

Introduction to the Special Issue: Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) and Theology Without Walls (TWW)

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People identified with being “spiritual but not religious (SBNR)” now comprise around a quarter of American adults and their number keeps growing. Despite the ambiguity of their spiritual states which defy easy characterization, SBNRs are consistent in their tendency of dabbling in or seeking spiritual resources outside traditional institutional boundaries of religions. As a research program organized in the American Academy of Religion, Theology Without Walls (TWW) aims to pursue theology as an open inquiry into ultimate reality untethered to institutional restrictions of religions, from whatever tradition a theologian may start her inquiry. Are SBNRs amenable to TWW? How do we look at the phenomenon of SBNR from the perspective of TWW and other related viewpoints of inter- or trans-religious studies? This special issue gathers scholarly contributions in areas such as sociology, pastoral care, pedagogy, psychology, political science, theology, and religious studies in order to shed light on these questions.

Keywords: Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR), Theology Without Walls (TWW), comparative theology, religious diversity, spirituality, pedagogy, democracy.

Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR)

The semantics of the word “spirituality” or “being spiritual” undergoes major changes in the intellectual history of the West. Being spiritual was once juxtaposed with being corporeal by major ancient Greek thinkers to characterize the inhabiting of human beings in a world of stark dualism, but after the establishment of Christianity in medieval Europe, spirituality started to refer primarily to the individualistic and subjective core of the allegedly genuine religion, viz., Christianity. During the era of Protestant reformation, this medieval reference was inherited while simultaneously being expanded to the world via the means of Western colonialism and global modernization. As a result, non-Western traditions had to be conceptualized per the Western construction of a cluster of ideas surrounding “religion,” among which the separation of the sacred and the secular vis-à-vis its institutional manifestation of the separation of church and state stands prominently. Spirituality was accordingly thought of as denoting the inner core of universal religiosity, about which every “religion” in the world has to present an expression of its own. Nevertheless, beginning from the late 20th century, a new meaning of spirituality has become increasingly popular among young or young-minded Westerners. This new meaning is now surprisingly juxtaposed with “being religious” to signify some way of meaningful human living which *contrasts with* the modern, Western construction of the religious way of life.¹

Two major forces have pushed this final round of semantic change to date: firstly, the commodification of spiritual products in a globalized market undermines the traditional organizational forms of religion and enhances the feasibility for individuals to seek the meaning of life in an idiosyncratic way. Secondly, the academic study of non-Western religions has led to

¹ More details of the semantic change can refer to 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, and 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,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* (2014): 1–7.

an increasing awareness among scholars about the insufficiency of conventional Western categories to characterize the so-called “world religions,” and consequently, about the non-universality of the aforementioned modern Western construction of religion. Honestly, these two forces also comprise the major background for me to engage with the research leading to this special issue as its guest editor. Grown up in China and pursuing religious studies in the U.S., I have constantly faced the challenge of how to utilize conventional Western categories (as they are mainly expressed in the English language) to study and present Chinese religions, particularly Ruism (Confucianism) as my major expertise, in the American academia and to the Western audiences. As I have been involved in the long-standing debate among concerned scholars about whether Ruism is a philosophy or a religion, I am now caught with another unexpected conundrum. That is, while we use our heads to debate philosophy, religion, and Ruism, the ground we stand upon has already shifted. In other words, “religion,” as well as other closely related terms to it, now does not mean exclusively what it was originally meant in the era of Western colonialism. As a consequence, before continuing the debate in any sensible way, I believe disputants must clarify the meanings of the basic modern language which they are still speaking.

Therefore, my study of the phenomenon of SBNR is motivated by my non-Western background, and specifically driven by a question as follows: what do people exactly mean when they self-report that they are spiritual but not religious?

Scholars have tried to answer this question via a variety of approaches such as qualitative, quantitative research and the historical investigation of ideas and concepts. After studying some of the major up-to-date research,² I come to conclude that if SBNR is definable as a self-descriptive term of a grassroots phenomenon in the West, people identified with being SBNR (also called SBNRs) are relatively sure of what they are avoiding, but remain diverse about what they are embracing. In other words, scholars can basically pin down the connotation of being “but not religious” while having to acknowledge the vagueness of “being spiritual” in the phrase of SBNR. There are two major items offered by conventional religions in the West in which SBNRs are losing their interest: doctrine and institution. In other words, SBNRs refuse to accept subserviently the authority of doctrines sanctioned by a religious institution which normally operates itself according to the modern political principle of the separation of church and state. Accordingly, SBNRs also dislike religious practices (such as the regular participation of liturgical rituals) which are also sanctioned by a conventional religious institution to reinforce the authority

