

A Theology for Religious Seekers: Reading Kaufman, Taylor, Mercadante, and Diller

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This article proposes a theology for religious seekers, a situation that is characterized by “erring” (as developed by Mark Taylor) between religious traditions. It does so by using the method of Imaginative Construction, which Gordon Kaufman uses to develop a contemporary Christian theology. In order to do so, Kaufman’s list of classical Christian loci (the human, the world, God, and Christ) is replaced by a list of theological loci that are specifically relevant for religious seekers. Inspired by the work of Mercadante on SBNR (Spiritual But Not Religious) I choose: the human, the world, the ultimate, keys to the ultimate, truth, spiritual growth, afterlife, and Mark Taylor’s “instability.” The analysis leads to a proposal of five steps of faith guiding someone from an agnostic starting point to a considered religious seeker position. First, a religious seeker ethics is constructed out of a view of the human and the world. Next, in order to be a religious seeker, an interest in spirituality is required. Then, in matters of truth, religious seekers will claim authority for themselves. From there, a number of possible views on diversity, as obtained from the work of Diller, can lead to the instability of religious seeking.

Keywords: Religious seeker, SBNR, Gordon Kaufman, Mark Taylor, Linda Mercadante, Jeanine Diller, steps of faith, erring

*The conception of theology as imaginative construction can provide Christians (and others) with methodological justification and procedures for drawing more widely on the resources of the various religious and moral traditions of humankind, as we seek to envision in new, better informed ways the cosmos in which we live and within which we must find our place. In this larger and wider human conversation that is increasingly getting under way, *In Face of Mystery* represents but one voice, drawing principally from Christian monotheistic resources. I hope its publication will encourage other voices (non-Christian as well as Christian) to speak out, articulating holistic visions significantly different from mine*

—Gordon Kaufman, “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage”¹

Traditionally, systematic theology and constructive theology are based on, and originate out of, one of the major religious traditions. In Europe and North America, that tradition most often is the Christian one. Generally, these disciplines aim to explicate faith seeking understanding, or aim to improve the quality of religion by proposing to formulate it in new, improved ways. This desire to do theology based out of a tradition is so strong that even present-day theologians working in the field of inter-religious theology assume one can only do proper interreligious theology if one bases it on a “home tradition.”²

The author acknowledges Chris Doude van Troostwijk, Dan McKanan and Marianne Moyaert for their useful suggestions as well supervision of this project, the reviewers of this article for their thoughtful input, and Rev. John Clifford for thorough proofreading.

¹ Gordon Kaufman, “Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage,” *Religious Studies Review* 20:3 (July 1994): 180–81.

² For example, chapter 1 of Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious Pluralism & Interreligious Theology: The Gifford Lectures—an extended edition* (Maryknoll, Orbis Books, 2017).

However, in the meantime, an increasingly large group of people pursues their spiritual interests in other ways, thus qualifying as religious seekers—which I would like to define as “being unstable in their orientation toward various religious traditions.” Religious seekers, to which I reckon myself, are a group of people considerably overlapping with groups such as Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) and multiple religious believers (MRB).³ For many religious seekers, their seeking is not necessarily a process that leads to an end (that is, a stable religious position in or outside one of the religious traditions), although this outcome is not to be excluded. Rather, for these seekers, the process itself is the essence of their spiritual attitude. This position may be described as that of “a liberal seeker after authentic but unstable religious views and experiences.” This seeking is not just an idiosyncratic process. Rather, as Leigh Eric Schmidt argues, it has the character of an emerging tradition and culture, reflecting a wide and increasing number of people, and with roots back as far as 19th century transcendentalism.⁴ This provokes ample reason to analyze this position from a constructive point of view. Yet, for religious seekers the traditional systematic or constructive way of doing theology out of one tradition would be incoherent with their unstable attitude towards these traditions.

The quotation at the start of this essay appeared in an article by Gordon Kaufman shortly after publication of his main work, *In Face of Mystery*.⁵ Kaufman, pivotal in establishing the field of constructive theology as opposed to systematic and dogmatic theology,⁶ has a theological method that is especially interesting for religious seekers for two reasons. First, he builds his theology on an agnostic (i.e. non-Christian) starting point; and second, he sees theology as a public activity, as opposed to theologies that function within a theological circle corresponding to one of the main religious traditions. In the quoted paragraph, Kaufman summarizes an invitation and challenge for people from different religious positions to imaginatively construct their position in terms of a number of deliberate steps of faith leading from an agnostic starting point to their position. In this article, I will accept this challenge on behalf of the religious seeker, thus aiming to offer religious seekers a proper account of their spirituality, delivering an understanding of why one should be a religious seeker, and make such a position comparable to other religious positions such as the contemporary Christian position of Kaufman. Doing so, I will introduce and discuss steps that lead from the same agnostic starting point Kaufman is using to the position of a religious seeker. (See figure 1 and 2.)

Before moving on, it is appropriate to write some words on my choice to discuss *religious seekers*, rather than *SBNR* or *MRB*. The reason is that for building a theology of the religious seeker, I would like to construct theology around two themes, which are probably quite common among SBNR and MRB. However, as there is no research available indicating that these themes are characteristic of these latter groups in general, I do not want to claim that the theology to be developed is an SBNR or MRB theology in general as such. Rather, I would only like to claim

³ The author identifies as belonging to the Unitarian (Universalist) tradition, which explicitly supports religious seekerism. The author is recognized as a minister by the General Assembly of Unitarian and Free Christian churches in the United Kingdom.

⁴ Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Restless Souls: The Making of American Spirituality*, 2nd edition, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2012).

⁵ Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁶ Jason Wyman, “Constructive Theology, History, Movement, Method,” in *What is Constructive Theology? Histories, Methodologies, and Perspectives*, eds. Marion Grau and Jason Wyman (London: T & T Clark 2020).

