which a so-called "secular" academy is based). This part of their decolonial cache, as long as such practices are engaged in authentically, in non-appropriative ways with humility and respect. It is also important to acknowledge that to "think with" alternative orientations, such as the Eastern-inflected "essential vacuity" of the self that Mandair describes, is to inherently think outside of a religion/secular binary, since such a binary is a product of the modern West. This dynamic can clearly be seen in Bin Song's reframing of comparative theology from a Ruist position above, which does not abide by a religion/secular binary. As a result, a Ruist comparative theology can be seen to be a "liberal art *par excellence*."

In other words, to privilege certain reductive ontological orientations, such as a hard constructivism or scientific materialism, and to subsequently reject ontological orientations that might be described as "religious" or "spiritual" for scholarly work, is to enact a colonial mindset—thereby working against the creation of a truly multi-ethnic, multi-racial, religiously and spiritually diverse democracy. In order to engage such democratic praxis, we must allow for a great variety of our multiplicitous perspectives and orientations towards the nature of reality to be present in our scholarly communities of inquiry. We must endeavor to make space for such diversities of perspectives to be present to one another, in dialogue and critical reflection with one another—not as zero-sum battles for hegemony—but as beloved communities of religious diversity. To be "secular" is also to be "religious," for it is to adopt a particular perspective towards the nature of reality and to reflect, argue, and critique from such a perspective. To grant a diversity of perspectives and orientations the moniker of "scholarly labor" is to engage in decolonial praxis. It is to take up our responsibility as professional thinkers and educators within the rich, profoundly diverse, religiously pluralistic society in which we subsist. It is, perhaps more than anything, to engage in a much-needed praxis of democracy itself. Thus, I will close as I

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[99] See Boaz Huss, "The Sacred is the Profane, Spirituality is not Religion: The Decline of the Religion/Secular Divide and the Emergence of the Critical Discourse on Religion," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 27 (2015), 97-103; and Boaz Huss, "Spirituality: The Emergence of a New Cultural Category and its Challenge to the Religious and the Secular," *Journal of Contemporary Religion,* 29:1 (2014), 47–60, doi: 10.1080/13537903.2014.864803.

began, with a final reveal on those words of wisdom from that queer sage of democracy, Walt Whitman, who professed in his visionary and prescient "Democratic Vistas":

> For I say at the core of democracy, finally is the religious element. All the religions, old and new, are there. Nor may the scheme step forth, clothed in resplendent beauty and command, till these, bearing the best, the latest fruit, the spiritual, shall fully appear.[100]

<div align="center">ঞ্চ</div>

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[100] Whitman, "Democratic Vistas," 949.