² Besides the works quoted in the first footnote and the works of contributors to this special issue, major research which inspires my writing of this introduction include: Michael Lipka and Claire Gecewicz, “More Americans now say they’re spiritual but not religious,” *Pew Research Center* (September 6, 2017), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/09/06/more-americans-now-say-theyre-spiritual-but-not-religious/>; Robert P. Jones, Daniel Cox, and Art Raney, “Searching for Spirituality in the U.S.: A New Look at the Spiritual but Not Religious.” *PRRI* (2017), <https://www.prii.org/research/religiosity-and-spirituality-in-america/>; Kathryn A. Johnson, Carissa A. Sharp, Morris A. Okun, Azim F. Shariff, and Adam B. Cohen, “SBNR Identity: The Role of Impersonal God Representations, Individualistic Spirituality, and Dissimilarity with Religious Groups,” *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 28:2 (2018): 121–140; Nancy T. Ammerman, “Spiritual But Not Religious? Beyond Binary Choices in the Study of Religion,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52:2 (2013): 258–278; Maria Wixwat and Gerard Saucier, “Being Spiritual but Not Religious,” *Current Opinion in Psychology*, 40 (2021): 121–25. Among the named research, the first three are methodologically more quantitative, Ammerman’s is more qualitative, Wixwat and Saucier’s “Being Spiritual but Not Religious” is a fine summary of the current empirical research on SBNR, and Huss’ works use mainly the method of intellectual history.

of doctrines. Being SBNR is nonetheless distinguished from being non-spiritual in that SBNRs care about the depth of human individuality, and hence, try to seek the meaning of life in connection to something larger than oneself.³ Three specific features of this “seeking” of SBNRs need to be highlighted in the context of scholarly discussions presented by this special issue.

Firstly, SBNRs are extremely diverse regarding the larger “something” that they seek to connect their inner self with. Theologically, they may be mono-or-polytheistic while believing in traditional Abrahamic deities. They may also be non-theistic and tend to accept the conceptualization of transcendent reality in Eastern religions such as Brahman, Dao, or other divine forces. SBNRs may be simply agnostic or atheistic while vaguely feeling the intrinsic value of “nature,” and hence, attempting to ground their life upon nature via practicing body exercises such as yoga or meditation.

Secondly, even if we focus upon the specific tendency of SBNRs’ towards any of the aforementioned theological or philosophical option, it is not usual to find coherency or systematicity about their conceptions of it.⁴ In other words, SBNRs may very well be content of their gesture of “seeking” without the urgent need of landing in any doctrine-like belief with “doctrine” being understood in the way of conventional religions.

Thirdly, although the exposure to multiple religions is not a decisive factor for one to become a SBNR, SBNRs in general do indicate a stronger willingness than the religious or non-religious to explain their novel and individualistic spiritual way of life using borrowed terms and ideas from multiple faith traditions.⁵ This also implies inter-religious learning can become a significant resource for SBNRs’ spiritual exploration.

In a word, the empirical research of the grassroots phenomenon of SBNR in the late modern West indicate that as an emerging category of religious survey which may succumb to radical transformation in the future, SBNRs intend to shift the authority concerning meaningful human living from conventional religious institutions to individuals, and seek to connect their inner self with something larger which they may or may not have a clear idea of.

Theology Without Walls (TWW)

The social and academic forces leading to the formation of SBNRs also contribute to the birth of the research program of Theology Without Walls (TWW), which has convened annually in the American Academy of Religion (AAR) since 2014 and published its flagship volume *Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative*, edited by Jerry L. Martin, through Routledge in 2019.⁶ Just as SBNRs as a category become construable through clarifying what SBNRs are avoiding, we need to grasp what kind of “walls” TWW theologians intend to bring down in order to understand TWW in general.

³ See the distinction between SBNR, “not spiritual but religious” and “neither spiritual nor religious” made by Jones et al., “Searching for Spirituality.”

⁴ Apart from the listed research in footnote 2, several contributors to the special issue highlight this feature of SBNRs. Please see my introduction to their articles in the following.

⁵ See Johnson et al., “SBNR Identity,” 135.

⁶ More information about the organization of TWW can be checked at its website: <http://theologywithoutwalls.com/>.