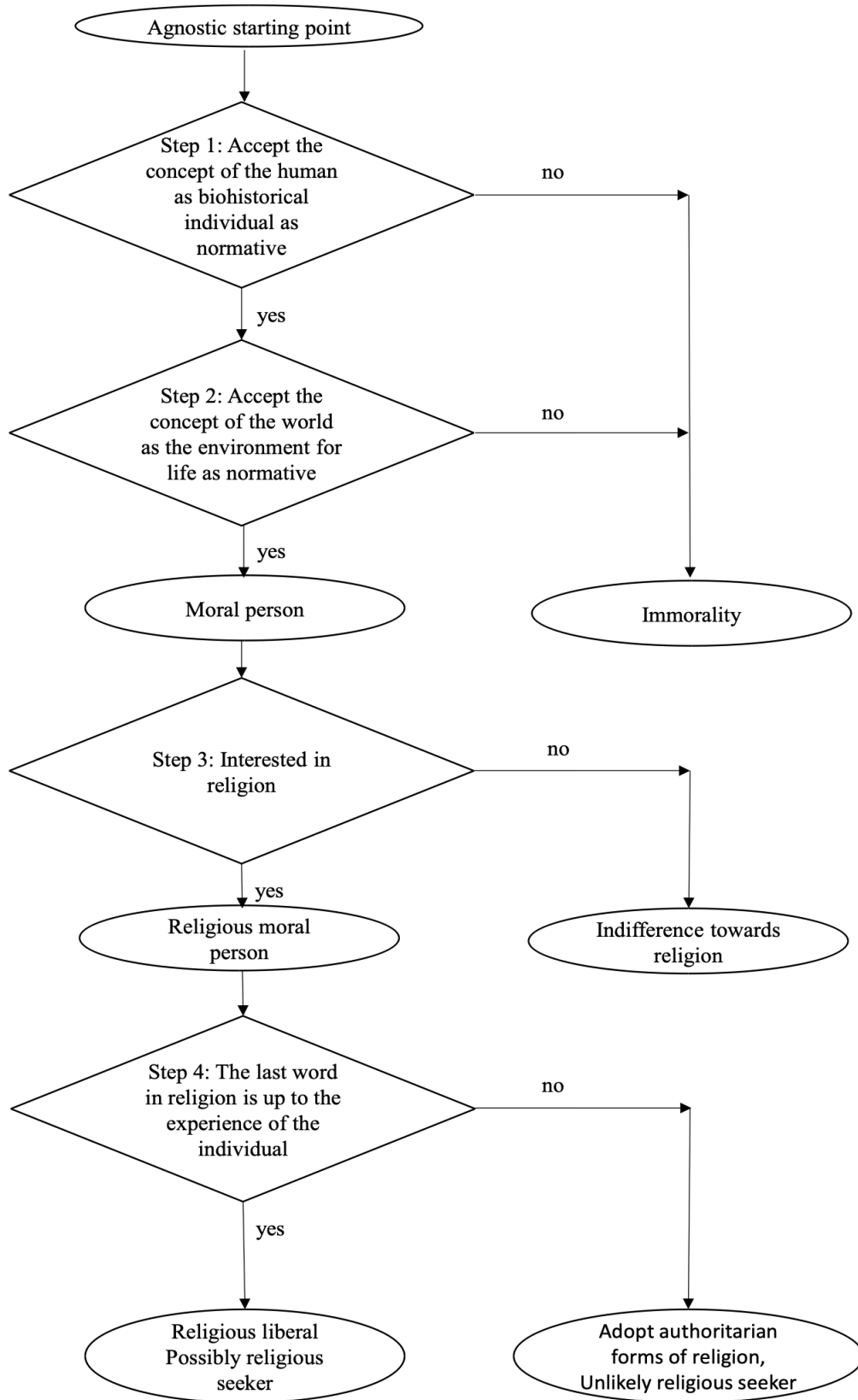


Figure 1: Overview of the first four steps of a theology for religious seekers.

