

A Theology of Increasing Adequacy: Process, Practicality, and Relationship

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*What is theology for, and to whom is it intended to speak? This essay presents a response to *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (ed. Jerry L. Martin) from the perspective of a scholar-administrator who herself identifies somewhere on the religious identity spectrum between “multiply religious” and “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR). The essay focuses on how the book speaks to the current historical moment, when the world is in the throes of global health and civil rights crises. It does so in order to suggest that “theology” should be a processual, pragmatic entity that takes adequacy to practical needs to be a central goal. Further, such practical needs constantly and diversely emerge from everyday human interaction, as has been clearly and forcefully underlined by the events of 2020. In other words, it was hard to read *Theology Without Walls* without seeing its relevance to current, pressing issues of the day – issues that seemed to demand a particular kind of tearing down, or at least making porous of, certain past theological walls. Theology should speak in a language that resonates with both “professional” and “non-professional” theologians alike, so as to address practical, urgent, lived needs of the present.*

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Some books present so many pathways, nooks, and crannies to explore that one wants to spend the day crawling around in their attics and basements with an intellectual magnifying glass, digging, examining, and unpacking. After a while, one looks around and realizes that hours have slipped by, and while a wonderful time has been had in discovering treasures and peeling back layers, one has ended up surrounded by piles and piles of books and notes, stacked up as far as the eye can see. That was my experience reading *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (hereafter TWW). Each essay in the collection sent me off on a new sort of thought adventure. I found myself scribbling notes in the margins of the book; grabbing other books off of my own shelves in reference to passages I was reading; and in the hours and days that followed my reading, typing out bursts of sentences on the notes app on my phone as I continued to process what I'd read.

After a while, however, I began to feel a bit like an antiques dealer who has collected so many treasures and become attached to so many of her “finds” that she can barely turn around in her own shop. She has simply accumulated, and become attached to, too much. I needed to pare things down, to find some sort of connection or thread of continuity in all the ideas that the various essays in TWW had provoked in my mind.

The main question-threads that wove themselves throughout all my notes and reflections, I'm a little embarrassed to admit, were all about me, and how my own thinking about theology has changed over the years. I realized that like a lot of good writing, the essays in TWW became conversation initiators, or mirrors. The questions I was writing down in the margins of the book were questions about the essays themselves, yes—but they were also questions, I realized, about myself, about my own place in the academy, and about what I thought theology was and what it should do; and, for that matter, about what the role of the academy, and more specifically, of higher education, is, both in the current historical moment and more generally. Thus, I hope my own brief reflections about my self-interrogations, evoked by my reading of TWW, will link to a

broader set of intellectual questions, and that these reflections, in turn, will get to the heart of the pressing, practical issues with which I left my reading of this book: issues that I think can be obfuscated and bypassed as a result of the use of technical disciplinary jargon behind which many academics (myself included) tend to hide.

I came away from the book wondering about some very basic things. First, what exactly do we mean when we use the word “theology”? And who comprises the “we”? It seems to me that “theology” is one of those words that means different things for different groups of people. Often, people think they are talking about the same thing when they use the word “theology,” but they often aren’t.

For example, let’s say that I meet someone who works outside of academia, and they ask me what I do for a living. I would tell them that I am a professor of religious studies and I teach courses at a local college. Later, they might introduce me to someone else by telling them that I am a professor of theology. My new acquaintance would have gotten things roughly right—they said “theology” rather than “economics” or “engineering”—but what I had said was “religious studies” rather than “theology.” To my new acquaintance, the difference between “religious studies” and “theology” didn’t seem all that great. They heard “religious studies” but remembered “theology.” But for someone within the field who studies religion, there is a distinction between religious studies and theology—one with a long history and lots of epistemological claims at stake.

This scenario—of my saying “religious studies” and someone hearing “theology”—has played out in my own life many times, sometimes with people in my own family. Of course, I usually don’t say anything, because within the context of general conversation and small talk, it’s just not a big deal. At the American Academy of Religion Conference or at a job interview, the distinction would matter; chatting with someone on an airplane or at a holiday party, however, being particular about the distinction would verge on pedantic and maybe even be a little rude. In sum, then, when we talk about theology, it can be useful to think about which community is talking about it; with whom they’re talking; and what they mean by the term.