From its first day of launch, TWW aims to pursue the study of comparative theology in a way alternative to Francis X. Clooney’s model, while remaining diverse regarding the concrete approaches to doing so among TWW theologians. As I have investigated Clooney’s comparative methodology in several publications⁷, the following is a very brief account of it.

Clooney’s comparative theology is premised upon his conventional understanding of theology as “faith seeking understanding” defined by the medieval Catholic scholasticism. Theology as such requires establishing one’s faith in a determinate form of divine revelation proclaimed by the Creed (as it is sanctified by the Catholic church) at first, and then, to seek available cultural devices to elucidate the revelation. In the context of the comparative study of religions, these “cultural devices” expand to the non-Western world (particularly to Hinduism in Clooney’s case), and hence, comparative theology is pursued as a discipline seeking inspirations from outside one’s home tradition to enrich and enhance one’s commitment to the religious truth revealed by the home tradition. During the process of comparison, comparative theologians of Clooney’s sort would think the determinate form of divine revelation sanctioned by their home tradition is the best and unalterable, and accordingly, an expected result from the comparison is to juxtapose theologies of different traditions so as to enhance the respective commitment of religious affiliates to the truth of each of them.⁸

In contrast, most of the TWW contributors advocate what I called the Protestant Conception of Theology (PCT),⁹ and intend to develop it into a fuller form in the contemporary time. According to PCT, “faith” refers to the pre- or super- linguistic traits of transformative experience, which is engendered by varying spiritual disciplines, and evidences individuals’ direct encounter with ultimate reality. Once individuals are committed to the active cultivation of these spiritually transformative capacities, religions are formed, and the comprehensive and deeper reflection upon the religious experience gives rise to theology. In other words, the primary goal of theology per TWW advocates is not to display the cultural implication of a pre-established and unalterable commitment to doctrines sanctioned by religious institutions. Instead, the ultimately indeterminate and ineffable nature of the spiritual experience of human encounter with ultimate reality entails that no determinate form of that experience can exhaust the unfathomable richness of that reality. Hence, the comparative study of religions and individual spiritual experiences drawing upon a variety of disciplinary approaches becomes a major method for TWW theologians to inquire into what ultimate reality is and becomes as well as how to navigate

⁷ See Bin Song, “Robert C. Neville: A Systematic, Nonconformist, Comparative Philosopher of Religion,” *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 40:3 (Sept. 2020): 11–30; Bin Song, “Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art,” in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, 31 (Nov. 2020): 92–113; and Bin Song, a review of *Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative*, edited by Jerry L. Martin (Routledge, 2019), *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, 32 (March 2021): 107–10.

⁸ The characterization made here about Clooney’s methodology of comparative theology pertains to the fundamental conception of “theology” which such a methodology implies. Notably, Clooney’s concrete commentarial works on classical Hindu and Christian texts, such as Francis X. Clooney, *His Hiding Place is Darkness: A Hindu-Catholic Theopoetics of Divine Absence* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013) and Francis X. Clooney, *Reading the Hindu and Christian Classics: Why and How Deep Learning Still Matters* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2019), indicate the conspicuous creativity and rigorous academic standard of his approach to comparative theology.

⁹ More details about PCT can refer to my review of *Theology Without Walls* cited in note 7. Part of the following explanatory words of TWW are rewritten from this published review.

individuals' diverse spiritual experiences with continually renewed understandings of ultimate reality.

Besides PCT, the project of TWW has the potential to revive the pre-Christian, Aristotelian understanding of theology in ancient Greek thought. Theology per its original use in Aristotle's works is part of metaphysics integral to philosophy as a way of life (PWOL), which prioritizes "spiritual exercises" aiming for the transformation of the whole personhood of human individuals over discursive analyses and argumentations about the transformative experience.¹⁰ The relationship between human spirituality and its theological reflection in ancient Greek philosophy is strikingly similar to the one implied by PCT. However, since those philosophers' work was embedded in a political and social infrastructure drastically different from the one of modern nation-states upon which PCT operates, and the discipline of philosophy has been well-incorporated into the global tradition of liberal arts education, I deem theology per PWOL is more promising in guiding the comparative study of religions as a genuinely open inquiry which shall generate rich pedagogical outcomes.