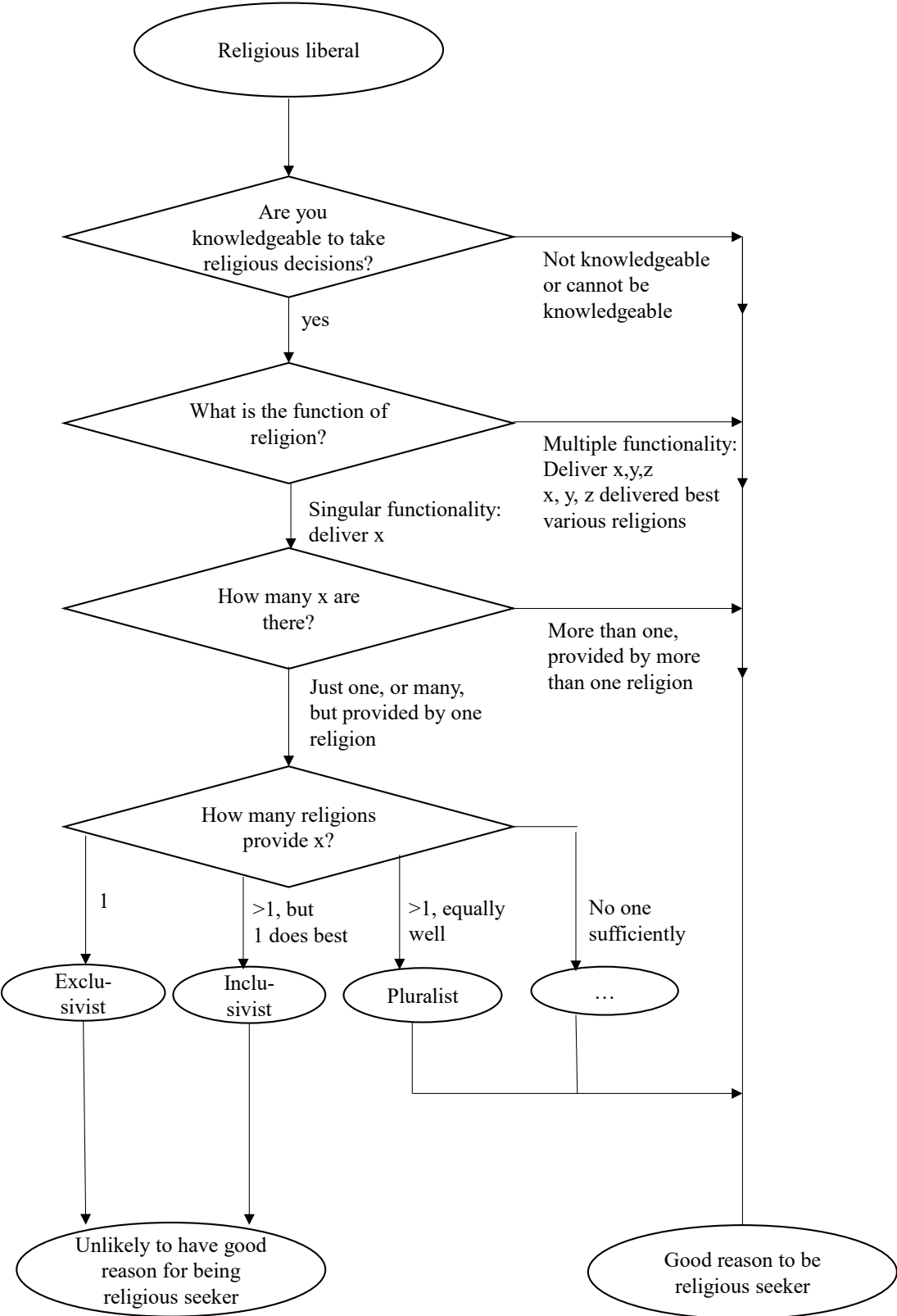


Figure 2: Overview of step 5 towards being a religious seeker

that the theology to be developed is highly relevant for a considerable subset of SBNR and MRB, which is the liberal religious seeker indicated above.

The first theme is instability. Religious seeker’s view is unstable with respect to religious traditions and may be so on various theological loci, and specifically on ultimate reality, as well. At one moment I have a transcending experience, I may experience the world being ultimately filled with love, while at another moment I may experience the world as utterly empty. Thus, ultimate reality, among other theological loci, is the object of continuous constructing and deconstructing. Mark Taylor calls this process *erring*.⁷

The second theme is a hierarchy of reflection which deviates from some classical theologies in which the ultimate criterion in talking about God is God self. Generally, to the extent that we have no direct knowledge of ultimate reality itself, next in line of the hierarchy is a *revelatory source*, for example scripture, or the church. All further theology is formulated subsequent to these, such as thoughts about ethics, dogmas, role of the ratio, religious experience, and so on. For religious seekers, this view is turned up side down. The way we see ultimate reality is subordinated to (for example) our individual evaluation, ratio, contemporary academic insight, direct individual experience of particular circumstances, authenticity, or culture.

There may be skepticism towards the idea of developing a theology for religious seekers, because of the instability of the views of religious seekers. Indeed if one equates coherence in religious views with stability in the view on ultimate reality that may be justified. There also may be skepticism against reducing the position of ultimate reality in the reflective hierarchy, if the essence of theology is seen as happening within the authority of ultimate reality itself (i.e. a theological circle). Indeed, if theology is done in this classical way it may be impossible to construct a theology for a religious seeker. However, I would like to claim, that a serious religious seeker is served by (1) a reflection on the instability of views itself, (2) the hierarchy of reflection itself and, on top of those, reflective schemes functioning within and coherent with those two boundary conditions. It is this broader way of seeing theology, which serves religious seeker’s faith seeking understanding. This article offers such a theology and because such a theology cannot be tradition based, it should inevitably be *Theology Without Walls*.⁸

There is no organizational body housing the majority of religious seekers, and therefore there is no generally accepted creed defining what they are and what they are not.⁹ However as stated, the group of religious seekers considerably overlaps with SBNR. For this group, Linda Mercadante, a scholar who did important empirical work in the field of SBNR, in *Belief Without Borders* has made a very useful mapping that is also generally valid for religious seekers.¹⁰ In short, Mercadante finds the following common characteristics for SBNR: They are generally open

⁷ Mark C. Taylor is a postmodern religious and cultural philosopher. His most relevant book in relation to this article is *Erring: A Postmodern A/Theology*, (Chicago, Chicago University Press, 1987).

⁸ Jerry Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, (London: Routledge, 2020).

⁹ However, the Unitarian Universalist Association, being a denomination that houses religious seekers, has accepted principles and sources of faith which may help in systematic reflection on religious seekers, as I have shown in Hans le Grand, “Gordon Kaufman and a Theology for the Seeker,” *Religions* 10:8 (2019): 480. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10080480>. See also www.uua.org.

¹⁰ Linda Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

mindful and pluralistic, in the sense that all people can have their own truth. There is a concern with existential questions and ultimate reality, but an antipathy to institution, authority, dogma, and exclusivism. They have a liberative ethos, they look for authenticity/authentic self in a process of spiritual growth and they are interested in afterlife and human nature.

Theological loci

Analyzing the themes mentioned by Mercadante, the list of four classical theological loci that Kaufman uses for a Christian theology (the human, the world, God, and Christ) needs to be reconsidered for religious seekers.¹¹ Of these, the human is found as a theological locus by Mercadante and the world, although not mentioned by Mercadante, might be of sufficient religious seeker's interest to discuss it as a theological locus as well. However, although Mercadante finds theological questions to be of relevance for religious seekers, the theological loci of "God" and "Christ" need adjustment, as religious seekers may look at both theistic as well as atheistic traditions. Therefore, the concept of God is no starting point for religious seekers, but a possible outcome, and, as such possibly unstable. This theological locus needs to be broadened and I broaden it into "ultimate reality". Likewise, the category of Christ is specific for Christianity and should be broadened into a locus "keys to ultimate reality," which, analogous to Christ, includes everything that gives insight in the ultimate, and it may include, for example, the Qur'an, "the ratio," and "authentic experience". Also, this locus may very well be unstable. Furthermore, Mercadante's findings suggest the addition of ethics, truth (to include a discussion on authority), spiritual growth, and afterlife. Finally, as religious seekers seem to deal with the diversity of religions in another way than people adhering to one tradition—and, in fact, a quite specific way, by not identifying exclusively with one of them—religious instability should be a theological locus as well.