Second, how do the ways we talk about these questions—questions about the history of theology and about methodology in theological discourse—change according to audience and context? It’s one thing to talk and think about theology within one’s religious community; it’s another to do so in one’s academic community; and it’s still another to do so in an interreligious community. In other words, the language differs according to whom our dialogue partners are. Context matters. And the game often changes completely in a practical, rather than a theoretical context, especially when one hits a crisis point in one’s life, and one is forced to act first and think later. If, say, one is trying to help a friend or family member cope with grief, one will probably be less concerned with discussing things like systematic consistency and more concerned with compassion and efficacy of care in the moment.

I shall begin, then, with the question-threads I pulled out from the notes I took while reading *TWW*. Then, I shall move to some practical, pressing questions I was confronting while reading the book – questions from my professional life as a scholar and administrator in higher education, writing and thinking in late 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, ongoing national civil rights crisis, and a great deal of pain and stress in terms of the way these crises were playing

out on my own campus. It was impossible not to see the relationship between (1) the challenges and opportunities presented in TWW regarding theology with and without walls in terms of the emotional, developmental, affective impact of inclusive and exclusive communities, and (2) the lives of the students, faculty, and staff on my own campus, many of whom were begging people in positions of power to tear down past exclusionary walls of pain and division in an effort to foster the possibility of imagining a new campus built on reparative justice, healing, cooperation, and shared, inclusive, dialogical learning.

Finally, I will conclude the essay with an example of a game-changing experience of theology without walls, or what I might call kaleidoscopic theology, from my own life. This experience has to do with my parents' deaths, both of which were related to their protracted bouts with dementia. My experience of caregiving for them and of metabolizing their losses of identity ties into my own multi-religious theological grounding; my confusion when others have understood my own religiosity as fitting into the "spiritual but not religious" (SBNR) designation; and my lack of conviction about the theological traction of the SBNR category.

Question #1: Why me? *Am I Spiritual But Not Religious?*

I was thrilled to be asked to write a response to TWW, and in particular, to consider how its premises might speak to those who consider themselves to be "Spiritual But Not Religious," or SBNRs. Invitations like this one, though—happy as they make me—also cause me to try to figure out what conversations I might've had that led someone to think I might be an appropriate interlocutor. I think this response is my own intuitive, self-protective residual response from graduate school, where a somewhat paranoid culture of blood-sport critique made me a lot quieter coming out as a graduate than I had been going in as a beginning student. What had I said about SBNRs to similar communities that made someone think I identified as SBNR, I wondered, and when?

The way I came to be involved with this project was as follows. One of the contributors to TWW (and my friend) Jeanine Diller got in touch with me about a panel that would be responding to the volume at an American Academy of Religion Conference in 2020 and asked me to participate, given that I was a person who might be able to "speak from or for the SBNR perspective." The phrasing of the invitation led me to ask myself: *am* I an SBNR, or an adequate spokesperson for this perspective? The short answer was that I didn't know. But I did know that I definitely liked talking with people who think about SBNRs. I thought I might be SBNR, or perhaps "multiply religious." But I also wasn't sure that what I was—how I, personally, should be religiously categorized—mattered much in terms of this conversation, given that it was a scholarly conversation about an academic book.

Thinking about my own religious identity, my "SBNR-ness," and the extent to which my own personal religiousness "should" play a role in my scholarly response to TWW became trickier the more I thought about it. To the extent that SBNRs are a group, one could argue that they comprise a group only to the extent that they eschew institutional religious grouping. Given that I have never felt fully comfortable identifying publicly as completely, unabashedly belonging with or to particular institutional religious groups, perhaps this feeling of not-quite-belonging was, in fact, my own most SBNR-like characteristic. And so, in terms of participating as a respondent on the panel, I realized that whether or not I thought of myself as SBNR, my own

ruminations on multiple belonging and on not-belonging—both from a scholarly perspective and from a personal one—made me particularly interested in and attuned to the orientations and sensitivities of SBNRs.