Besides PCT and PWOL, another major source to inspire the project of TWW is the scholarly study of non-Western traditions, since these traditions do not necessarily share the same assumptions as Francis X. Clooney's on theology. For instance, Jeffery Long emphasizes that the Vedanta tradition of Hinduism "has no dogma or creed. Individuals in the Vedanta tradition are thus free to express skepticism about this teaching. ... In contrast with mainstream Christianity, Vedanta is not primarily about belief in the divinity of a particular teacher, but about the realization and manifestation of the divinity within us all."¹¹ In other words, individuals nurtured by the tradition of Vedanta Hinduism can broadly incorporate insights from outside and revise their preestablished spiritual visions without needing to worry about total conversion. In my work which defines a Ru (Confucian) theology of religions as a seeded, open inclusivism, I also argue that for traditions that lack a credal attitude towards ultimate reality, established theological wisdom within a tradition would be like a "seed" to assist individuals' spiritual growth, and insights gleaned elsewhere may modify the genetic expression of the seed so as to develop new epi-genetic traits of the rooted tradition in time.¹² Therefore, as indicated by these works of comparative theology, which stand firmly upon a tradition different from Christianity, TWW does not preclude the open inquiry into ultimate reality from starting from a base perspective, but the perspective is expected to be enriched, revised, and hence, vulnerable to further feedback from realities perceived outside of the base.

In a word, the "walls" that TWW intends to tear down are nothing but the aforementioned credal attitude towards what concerns human individuals ultimately, as well as the sovereign role that conventional religious institutions play in bolstering this attitude. Under the mandate of pursuing theology as an open inquiry, TWW theologians can broadly draw upon sources in PCT, PWOL, non-Western religions as well as the whole span of human spiritual experience and academic disciplines to address their concerns with ultimate reality in a way of inter-religious, trans-religious, or simply tradition-based learning. Despite the diversity of these

¹⁰ See my analysis of theology as a liberal art in ancient Greek thought in Song, "Comparative Theology."

¹¹ Jeffery D. Long, "A Hinduism without walls? Exploring the concept of the avatar interreligiously," in *Theology Without Walls*, ed. Martin, 230.

¹² Song, "Comparative Theology," 105–13.

concrete approaches to the intended open inquiry, I hope it is obvious from the above discussion that TWW is premised upon an unconventional understanding of theology. Since being a relatively young research program, how TWW proceeds in the future and whether it can generate broad impacts both in and outside the academy remains to be observed.

SBNR and TWW

Since TWW is revoking what SBNRs are avoiding, viz., doctrines and practices sanctioned by conventional religious institutions in the West, are SBNRs amenable to TWW? In other words, can TWW find its audiences among SBNRs so that the grassroots phenomenon of SBNR and the up-to-date mainly academic pursuit of TWW build a rapport with each other? Furthermore, how can we broadly reflect upon the natures of SBNRs and TWW if these two are juxtaposed as representing a significant new development of human spirituality? It was to answer these questions that a panel titled as “SBNR and TWW” was convened by the Unit of TWW in the 2020 annual meeting of AAR, which furthermore leads to the publication of this special issue with the same title.

After the AAR panel, some panelists withdrew from the publication process although their recent publications can inform readers of this special issue of their original contributions to the panel¹³. A new author, Paul Hedges, joins during the process. Except these changes, all other authors in this special issue maintain basically the same roles as they did in the panel, with Rory D. McEntee’s and Linda Mercadante’s being more responsive while others are more original. Here follows a brief introduction to each of these authors’ articles.

Paul Bramadat’s paper “Walls and Borders: Theology and Regionalism after Religion,” based upon an extensive field work conducted via the method of sociological religious studies, argues that if TWW aims to build a coherent theological doctrine in a way of synthesizing spiritual wisdoms from varying religions, it would be difficult for TWW theologians to find their audiences among SBNRs living in the Cascadian region of the North America. This is because the “not religious” part of the spiritual consciousness of SBNRs in the identified region does not derive from any deliberate dissent from established religions. Rather, being not religious is almost an inborn character of SBNRs since they grow up in an environment where institutionalized religions have declined for so long a time that can barely generate impacts upon SBNRs’ everyday life. As a result, young SBNRs simply do not have any interest in either affiliating with or disaffiliating from religions, and hence, they are better to be characterized as SANRs (Spiritual And Not Religious). Because of this inborn nature of SBNRs’ attitude toward religion in a concrete place and time of “after religion,” they either resist or is simply indifferent to a coherent set of practices reflected by a synthetic theological doctrine, despite the fact that they frequently engage spiritual practices (such as yoga and meditation) and share “reverential naturalism” as a vague, yet discernible common spiritual belief. Bramadat’s paper therefore urges TWW

¹³ See Wesley J. Wildman and Kate J. Stockly, *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (St. Martin’s Press, 2021). Jeffrey J. Kripal, “Comparison gets you nowhere! The comparative study of religion and the Spiritual but Not Religious,” in *Being Spiritual but Not Religious*, ed. William B. Parsons (Routledge, 2018), 253–67. Rory D. McEntee’s article, which I will introduce in the following, also explains the original AAR panel in detail.

theologians to heed the subtle nature of the spiritual state of SBNRs in specific regions, and to consider how to do theology both locally and outside of the conventional boxes of religious identity.