The human, the world, and ethics

Kaufman deliberately chooses to prioritize ethics over religious doctrine. For him this choice is essential, but practical rather than metaphysical. Among human cultures, there is a huge and irreducible variety of interpretative schemes, and there is no objective way to determine the right one among them. However, in matters of ethics, we, as humanity, are increasingly living in a global village and for reasons of our very survival, we cannot afford to disagree on matters of ecology as well as protection of human basic needs and human diversity. Moreover, decisions on how to go on cannot wait until the debate about ethics is decided. Thus, along with an unstable view on religious doctrine, a stable view on ethics is needed, but that should be, using the wording of Taylor, an ethics without absolutes,¹² and that is exactly what Kaufman delivers. At this point it is important to note that in prioritizing ethics over religious doctrine, Kaufman inverts the reflective hierarchy in a similar way as religious seekers tend to do. This is one of the reasons why Kaufman's theology is highly relevant for religious seekers.

¹¹ Kaufman calls this set of Christian theological loci "the Christian categorical scheme."

¹² Mark C. Taylor *After God* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2007), chapter 6.

Kaufman constructs an ethics based on a specific view of the human and a specific view of the world. The selected view of the human he chooses is to see the human as a biohistorical being. In this concept the word-part “bio” refers to the animal-like character of the human including its basic needs for food, sleep, health, procreation, safety, etcetera. Elevating this word-part to a foundation of ethics leads to the defense of human basic needs. The word-part “historical” refers to the fact that by its very nature, humanity has developed in a wide range of cultures, each having a lot of specific aspects including values, and religious orientations. To see this as essential for humanity leads to a defense and promotion of human diversity. Thus, humanization in terms of the human as a biohistorical being entails both protecting basic human needs, as well as a promotion of diversity in combination with rejection of violence. This diversity most notably also includes a diversity of interpretative schemes, each resulting from human, historically dependent constructive activity, and in that sense his theology is *pluralistic*. Thus, Kaufman’s choice also pays justice to all other forms of seeing the human as they originate from the various cultures.

Similarly, there are also a lot of possible ways to view the world, but among those, Kaufman decides to see the view of the world as the environment for life and human life in particular as normative. For him, this leads to his ethics being ecological.

From the perspective of religious seekers, Kaufman’s construction of a view of the human, the world, and ethics is promising. Here several aspects are worth mentioning. First, in contrast to their adoption of instability in religious doctrine, the two reasons Kaufman gives to prioritize ethics over religious doctrine and to stabilize ethics in a specific way are convincing, also specifically for religious seekers. Religious seekers will claim authority for matters of doctrine for themselves, seeing the worth of diversity, as such diversity will give them the room to deviate, giving them the variety of religious insights that is available to them. Yet they will admit that although being diverse and instable in their doctrinal views, they must live together with other people, and more or less stable moral rules with a certain universal appeal are needed to ensure that this happens in relative harmony. Thus, while religious seekers are instable in their views on ultimate reality, they may want to be stable in their ethics. Also, despite their instability in views on religious doctrines, religious seekers will need to act, and will want to do so responsibly and consistently over time.

Although Kaufman’s analysis so far is attractive to religious seekers, it needs to be criticized from their perspective in one important respect and that is the *individuality* of religious views. Kaufman’s interpretation of historicity as leading to the various cultures implies that cultural diversity should be respected and promoted, but it may suggest that doctrinal views are to be stable between individuals within a culture, and stable over the scale of time over which the culture itself is stable. Therefore, it does not do justice to the diversity among individuals *within* a cultural background—and also not to the instability of religious views over time *within* an individual. Therefore, religious seekers will claim that not only their cultural background, but also their individual circumstances and life experiences are determinants of their spirituality and should therefore have a status comparable to cultural background. To account for this individuality, as a basis for a theology of religious seekers, I propose to see the human as a biohistorical *individual* rather than Kaufman’s proposed biohistorical *being*.

As Kaufman states, there are many possible views of the human, and many possible views of the world and the choice to see specific views as normative cannot be derived objectively. However, they require a step of faith. The fact that Kaufman does not formulate these choices as steps of faith, similar to his steps in doctrinal matters that he formulates later in *In Face of Mystery*, seems to be inconsistent. Therefore, for religious seekers I will formulate these choices as steps of faith:

Step 1: *The decision to accept the view of the human as a biohistorical individual as normative*

Step 2: *The decision to accept the view of the world as the environment for life and human life in particular as normative*

Overviewing our steps so far, we can conclude that the first steps have brought us to defining what it is to be “a moral person”—at least in the view of religious seekers. However, to narrow down the group of what is seen as moral persons into religious seekers, further steps are required.

Towards being religious

Having set the basis of the ethics of religious seekers, we can now turn to what it means to be *religious*. For the word “religious” there are two directions of thought. In the wording *Spiritual But Not Religious*, the word means belonging to a denomination or one of the main religious traditions (Christianity, Buddhism etc.). In contrast, John Thatamanil defines “religious” as “participating in comprehensive qualitative orientation”¹³. In this definition, “religious” is probably much closer to the word “Spiritual” than to the word “Religious” in “Spiritual But Not Religious”. It is in this latter way that I am using the word “religious”.

At this point, it should be emphasized that with the position we have reached so far, i.e. the morally responsible person, from a general human perspective nothing is wrong. In fact, it *cannot* be wrong from a general human perspective, because the general human perspective is included and summarized in the two steps we have already taken in order to be a moral person.