I think this intuition toward discomfort with a publicly proclaimed full sense of belonging to a single religious institution has to do with a deep knowledge that we—all of us—are always in process, and thus, always fluid in a way that can make the notion of single-group-belonging¹ challenging, especially when there will always be others in the group who cling very tightly to group identification and like to censure others on the basis of it. For them, “belonging” might mean one thing or one set of behaviors, and any change to that one way of being is perceived as a threat, and thus, as a challenge to the integrity of the institution. Largely for these reasons, even before I realized that these feelings were operative in my religious life, I generally hesitated to proclaim my deeply felt spiritual/religious group affiliations to others.²

But back to the invitation to participate in this group of respondents. I met Jeanine Diller several years ago when we were both participants in a lively, collegial, and fruitful seminar, run by John Thatamanil and several others who also later became involved with the TWW project. The seminar examined comparative theology and theologies of religious pluralism.³ I was drawn to the seminar, which took place over the course of two summers, for a variety of reasons, not least of which was my interest in interreligious and interfaith studies. But even though the seminar focused on theology, my own academic training was in philosophy of religions, and the tradition in which I had done my academic work was Indian Buddhism. So, when it came to the theological language that was flying around the room during many of those summer days, much of which was steeped in the assumptions of a Christian theological framework and background, I was frequently lost. If I had a dollar for every time I said something along the lines of, “Well, you see, I’m not a *theologian*” throughout the course of that seminar, I would now have lots of dollars.

While one might think that my training in philosophy of religions would have afforded me some overlap with training in theology, such overlap was in fact surprisingly slim. The lack of overlap was probably specific to both my area of training, which was in Indian Buddhist philosophy, and the timing of my coursework, which was the mid- to late-1990s. The landscape of the study of religion at that time, at least in the U.S., was reflected in the structure of the

¹ The feeling of discomfort I’m trying to describe is very difficult to capture in words. While “single-group belonging” sort of gets at it, it might be better described as “single-state belonging” —the idea that if you describe yourself as X, that means you are accurately and fully describable by qualities Y and Z at all times. At its root, the problem is with the nature of language, and its erroneously hypostatizing characteristics.

² This hesitancy is a result of and reaction to my own lived, embodied experiences of being monitored and corrected and regulated quite a lot throughout my life. My experiences of having been monitored and tacitly censured have, in turn, allowed me the realization that professing my wholehearted membership in any group is, at least in part, interpreted by many as an invitation to more policing by other members of the group. I have come to understand those dynamics lot better as I have gotten older, and there are some dynamics of groups in which I am no longer willing to participate. Sometimes, it seems to me, the benefits of group membership are not outweighed by the harm that those groups can cause. Walls can provide safety, boundaries, and direction, but they can feel perilous, too.

³ For more information on the Summer Seminars on Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology, co-sponsored by the American Academy of Religion and the Luce Foundation, see “Announcing AAR/Luce Summer Seminar Cohort III,” *Religious Studies News*, Oct. 2011, accessed July 14, 2021, http://rsnonline.org/index6c32-2.html?option=com_content&view=article&id=801:announcing-aarluce-summer-seminar-cohort-iii&catid=80:aar-related-news&Itemid=919.

American Academy of Religion (AAR). The Philosophy of Religion Unit focused primarily on Western (non-Buddhist) philosophy, and much of the work in theology that overlapped with it was in Christian theology. The Buddhist Philosophy Unit of AAR, on the other hand, did not exist until around 2006.⁴ Meanwhile, work in Buddhist theology was not on my radar much at all; Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky's excellent volume on Buddhist theology (*Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*) didn't come out until 2000.⁵

I bring up all these past connections—to my own somewhat late in life, circumspect studies of theology and to the authors of the essays in TWW—only to underline the fact that over the years since I was a graduate student, I have found myself drawn to and interested in both the work and the company of colleagues and scholars who do work in theology—specifically, comparative theology and theologies of religious pluralism. However, the more deeply I have read, studied, and spoken into this work, the more I have realized the extent to which there is a linguistic chasm between my training as a philosopher of religion within the framework of Indian Buddhism and the many people working as theologians within frameworks and disciplinary languages informed by Christian presuppositions. Put more simply, I have often found myself in conversations where I have no idea what the theologians are talking about,⁶ even though I spent almost a decade in graduate school and have since spent two decades teaching in philosophy of

⁴ Similarly, the specific Ph.D. track that I was on that afforded me the opportunity to study Buddhist philosophy did not formally exist until after I was already enrolled as a student, so I switched over to it part-way through. I bring up the origins of the program and of the as-yet non-existent Buddhist Philosophy Unit at the American Academy of Religion to point out that during this time period, the idea of “Buddhist philosophy” as an ontological category with enough weight to be made manifest in curricula and on academic panels was only just emerging. The emergence of “Buddhist theology” as a topic of conversation emerged around the same time—perhaps even a bit later. So, it was, in fact, possible to be trained in philosophy of religion and not get much granular training in Christian theology as well.