While characterizing TWW as essentially aiming to construct a free-floating meta-theory of “ultimacy” unconstrained by any grounded human condition, Paul Hedges’ paper, “Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation,” has furnished the harshest critique of TWW to date. Hedges distinguishes three approaches to the study of religion: confessional theology, academic theology and religious studies. He also enumerates subdisciplines of theology (such as historical theology, systematic theology, pastoral theology, and so on.), the academic credentials of all of which are pinpointed by Hedges as consisting in engaging the claims made by a tradition via the forms of academic reasoning. While advocating a distinction of making truth claims as non-academic versus examining truth claims as academic, Hedges avers that TWW does not belong to any of the aforementioned approaches or subdisciplines of the study of religion and theology which is qualifiable as scholarship. Underlying the non-academic nature of TWW are biases shared by TWW contributors who enjoy the Western, white, and colonial privilege of not being obliged to tie to any established tradition, and thus, treat non-Western traditions as consumable spiritual products susceptible of individuals’ free choice. Since its approach to theology is discredited by Hedges as being nothing less than confessional in nature, TWW cannot take SBNRs as its audiences, who, despite their abundant inner differences, are commonly averse to confessional doctrines. Surely, Hedges’ paper poses a serious question to TWW theorists about how to claim truth about ultimate reality untethered to traditions.

Being crafted in a responsive style to the original AAR panel and to the essays included in this special issue, Rory D. McEntee’s paper “The Potential of Theology Without Walls as Decolonial & Democratic Praxis: A Response” addresses a variety of issues crucial to the further development of the TWW enterprise within democratic society at large and the current academia in particular. Three major aspects of McEntee’s argument are summarized as follows: firstly, as a TWW contributor himself, McEntee clarifies the nature of the TWW project as aiming to create a “beloved community of religious diversity” to provide guidance for the maturity of spiritual learners. While aiming so, TWW transforms the theological study of ultimate reality into an open inquiry which encompasses all relevant disciplinary approaches, methodologies, traditions, and individual experiences. Secondly, McEntee very wisely points out that the best connection between TWW and SBNRs consists in a re-envisioned pedagogy of religion, philosophy and spirituality, which fulfills the needs of the increasingly diversified academy and the decolonizing public space in a democracy. Thirdly, which is also his most exciting contribution to the special issue, McEntee engages with Paul Hedges’ critique towards TWW in such details that McEntee does not only proposes an alternative criterion to define religious scholarship. More importantly, as prompted by his democratic and decolonial commitment, McEntee also broadly reflects upon the disciplinary natures of theology, philosophy, religious studies and area studies as well as the underlying Western assumption of these compartmentalized disciplines regarding the religious/secular binary. The conclusion reached by McEntee might sound stunning from the perspective of the Kantian constructivism which, according to Hedges’ argument, applies to the criterion of modern scholarship in general: while devising one specific ontological orientation to engage the nature of realities as such, the alleged “secular” lens of scholarship is equivalent to being “religious.” Hence, a more desirable

type of religious scholarship, to which TWW is expected to belong, should break the religious/secular binary so as to make the academic study of religions genuinely open to the multiplicities of human spiritual experience, and thus, be able to contribute to the decolonization of the academy and the strengthening of democracy.

While drawing upon a variety of growth experiences as a graduate student, scholar, teacher, college administrator, and daughter, Katherine Janiec Jones’ article “A Theology of Increasing Adequacy: Process, Practicality, and Relationship” reflects deeply upon what “theology” is supposed to be meant in varying conversations, why and to what extent one’s spiritual “identity” matters, and how the “community” life in the academy should be organized in face of emerging and urgent human needs in a fraught time of uncertainty, tension and crisis. Jones argues the disciplinary walls between theology, religion, and philosophy, as well as the spiritual walls between varying self-identifiers (such as SBNR, multiply-religious, and other tradition-based ones), should all succumb to a scrutiny of one’s on-going life experience embedded within human relationships and communities. Therefore, in the final analysis, theology is and ought to be a processual and pragmatic entity which takes adequacy to practical needs as its central goal.