What then, if there is no reason from a general human perspective to do so, is the reason for going further? The reasons are that some of us have a desire to understand who we truly are, to understand what the world truly is, to understand what the human truly is, the desire to live as well and as fully as possible, to understand individual personal ideals, and how to pursue them. That from a general human perspective may be somewhere far up the Maslow pyramid, but for some of us, those questions *are* relevant, maybe even existential. Being a religious seeker in particular implies there is an interest in *something more*. It is the incidence of that interest we have to ask for by means of the next step.

Kaufman makes the step towards being religious by stating: “I will propose that we make some decisions about certain broad metaphysical issues that bear directly on how we understand human existence. It will not be possible any longer, therefore, for us to claim that our procedure

¹³ John J. Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020), chap 5.

is based on a widely accepted modern faith-consensus”¹⁴ The religious interest of religious seekers is related to Kaufman’s proposal but is not identical to it. Key is the word “decision” as used by Kaufman. That word suggests that something has *to be concluded*, i.e. it becomes *stable*. For religious seekers, the process of metaphysical orientation is *unstable*, moving back and forth between various perspectives weighing the merits of each at every moment, without final decisions. Thus, instead of the proposal as worded by Kaufman I propose to word the question of religious interest as a step of faith in the following way:

Step 3: *The decision to consider (at least in a rudimentary way and for the time being) our position on some aspects of the ultimate questions about life, death, and reality.*

By taking this third step of faith, we have narrowed down the group of “moral persons” to the group of “religious moral persons”, separating out people who are not interested in religion and spirituality.

Truth

The group we separated up to now, religious moral people is still much broader than the group of religious seekers, and we will further narrow it down by considering the theological locus of truth.

Throughout *In Face of Mystery* as well as other works, Kaufman discusses five issues around the theme of truth and all these issues are related. (See figure 3.)

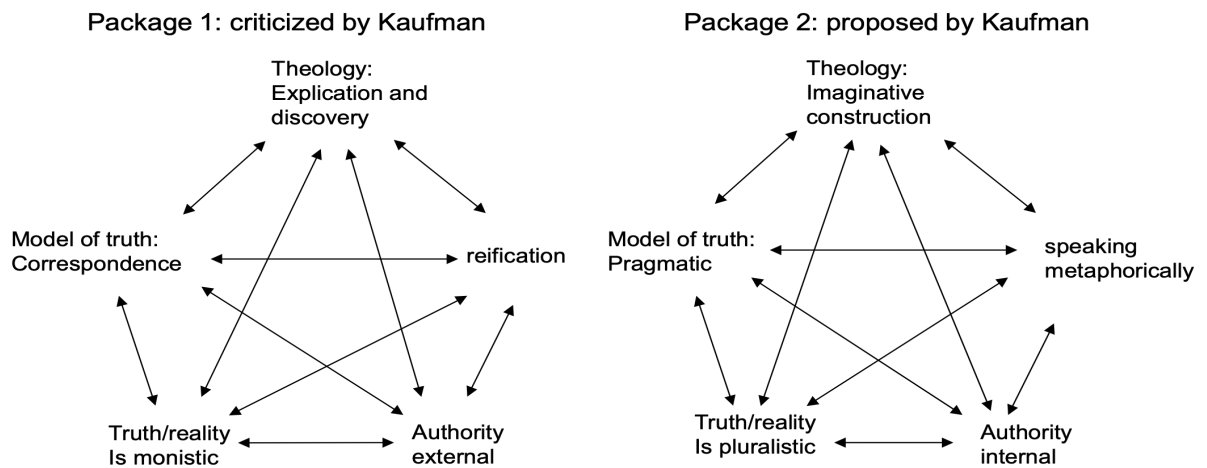


Figure 3: Five interrelated stances on truth and theological methodology as proposed by Kaufman to replace five corresponding classical stances.

The first issue is that Kaufman proposes to practice theology as imaginative construction in contrast to theology as explication (of revelation) and discovery (of the truth) in revelation or in rational activity. In literature, this issue is discussed extensively.¹⁵ The latter, is now generally

¹⁴ Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*, 241–42.

¹⁵ See, for example, various contributions in part I of Grau and Wyman, eds., *What Is Constructive Theology*.

called “dogmatic theology” or “systematic theology,” while the former is called “constructive theology.” Here, Kaufman’s defense of theology as a discipline of imaginative construction was groundbreaking by making constructive theology the new standard in the field.

A second issue is how we should see truth. Systematic or dogmatic theologians generally approach the concept of truth by applying a correspondence model: Something is considered true if it corresponds to “a reality out there”. Kaufman and many constructive theologians after him see such an endeavor as futile as there is no objective way to check such correspondence. Rather, they propose that something is true if it is suitable to give guidance and orientation in life, i.e. they use a pragmatic concept of truth.

A third issue is reification of religious concepts versus speaking metaphorically about them. In the classical picture that Kaufman criticizes, religious concepts such as God are reified. That is, they are realities out there, independent of how people think about them. In contrast, in his proposed framework, God can be spoken of only in metaphors and those metaphors are human constructions.

In the classical picture, there is only one reality and every theology trying to approach that reality is either successful or failing, and as a consequence respectively right or wrong. It mostly corresponds with exclusivist or inclusivist views. In the new picture truth is pluralistic: It is possible that there are more, equally valid ways to see (ultimate) reality, or maybe there is even more than one (ultimate) reality to refer to. Thus for people with pluralistic views, Kaufman’s view will be more attractive than the classical monistic view.