⁵ First published in 2000 by Curzon Press; published in 2013 by Routledge. In the Preface, Jackson and Makransky write the following, which addresses the fact that “Buddhist theology” was a somewhat new category within the Western academy of religious studies: “By and large, scholars trained in Religious Studies (including Buddhist Studies) critically analyze the data of a religion at a distance from tradition, to develop theories of interest to the Western academy. By contrast, contemporary theologians who have been trained by and stand within a religious tradition use the same tools for a different purpose: to draw critically upon the resources of tradition to help it communicate in a new and authentic voice to the contemporary world. The contributors to this volume are both academically trained scholars of Buddhism and Buddhists who have learned to interpret their world ‘dharmically’ from traditional teachers within diverse communities of practice. Their learning and experience cover a variety of Asian Buddhist cultures, while their methods range from the historical, to the philosophical, to the sociological. As diverse as the contributors and their interests are, they share the broadly theological concern above [of sharing their own perspectives on the ongoing contribution of Buddhism to the modern world], *which distinguishes their approach from much of what has been written within the Religious Studies academy*” (ix, emphasis my own). Similarly, in his 2000 review of the book, Paul J. Griffiths writes, “The phrase ‘Buddhist theology’ has an exotic and awkward sound. ‘Theology,’ after all, is a technical term from the lexicon of Christianity, and it means, etymologically and also often practically, ‘reasoned discourse about God.’ In what sense is there a Buddhist version of this enterprise? The main purpose of this collection is to provide an answer to that question; its secondary purpose is to provide examples of the practice of Buddhist theology.” Paul J. Griffiths, “Jackson, Roger and John Makransky eds.: *Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*,” in *Journal of Global Buddhism*, 1 (2000): 56ff. See *Gale Academic OneFile*, link.gale.com/apps/doc/A359209286/AONE?u=teszler&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=05418850.

⁶ Usually, this occurs when someone is using very specific but somewhat esoteric Christian theological language, or referring to a thinker that most in the field of Christian theology have read. Such experiences of feeling lost can always be salutary, of course, in that they remind one that there is always more to be read, and so much that one does not know.

religion and religious studies.⁷ And so, I have wondered: what in the world is going on? Are our fields, and our concerns, really so incommensurable, really so far afield from each other? It couldn't be that Christianity is *that* foreign to me, I have reasoned, since I was baptized and confirmed as an Episcopalian within the Christian tradition as a young person. Another thing I have often thought about: if I have frequently found myself scratching my head when in conversations that purport to be about theology, even with my years of background in adjacent fields, what of our students? Do they feel lost, too? Or is this feeling of misty bewilderment context-specific to me?

At any rate, one happy after-effect of the Summer Seminar in Comparative Theology and Theologies of Religious Pluralism was a subsequent book project with which I became involved. Another colleague and friend I met through the same seminar workshop cohort, Shelly Rambo, invited a group of people to contribute essays to a volume called *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*.⁸ I bring this up only because, once again, I found myself happily surrounded by a group of top-notch theologians, feeling a little bit lost and imposter-like, explaining that I wasn't really a theologian, but I did like hanging out with theologians and I was very interested in the questions they were asking. But I again felt compelled to point out as a frequent conversational caveat and cover story that I was a philosopher with a background in Buddhist studies, you see. And while I had grown up in a Christian context, my academic training was not in Christian theology, and while I had spent most of my life in school studying religion, and in fact was now a professor of it, I was not familiar with a lot of the terms they were using.

Then another book project came along to which I contributed a chapter. This one, while not explicitly theological, did deal with the topic of vocation.⁹ In this book, I, like Christopher Denny (a contributor to TWW),¹⁰ wrote an essay that revisits Robert Bellah's Sheila.¹¹ In my own essay, I use Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls*,¹² which came out about ten years after *Habits of the Heart*, to examine both how and why Sheila seems to have become a sort of Rorschach test. Readers see in her (or project onto her) their own sense of what a religious community *should* look like— as well as their own, perhaps painful, experiences and memories of feeling “othered” by a group to which they thought they belonged... Perhaps Sheila is reviled by some because she gives voice to the deep, dark secret that many of us harbor: we aren't entirely sure who we are with regard to our religious selves and our religious belonging.