Linda Mercadante writes her contribution “Do the ‘Spiritual But Not Religious’ (SBNR) Want a Theology Without Walls?” as a theologian who conducted extensive field work and interviewed generations of SBNRs. To answer the titled question, which is also a central one for the special issue, Mercadante adumbrates a set of preconditions for SBNRs to remain open to theological issues, and thus, to TWW. Firstly, SBNRs are reported as being remarkably consistent on rejecting beliefs that remind of rigid Christian doctrines such as original sin, personal transcendent God and retributive afterlife. Secondly, they show little interest in traditionally organized religions, and hence, while pursuing spiritual activities such as yoga and meditation, they irregularly, if not rarely, go to churches, and consequently do not request a coherent thought-world. Even so, many SBNRs are prone to ask metaphysical or “theological” questions although they may not yet have identified these questions as theological. Interestingly enough, according to Mercadante’s analysis, many SBNRs are triggered by their highly individualistic spiritual experience to continually create a sort of “mini-meta-narratives” which focus upon the feelings of wonder, awe, and self-actualization or self-transcendence. Mercadante concludes that the trans-religious, open-minded, and tolerate nature of TWW would not attract SBNRs straightforwardly. However, if keeping aware of the aforementioned preconditions of SBNRs’ theological exploration and aiming to nurture individual spiritual experiences instead of constructing top-down theological doctrines, the TWW enterprise may find serious audiences among SBNRs.

Hans le Grand’s paper, “A Theology for Religious Seekers: Reading Kaufman, Taylor, Mercadante, and Diller,” conducts a thought experiment on how SBNRs can become the so-called “religious seekers” who can seriously pursue “theology.” Such an experiment leads to the careful crafting of two diagrams which portray how a person, starting from an agnostic point regarding religious matters, gradually advances into the further steps of a religious seeker via pondering a series of existential questions such as whether to be committed to ethical human living, whether to ground such ethics in a broader interpretive scheme, and whether to accept individual experience as the final authority for one’s religious decisions, etc. The tentative conclusion of the paper is intriguing for both scholars of social science in SBNR studies and

TWW contributors: it establishes a series of signposts on the spiritual path for a SBNR to choose to be a theologian and affirms accordingly that TWW is this sort of “theology” fit for such religious seekerism.

Conclusion

With the rich implications of these gathered articles remaining to be unpacked by readers, I will furnish two preliminary conclusions to address the major questions asked by this special issue. Are SBNRs amenable to TWW? After reading the contributors’ articles, I come to realize that asking this question is like inquiring into whether the college freshmen can be taught philosophy, a subject to which they normally have very little, if not zero, exposure in high school. In other words, it all depends upon how instructors do it. If philosophers and theologians as instructors intend to impose their own doctrines disregarding the receiving capacity of students, it would almost certainly fail. However, if theologians can maintain a genuine openness towards their pursuit of theology as a theology *without walls*, and hence, take facilitating individuals’ navigation of spiritual experience as a central pedagogical goal, TWW does have a chance to attract SBNRs. In this regard, pedagogical explorations pursued by the program of Philosophy as a Way of Life convened in the University of Notre Dame and other venues may furnish inspirations to TWW theologians, since as I argued above, PWOL is one intellectual source in the West which enlightens the birth and development of TWW.¹⁴

Finally, is there any broad observation we can obtain regarding SBNRs and TWW as a novel phenomenon of human spirituality? As particularly hinted by Hedges and McEntee’s exchange, the formation of SBNRs and TWW challenges the very fundamental intellectual assumptions upon which the society, politics and academia of the modern world are built. If the difference between philosophy, religion and theology turns out to be untenable, if the sacred is relentlessly within the secular, and if religiously significant new institutions do not distance themselves from the state, what would the new academy look like? What is democracy going to be? What kind of new world cultural order shall we look forward to? I hope this special issue can trigger much of readers’ thought on these questions.¹⁵



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¹⁴ More information about the program can be found at its website: <https://philife.nd.edu/>.

¹⁵ For the composition of this introductory article, I specifically thank Prof. Melissa Deckman, a colleague of mine at Washington College, who helped my collection of data regarding the religious state of SBNRs in the US.

895, and “*Comparative Theology as a Liberal Art*,” in *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, No. 31 (Nov. 2020): 92-113.

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