The final issue is authority. In the classical view, authority in matters of religion is external: something is true because, scripture, revelation, the synod, Jesus, the ratio, the guru, reality as it is, etc. says so. In the new picture, authority is internal: in the end, the individual experience has the final say in matters of religion.¹⁶

Kaufman never made these two packages explicit *as packages*; but throughout his work it is clear that these five issues are strongly intertwined.¹⁷ Thus, for any individual it is most logical to choose between the two entire packages, because alternatively one has to defend why the five issues are not intertwined. Setting apart that latter hard-to-defend possibility, for the religious seeker, the choice is between the two packages. Between them, it is clear that Kaufman’s package gives much more room for instability in religious views than the classical picture. Moreover, Kaufman’s package is much more in agreement with the upside-down hierarchy of reflection of religious seekers, subordinating doctrinal statements to ethics and leaving the last word in religious doctrine to individual experience rather than to a revelatory source. This is another reason why, for religious seekers, Kaufman’s theology is very relevant.

Also here, the choice between the classical package and Kaufman’s package is not a choice between the correct and the incorrect, as both packages can be adhered to coherently. Neither, is the one morally right and the other morally wrong as both can support a religious moral stance as constructed earlier. However, adhering to the classical package is at odds with

¹⁶ Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, 3rd edition (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1995), 8.

¹⁷ A comprehensive analysis of this intertwining needs to be discussed elsewhere.

religious seeker’s instability on key theological loci and their hierarchy of reflection. Thus this choice should be formulated as a step of faith on behalf of the religious seeker. Assuming that indeed all five issues are intertwined, it suffices to define the step along one of the five issues while the intertwining makes sure that steps in the other four issues follow implicitly. To keep as close to the findings of Mercadante as possible, I choose to use the last issue (i.e. the one on authority) as explicit and determinative:

Step 4: *The decision to leave the last word in matters of spirituality to the experience of the individual*

Again, by proposing this step, we are narrowing down the group of people, as people who have any kind of authoritative belief will leave us here. This fourth step is a step of commitment to openness, and therefore can also be described as a step towards liberalism, as opposed to adherence to authoritarian forms of belief.¹⁸

Although we have narrowed down the group quite considerably, we are still left with a group that is considerably larger than the group of religious seekers, as the group we are now considering still includes people who, although liberal, belong to one religious tradition and have stable views on the various theological loci. A further step is needed to narrow the group down to religious seekers and we will propose such a step by considering the other theological loci: ultimate reality, keys to ultimate reality, spiritual growth, after life and, most notably and finally, instability.

Ultimate reality, key to ultimate reality, spiritual growth, and afterlife

We have seen that, for religious seekers, it makes sense to replace the Christian theological loci of “God” and “Christ” by, respectively, “the ultimate” and “keys to the ultimate.” However, although *the ultimate* and *keys to the ultimate* are relevant to religious seekers, it is difficult to be more specific about these loci, other than by recognizing their instability between, for example, God (seen in wide variety of ways), emptiness, wholeness, earth, or nature, just to name a few; while, for “keys to the ultimate” besides Christ, religious seekers may consider, for example, the ratio,

¹⁸ Probably it is fair to say that the choice for the Kaufman package is a choice to be liberal, but this assumes a specific definition of being liberal as open or as being anti-dogmatic. Alternative definitions of religious liberalism exist. One may link it to an emphasis on the ratio. In this view, liberalism is linked strongly to Western enlightenment thinkers and the modernism that originates from that. As a consequence, 21st-century liberal thinking is considered anachronistic and parochial. Another way to approach liberalism is to see as the essence of liberalism an emphasis on direct experience as the prime source of inspiration (for example, referring to Schleiermacher). In this view of liberalism, Kaufman would not qualify as a religious liberal (and in fact, probably for this reason, Kaufman himself never identifies as such), because he is skeptical towards experience as a direct source of inspiration. A third approach to liberalism is identifying it with a progressive ethics. I do not agree with such an approach either. As an example, I would like to point at Greta Thunberg, who definitely has a progressive ethics, but I cannot see her as a religious liberal. Thus, I think a good case can be made to define religious liberalism by its open way of dealing with truth: religious liberals are people who refrain from universal and eternal correspondence truth claims and in considering liberalism that way, Kaufman is a liberal, and not surprising he is identified as such in literature. Given Mercadante’s findings about the anti-dogmatic and anti-authoritarian character of SBNR, it is not possible to combine being a religious seeker with adhering to external authority or otherwise adhere to universal and eternal truth claims (in the sense of corresponding to a reality out there). Therefore, in the given definition of religious liberalism, religious seekers must be liberal. However, this also means that steps 1 through 4 constitute a theology of religious liberalism.

authentic self, various forms of experience of miracle and wonder, various religious teachers, holy scriptures, and so on.

The same is basically true with the other two theological loci discussed in this section: spiritual growth and afterlife. With respect to spiritual growth, it should be noted that interpretive schemes are often linked to therapeutic regimes, which offer ways forward for humanity, salvation, escape from the circle of Samsara, and so on.¹⁹ Similar to the theological loci of *the ultimate* and *the key to the ultimate*--rather than, respectively, God and Christ--for religious seekers to choose one specific therapeutic regime as a theological locus would be too narrow. Rather, a broader umbrella term covering all of these would be more beneficial. "Therapeutic regime" itself could be an option, while, to remain closer to common terminology among religious seekers, "spiritual growth" is a better one. In order to define spiritual growth in such a way that it encompasses the various options for therapeutic regimes that religious seekers face, spiritual growth could be defined as the process in which the concept of spiritual self (how individual religious seekers see themselves as religious selves) and the concept of ideal spiritual self (how individual religious seekers see their ideal religious selves) become increasingly similar.²⁰ The exact image of what the ideal self is, and how religious self and ideal religious self approach each other, for religious seekers might be instable as well. Some might have one clear concept of spiritual growth in mind. Others may consider and pursue several. It is also important to note that, not only may spiritual growth be initiated by religious seekers themselves, it may be perceived also as initiated from the side of the ultimate, such as by means of "grace."²¹

Following Mercadante, we can suspect that many religious seekers have an interest in afterlife, but in contrast to religious seeker's interest in the ultimate, keys to the ultimate, and spiritual growth, there is also a considerable group of religious seekers who does not believe in afterlife or alternatively their beliefs in afterlife may be instable as well. Afterlife itself is already a generalization of the classical Christian theological loci of heaven and hell. As such it may include options from various traditions such as reincarnation, ancestral worship, and eternal judgment. In that way the concept afterlife does justice to various views on afterlife as they may circulate among religious seekers.