⁷ To be clear, I am not saying that this is because there is no overlap between the fields of (non-western) philosophy of religion and theology. What I am saying is that there was a vast chasm between what constituted curricula when I was trained and what, perhaps, constitute curricula now, in graduate school training. Not coincidentally, there have been vast changes in the number and types of groups and units that comprise the American Academy of Religion since that time. I take these changes to be all for the good.

⁸ *Post-Traumatic Public Theology* (ed. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo, Palgrave, 2016). My own contribution to this volume is entitled “9/11 Changed Things: The (Post-Traumatic) Religious Studies Classroom.”

⁹ David S. Cunningham, ed., *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy* (Oxford University Press, 2018). For more on this book and the context of its writing, see the “Scholarly Resource Project” section on the Council of Independent Colleges' NetVUE (Network for Vocation in Undergraduate Education) website), accessed July 20, 2021, <https://www.cic.edu/programs/netvue>.

¹⁰ “Revisiting Bellah's Sheila in a Religiously Pluralist Century,” in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry L. Martin (London: Routledge, 2020). You can imagine my delighted surprise when I opened TWW, read the table of contents, and saw that someone else had decided that perhaps Sheila deserved a bit more attention.

¹¹ For more on the “Sheila” to whom I refer, see Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1985).

¹² Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* (New York: Riverhead Trade, 2005).

We might not even be sure what “belonging” actually *means*, so we make it up from day to day, trying to respond to things as best we can—hoping all the while that no one outs us as frauds, as “other than,” as “not quite good enough,” as somehow less than “pure”.¹³

I have professed to not being a theologian for a long time; but I think it’s time to admit that I probably am one, even if I’m not fully sure what that means. I’ve come to think of theology as Shelly Rambo describes it. She says, “the work of theology [is] a two worlds practice. It is the work of transfiguring the world—working between the *as is* and the *otherwise*”.¹⁴ If this is the way one is to understand theology—more as something that helps us understand the way things should be or could be, that helps us discern how to best to create the conditions to help make the world that way, and less as a regulatory, othering, punitive identity-sorting device—then I am all in. The way Rambo describes the work of theology can only work, I think, without walls, especially in a contemporary context, for both practical and ethical reasons. What I mean by “without walls” here means something along the lines of walls whose construction leads to a hardening of the heart, of a sorting of “us” from “them” that gives a sort of security that can lead to an insecurity-driven pushing away, a grasping-for-place, a sense of limited resources and space.

Question #2: What other choice do we have than TWW?

One of the questions that Jerry Martin, the editor of TWW, asked respondents to consider was this: are the methods presented in the book promising? My simple response to this question is “yes, absolutely.” In fact, it was often in response to questions of methodology that I ended up jotting down notes while I was reading. To my mind, conversations about methodology in theological studies are important—vital, even. If we are talking about the very act of talking to (and living with) people both within our own communities (religious, academic, vocational, racial, gendered, etc.) and outside of our communities (however we consider the “us” and “them” of our communities to be constructed), we need to think carefully about how best to do these things (talk and live), and about how our own presuppositions about who “we” are might be covered up by accretions of habit, or by language, or by a multitude of other things. In other words, methodology matters.

What do I mean by “our communities”? We all live within a series or overlap of many intersecting communities,¹⁵ both imagined and named.¹⁶ One community of which I am a part is that of scholars of religion. One could think of that community—“religion scholars”—as being one of a set of Russian nesting dolls of communities: there are both larger communities (larger dolls) that the “religion scholars” doll fits within, and smaller dolls (smaller communities) that fit inside of it. One of the larger communities within which “religion scholars” fits is all of academia,

¹³ Katherine (Trina) Janiec Jones, “Reviving Sheila: Listening to the Call of Multiple Religious Belonging,” in *Hearing Vocation Differently: Meaning, Purpose, and Identity in the Multi-Faith Academy*, 45–62.

¹⁴ Arel and Rambo, *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, 3.

¹⁵ For more on intersectionality, see Jane Coaston, “The Intersectionality Wars,” *Vox* (May 28, 2019), accessed July 21, 2021. See also Kimberlé W. Crenshaw, *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings of Kimberlé W. Crenshaw* (New York: The New Press, 2017).