Because religious seekers deal with the theological loci of the ultimate, key to the ultimate, spiritual growth, and afterlife in such widely different ways, and because for religious seekers, some or all of these theological loci may be unstable, it is not possible to define any specific step of faith in the realms of these theological loci directly, but these theological loci have to be considered within the perspective of instability.

¹⁹ See Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, chapter 5.

²⁰ This concept of spiritual growth is derived from the concept of personal growth analyzed by therapist and psychologist Carl Rogers. See Carl Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's view of Psychotherapy*, (London: Constable, 1961), 225–42. This non-directive approach to spiritual growth fits well with the non-authoritarian stance of religious seekers, as well with as their search for authenticity.

²¹ Even in that case, however, nothing can be said about "grace" itself. About grace, similar to God, it is only possible to speak metaphorically (i.e. as a human construction). Even if it is interpreted as triggered by the ultimate, it is not reified, but unstable, and therefore object of the religious search, rather than being a boundary condition for that search.

Instability

Why would religious seekers be unstable in their choice between religious traditions, a choice between interpretive schemes, or a choice with respect to one or more theological loci? Such questions also point at a question after coherence: Why would religious seekers consider it to be more coherent to have unstable views than to have one stable set of doctrinal views, possibly corresponding to one interpretive scheme, or to one religious tradition? Among the many reasons why religious seekers refrain from making such a choice some of them are very practical. Just think of the mixed religious couple who decides to educate their children in both traditions, because they want to do justice to the religious feelings of both parents. But in this section, I would like to investigate *theological* reasons for refraining from such a choice. (See figure 2.)

The first reason is agnosticism. Religious seekers may claim that they do not know which religious tradition is best (in general, or for them specifically). They may think so, because they feel they lack the experience or knowledge to make a considered decision. This may be temporary. Maybe these religious seekers are looking for a religious home (“seekers” in the narrow sense as defined by Mercadante²²) and in that temporary process of finding a (new) religious home, may aim at acquiring enough knowledge to make a considered decision. But the reason for the agnosticism may be much more fundamental. If we think there is no way we *can* know anything for sure about the ultimate, for example because we think that every religious experience is determined by our cultural or personal background and therefore is not objective (as Kaufman does), that is a strong reason to refrain from deciding among religious traditions/interpretative schemes (although Kaufman does not refrain from doing so). Why choose between sources of insight if we have no objective and universal criteria to decide between them, especially if we realize that these various sources offer varying amounts of insight for different individuals and because for one individual these sources offer varying amounts of insight over time, dependent on the situation? It seems to me that this agnosticism, as a major factor determining our stance towards issues of religion and spirituality is too often fundamentally neglected by theologians. At least it is a valid reason to be a religious seeker.

As a next step, I would like to discuss a number of possible ways to deal with religious diversity as reviewed by Jeanine Diller.²³ Assume that in contrast to the previous paragraph, we *do* consider ourselves sufficiently knowledgeable to take a decision about the relative merits of the various traditions. Now a next step is to ask the question: how many functions does religion have? Most often theologians, often without much justification assume that religion has just one function, or that just one function has overarching importance. That function could be for example offering salvation,²⁴ offering a discourse for comprehensive qualitative orientation,²⁵ or offering the right way to consider ultimate reality. The variety of functions introduced by the various authors already suggests that the idea that religion has just one (main) function is at least questionable. The picture becomes even more in favor of plural functionality, if we realize that one could link each theological locus to a theological function: To give insights to the ultimate, to

²² Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders*, 60.

²³ Jeanine Diller is an author active within the Theology Without Walls initiative who contributed to various discussion in religious philosophy. For our purposes here, her most relevant article is “How to Think Globally and Affiliate Locally,” in *Theology Without Walls*, ed. Jerry Martin.

²⁴ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious pluralism and Interreligious theology*, chap. 1.

²⁵ Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*, chap. 2.

provide access to keys to the ultimate, to provide an environment for spiritual growth, and to get support in working towards a desirable afterlife.

Now the question is: how do we consider this possibly multiple functionality? There are a number of options. One of them is that there is just one overarching function, and that all the other functions are derivative. Another option is to see that all these functions are integrated in coherent integrated systems—so that if you choose one religion because of its fulfilling one specific function in an outstanding way, for one reason or another (such as a willingness to be true to a tradition or because of the intertwining of functions) you will have to accept that other functions of religions may not be optimally served. Yet another option is that you think that all functions are served best by the same religious tradition. All these options, which together I will call singular functionality, can be defended; but they do not automatically lead to being a religious seeker. However, in contrast, if you think that (a) religion has several functions; (b) different religions are best in serving different functions; and (c) there is no convincing reason *not* to enjoy the various functionalities of different religions (multiple functionality), this offers a powerful reason not to choose among those religions but rather opt for the instability of religious seeking. Thus, as an example: my religious seekerism may be triggered by the observation that for matters of ethics, I am most strongly helped by Christian inspiration, while for a powerful psychology, I am helped more strongly by Buddhism.

Now, assume that in contrast to the previous paragraph one believes that functionality essentially is singular. Now, as a thought experiment, let us pick one of the possible functions and assume it is prime, e.g. to offer salvation. Now the next type of question is suggested by Mark Heim and John Cobb. Next to questions of the form “How many religions x ,” they also ask the question “How many x -es are there in the first place?”²⁶ Applied to our example, the question becomes, “How many salvations are there?” Here again there are a number of possibilities that can be structured very much in the same way as we have seen with functionalities. One of them is that there is just one overarching salvation, and that all the other salvations are contributing to the main one. Another option is to see all these salvations are integrated in systems, so that if you choose one religion because of its fulfilling salvation in an outstanding way, for one reason or another (such as being true to a tradition) you will have to accept that other types of salvation may not be optimally served. Yet another option is that you think that all salvations are served best by the same religious tradition. All these options can be defended, but they have in common that they do not automatically lead to being a religious seeker. However, if you think that a) religion is about several salvations and b) different religions serve best for different salvations, this offers a powerful reason not to choose among those religions and consider yourself to be a religious seeker. Thus, if I see both Christian grace and Buddhist detachment as essential elements of different salvations, I have a good reason to be instable in my consideration of Christianity and Buddhism.

We are now left with considering one last situation. Assume we believe that the functionality of religion is singular (provide x) and there is just one x . Now we have to ask the question, “How many religions provide x ?” Here the classical framework of Alan Race comes in.²⁷ The choice is between: “only one religion offers x ” (exclusivism), “more than one religion

²⁶ Mark S. Heim, *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

²⁷ Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983).

offers x , but one religion does better than the others” (inclusivism), “more than one religion offers x best” (pluralism); but, in this case, “no religion offers x ” has to be added. The exclusivist and inclusivist options give reason to adhere to one religious tradition because that tradition is the only one that offers x (exclusivism) or that it is offers x most optimally (inclusivism). The third option points to the possibility that the insights of more than one religion may result in salvation, and in such a case you might have a good reason to be a religious seeker in order to include all relevant insights in your spirituality. Thus, you may want to pursue the one salvation as offered both by Buddhism and Christianity, each in their own way, and you want to combine them for optimal result. The fourth option in comparable cases would lead to atheism.²⁸ However, formulated in this way, this conclusion is not appropriate. It may be that none of the traditions offers x alone, but that together they do offer x . But also, it may be possible that no religion offers something that is necessary for x . The last possibility may apply for example if one considers *individual authenticity* to be an essential element of x . In that case the potential of any religion to fully provide x is limited. However, this last case does not exclude the possibility that various religions can inspire the individual. Therefore we can conclude that both the third position (more than one religion can fully provide x) and both versions of the last position (no religion fully provides x) may lead to religious seekerism.

In this section we have derived a number of essentially different positions that offer good reasons to be a religious seeker and we may also want to claim that if we are *not* in one of these positions, we probably do *not* have a good reason to be a religious seeker. Thus if my analysis is correct, adopting one of the indicated positions is a condition which is *necessary* to be a religious seeker. However, at this moment I have to make clear that I did not say anything about whether they offer *sufficient* reason to be a religious seeker. Such a claim would not be feasible because, even if one adopts one of the indicated positions, numerous reasons may exist not to be a religious seeker—and it is not possible to weigh the various reasons for or against being a religious seeker in general. A good theological reason against being a religious seeker in spite of adopting one of the indicated positions may be that you want to uphold the integrity of the various traditions. (For example, the tradition you feel inspired by might require exclusive commitment). But, there are also many practical reasons playing a role. For example, you may be a long time and content member of a denomination in one of the religious traditions; it may be that you are living in a small isolated place where just one of the traditions that inspire you is available; you may want to be a member of the same denomination your significant other is a member of; or you may consider that it can already fill an entire life to properly investigate one religion alone. Many other reasons could be thought of.

We can conclude that once we have taken the first four steps of faith to be a religious seeker, a fifth step of faith includes four alternatives:

Step 5: *the decision to take at least one of the following four reasons to be of more importance than any reasons not to be a religious seeker:*

- a) *The acceptance of the idea that we cannot weigh the relative merits of the various religions because we are not knowledgeable or cannot be knowledgeable to do so.*

²⁸ Schmidt-Leukel, *Religious pluralism and Interreligious Theology*, chap. 1.

- b) *The acceptance of the idea that religion has more than one essential function and that various religions serve these various functions best.*
- c) *The acceptance of the idea that religion has essentially a singular functionality (provide x), but that there are various x-es, which are provided by more than one religion.*
- d) *The acceptance of the idea that religion has essentially a singular functionality (provide x), and that there is just one x, but that either more than one religion fully offers x, or none of them does so.*

No Conclusions

This article offers—as far as I know—a first try at presenting a comprehensive theology for religious seekerism. I have done so by defining five steps of faith, following the theological method of Gordon Kaufman. This theology claims to describe Mercadante’s findings for SBNR in a coherent way. Moreover, it coherently describes two important characteristics of religious seekers: (1) instability with respect to certain theological loci or to inspiration from various religious traditions and (2) a reversed hierarchy of reflection. For the first, this theology follows Mark Taylor’s work on erring, while for the second, it largely follows Kaufman’s hierarchy.

The steps I propose in this article are not a practical course on how to become a religious seeker. Rather, they are cognitive steps, asking the readers if they are willing to agree with seeing the world in a certain (i.e. my) way. These steps are ordered like concentric circles, narrowing down the amount of people who will follow me in my thoughts, until only people whom I consider to be fellow religious seekers are left. These steps follow a certain hierarchy of reflection: I am only willing to be religious as long as I can do so within a certain ethics. I can only look for doctrinal truth if I am interested in religion, I can only accept instability in my doctrinal views if I lend the last word in doctrinal matters to my own experience. However, as all these steps are the result of faith seeking understanding, they are theological steps, and cannot be reduced to psychology or anthropology.

Given the entrepreneurial set-up of this project, I do not want to claim any final conclusions. Rather, this article hopes to trigger new discussions. These include a discussion whether a theology for religious seekerism is at all possible; whether religious seekers are in need of a theology; if the method of Kaufman’s and Taylor’s concept of instability are appropriate to do so; if the attempt to understand religious seekerism and formulate a theology for religious seekers is the appropriate approach for a typically postmodern phenomenon such as religious seekerism; whether religious seekerism as discussed here and SBNR overlap; and finally, whether the development of a theology for religious seekers is a proper target of the Theology Without Walls initiative. To end this article and start the discussion, I would like to propose that the answers to all these questions may be a cautious “yes”.



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