¹⁶ Many scholars have written on different types of imagined communities (Émile Durkheim, Mary Douglas, and Peter Berger leap to mind). Benedict Anderson, in particular, has written a book by that title that focuses on nationalism (*Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, New York: Verso, 2016).

all of the communities that comprise the collective pursuit of learning. Some of the smaller communities that fit within the community of religion scholars include those of philosophers of religion and theologians. So, in sum, there are communities nested within communities, and each of them has its own languages, subdivisions, and tacit cultures.

As I described above, in my own experiences of reading and learning among several theologians in various contexts, many (but certainly not all) of my peers had been trained in the history and canon of Christian theology. I have referred to the fact that while all of us had engaged in graduate study in religion, there was a different lineage of books and language that most of my theologically-trained peers had learned and that I had not. Their hermeneutical lenses—their interests, and their teachers, and probably their teachers’ teachers—had focused on (largely Christian) theology, while mine had focused on philosophy, and on Indian Buddhist philosophy in particular. The difference sounds minor, but the more advanced the discussions became, the more I felt like I was back in a middle school cafeteria trying to suss out how to maneuver the opaque mystery of cliques. Had I received my training more recently, perhaps things might have been different. None of my confusion, I should point out, felt like it was by way of conscious ill intent or nefarious design on anyone’s part. Rather, it seemed to me, everyone just assumed that we were all part of the same intellectual heritage and community, and therefore would all understand the same language. We were all part of the same “we.” Except we weren’t. The intellectual disorientation I was experiencing, I think, the feeling of liminality, was an artefact of the particular point in time and the particular place in the history of religious studies training in the United States that I experienced as a student.

Even so, if this kind of exclusion-by-assumed-shared-language-community inadvertently happens among professional peers, how often must assumptions of shared language, experience, and history obfuscate clear communication in other contexts? How much pressure to code switch probably occurs where power imbalances also obtain? In my own situation, I think the assumptions were generous ones, and no real harm was done. People assumed I knew “theology” as they had learned it (and that there was a mutually agreed-upon way to speak it), and I was able to get myself up to speed quickly enough by doing the suggested readings for the seminar, my own background reading, and having extended conversations with learned peers.

But I can’t help but think about situations where more is at stake. At the time of my original draft of this essay—the fall of 2020—those of us working in higher education in the United States had to ask ourselves a lot of difficult and important questions (questions we should have been asking all along, but which are clearly, I hope, unavoidable now) about access, equity, and justice in our institutions: questions about who the “our” is in the phrase “our communities.” What does the language we use on our campuses—on our websites, on our syllabi, in our course catalogues—communicate about who we take to be who “we” are? Who is welcome on our campuses? Toward what ideals of an educated person are we creating curricula? And what structures do we have in place—or *not* have in place—on our campuses to facilitate putting those ideals into practice, to instantiate those ideas in real life? Language and community—like lived theology—can be paradoxical: it can, perhaps, facilitate, invite, and lead to mutual learning; or, it can exclude and wall people out. Therefore, we must be attentive to the language we use, lest in an effort to show meticulous fidelity to methodological concerns, we lose sight of context, and

build up walls that prevent clear communication and invitational, open-hearted, dialogical learning.¹⁷

Question #3: Might crisis points in one's life threaten the structural integrity of some theological walls? What happens to the methodological coherence or community history that keeps some walls intact when one has to act quickly with the tools they have available at the time?

I described above the seriousness with which I take methodological concerns. Such concerns include attention to detail and context, precision with language, and care and humility before speaking and acting. Attending to such concerns is possible in an ideal world—or even a pretty good world. But sometimes, a bit of the tumultuous side of life will enter onto the stage unannounced and sully the clear lines of method. I have found that when an emergency hits, my carefully constructed methodical concerns go on my mental back burner so that I can focus instead on how to best triage this new existential situation. Then, after things settle, I will think, “Huh. Did any of my methodological considerations apply while that thing was happening?”

For example: when both of my parents suffered from protracted battles with dementia, I watched both their bodies and minds degrade and tried to figure out how best to care for each person in the moment. And the needs of the moment tended to shift rapidly and seemingly without reason or precedent. I wondered how they understood who they were and who I was. Sometimes, I was able to recite Christian scripture to them, or to sing a hymn, and doing so provided great comfort—visibly, to them, and in turn, immediately and physically, to me. The scriptures and hymns were something we knew and recognized and shared. And then sometimes, there were Buddhist concepts that I knew and had learned about and puzzled over for years that provided me with the only way to come to grips with losing a sense of who or where they were in the moment. Where had the people I'd known and loved gone? Their bodies were there, but where were *they*? My insides were a kaleidoscope of theologies; but if efficacy counts for anything, the kaleidoscopic approach worked. It worked in the sense that during those moments in which I felt utterly lost and caught within a type of pain that is beyond language – moments where I wanted more than anything to provide a kind of presence for my parents, but did not know how best to do that—I was able to find orientation, succor, and an ability to be still and quiet, even if only for a moment.

¹⁷ I can best explain what I mean by “dialogical” here by again referring to an example. In my workshop with my theologian friends, when I said, “I don’t know what that word means—I think it comes from an intellectual lineage to which I was not exposed. Can you help me?” they were open to what I had to say and responded openly and helpfully. They explained the terms, did not scoff at my request for information, and in turn, asked for feedback from me as well. We had a dialogue, and mutual learning and growth occurred. Similarly, in my work as a teacher and as an administrator, I’ve received feedback from students and colleagues regarding places where assignments in courses or school processes have seemed opaque or exclusionary. I have (I hope) responded with curiosity rather than defensiveness and worked with those students and colleagues to find a way to improve things where I could, and to see where my own social location might have prevented my seeing a limitation in the way something was phrased or explained. Through the give and take of dialogue, we can see where our own hermeneutic positionalities have impacted our abilities to understand one another, and subsequently, might be able to learn both about the matter at hand and about the limitations and possibilities of language itself.

I don’t know if whoever I was during those moments would have looked theologically coherent on paper. I don’t know if my approach was methodologically sound. But, honestly, I don’t really care all that much. Method really didn’t matter in those moments.¹⁸

On the first page of his introductory essay to TWW, Martin writes, “A major achievement of the past half-century has been the development of increasingly adequate concepts and methods for comparison and dialogue conducive to theologizing across traditions”.¹⁹ I’ve come to a point in my life where I really think that “increasing adequacy” is all we can hope for—and actually, I think that a trajectory of increasing adequacy is a pretty high bar. In my own case, it took many years of study for me to get to the point of having the efficacious mishmash I had at my disposal when my parents were dying. In the case of being responsive to my students in the present historical moment, it has taken a lot of reading and thinking and learning and unlearning for me to increase my adequacy to them—to increase my ability to be adequately responsive to them: to be able to listen well, to teach well, and to diversify my syllabi and think anew about what students should know and be able to do. For me, responsivity to my students and their evolving needs is a theologically transreligious imperative.²⁰ It is about trying to take the world as it is *right now*, trying to listen to the needs of the world as they are being articulated *now*, and respond. I don’t think the old walls will hold up anymore. Or, if they do, most of the young people will just leave the house.

The challenges that face us in the public square are no less great. All of this thinking and worrying about walls matters, I think. And I think it matters while we are in the process of thinking—while we are forming and trying to figure out what we want our walls to be made of and our windows to look like—what we think makes sense and goes together and seems to cohere and work. But then there are the messier moments of living, and during those times, survival matters much more than theological coherence. If a person’s survival raft is a pastiche of symbols and metaphors from different traditions, it seems to me that it’s the getting the person to the other side of the river of crisis that matters.

To extend the metaphor of walls: my job puts me at the juncture of many walls in academic life. I teach; I am an administrator; and I work with the Office of Institutional Equity at my institution. I work with curriculum and co-curriculum; I work with formal complaints about equity and inequity; and I have a lot of very difficult conversations with people that go way beyond the theoretical. The months that followed the Covid-19 pandemic and the killing of George Floyd have shown me very clearly that our students are hungry for a time when the institutions they have believed in and put their faith in will manifest the ideals that they profess in their mission statements into concrete realities that can be seen and felt in the everyday lived realities of student life. Student demands for a better world, for the world that could be and should be, resonates, in my mind, with a theological method that loosens its vice-like grip on its walls – one that strives with the necessary, daily, plodding work of becoming ever-more adequate, ever closer to what we could and should be.

¹⁸ And here, by “method,” I suppose I mean how someone from the outside would have judged the coherence of the practical approach I was using—the moving swirl of theologies I was living through in order to survive with my heart and mind intact.

¹⁹ Martin, *Theology Without Walls*, 1.

²⁰ It is a theologically transreligious imperative both because they come from a variety of religious and cultural backgrounds, and because their needs will change over time.



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