

Theology With and Without (W&W) Walls, Scholarship W&W Walls, and Decolonization W&W: A Rejoinder to Rory D. McEntee

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This article does a number of pieces of work. On the one hand, it explores how the impetus to decolonization may be balanced against the necessity of critical scholarship. It also clarifies some aspects of how exploration of theology and theological work may operate within the bounds of scholarly apparatus. In this, it is also a rejoinder to McEntee's critique of my work that both points to the way that Theology Without Walls (TWW) cannot solidly ground itself in decolonial praxis as it stands, but also pointing to a set of assumptions made about my work which do not stand up to scrutiny. Taking a strong decolonial stance, which infuses much of my work, I seek to - rather than refuting McEntee point-by-point - produce a vision for scholarship that can take the concerns of TWW seriously, but goes beyond the limitations which I argue lay within it, and which its practitioners may be unaware of.

Keywords: decolonization, theology without walls, critical religion, social construction, Kant, Cornel West, Bede Griffiths

Setting Out my Stall in the Marketplace

Let me start obliquely by talking about the British monk Bede Griffiths. For those not familiar with him, as a student at Oxford under C. S. Lewis' guidance, Griffiths was drawn towards taking Christianity more seriously, and shortly afterwards converted to Roman Catholicism and became a monk. From Prinknash Abbey in England he felt drawn to India where he came under the influence of Abhishiktananda and the Christian Ashram movement, and wrote many books linking Christianity, science, and Indian religions. As a young person, I was greatly taken with Griffiths and had read most of his writings. My own spiritual experiences led me to believe in his fusion of the religions of East and West, as he often put it. Indeed, I wished to do my PhD on him, and had an offer to do so. However, for reasons of timing and finances, I ended up elsewhere, staying at St David's University College in Lampeter, and studying something with less personal resonance with me at the time, British missionary theology, mainly from the nineteenth century, specifically fulfilment theology.¹ This change in PhD topic did not take away from my interest in Griffiths. I still find him a fascinating character for study and have included him in published work.² But, in the twenty-six years since starting my PhD, my perception of academia and scholarship has changed and been challenged. I do not tell this story because I want to claim that I have moved on as a scholar to higher insights. Rather, in the spirit of the friendly exchanges Rory McEntee and I are exchanging about Theology Without Walls (TWW), I want to suggest that I understand something of where, I think, he stands, and that I myself have stood in a somewhat similar place. That I now stand in a different place and see with different

¹ This resulted in my first book and so essentially laid the grounds for the possibility of my future academic career, see Paul Hedges, *Preparation and Fulfilment*: (Bern: Peter Lang, 2001).

² See, for instance, Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 62–64. As a note, because this paper is a rejoinder to a critique of my work I will rely heavily upon citations of my own work, especially this book, to help demonstrate how I have approached the issues discussed and how I would frame them. As such, it is not to prioritize my own work as the go-to resource, but to place this paper in relation to an ongoing debate around my own critique of TWW started by McEntee's response (cited below).

eyes is part of my own journey, and I hope that we can learn together on our journeys to seek towards what I hope will be better ways of understanding: “In disputes upon moral or scientific points [which I take this to be], let your aim be to come at truth, not to conquer your opponent. So you shall never be at a loss in losing the argument, and gaining a new discovery.”³ With this initial and autobiographical note in place—though I will return to autobiography and scholarship in due course—I turn to a more formal start to this rejoinder.

As a scholar, I am grateful to Rory McEntee for his long and sustained critique of my reflections on the TWW project.⁴ Much that is written, especially in the Humanities, disappears into the growing morass of ever greater numbers of publications that we are often institutionally obliged to turn out. To be considered, even critiqued, is therefore an honour and a privilege. Attentive readers will no doubt have guessed at what I am aiming at here, which is to turn this around, and suggest that my critique of TWW is to take it seriously. McEntee is, nevertheless, correct when he says that: “If Hedges’s critiques are valid, then they would seem to represent something of a death knell for TWW.”⁵ I do not think this contradictory, because the questions and issues TWW raises are very important and definitely need a place within the academy, and beyond, but where, when, and how these are addressed is, perhaps, what is at stake. If nothing else, and a point I raise in my critique, if the TWW project (as I suggest) is but another recurrence of a kind of perennialism that perennially pops up in scholarship and popular discourse then it does need to be explored and discussed. McEntee is also quite correct on at least two other grounds. Firstly, that our definitions and visions speak to different perceptions of what scholarship is and what it is for, though I think he overstates our differences. However, as McEntee notes, his case is based upon an analysis of one paper by myself which takes, perhaps, a strong and rhetorical tone, leading to his reading of my work. Secondly, that there are fissures, cracks, and aporia in my argument, which he generously acknowledges my awareness of when I speak, in particular, of the problematic category of the secular. But I see this as inevitable given the nature of the issues at stake—there is no clear black and white than can neatly be demarcated—but this does not mean that we cannot seek to create analytical and meaningful distinctions despite the ruptures that will inevitably exist in the human experience of what, for want of a better term, we may call here “reality”.

It may be useful to put in a note, or caveat to the reader, as to how I am defining “scholarship” for the purpose of this paper. I fully accept that confessional theology may be scholarly. It may be well researched, fully referenced, engaged with due regard for philosophical or other issues that arise. However, somewhat rhetorically, I am here using scholarship only to refer to certain forms of critical engagement which are not confessional in nature. This is somewhat for want of a better word, but also to distinguish the work of what I may term the scholarly guild from other ways of engaging the world. Such scholarly scaffolding may certainly

³ Arthur Martine, *Martine’s Hand-book of Etiquette, and Guide to True Politeness* (New York, NY: Dick and Fitzgerald, 1866), cited in Maria Popova, “How to Criticize with Kindness: Philosopher Daniel Dennett on the Four Steps to Arguing Intelligently,” *The Marginalian.Com* (2014), accessed at: <https://www.themarginalian.org/2014/03/28/daniel-dennett-rapoport-rules-criticism/>.

⁴ See Rory D. McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential as Decolonial and Democratic Praxis: A Response,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (2022): 34–65; see also, Paul Hedges, “Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 34 (2022): 18–33.

⁵ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 55.

be used beyond the bounds of the academy, and even in ways which are not included herein as scholarship per se. As such, my distinction of scholarship versus (confessional) theology (or the work of TWW) is not to suggest that the latter is an anti-intellectual pursuit. I hope this caveat will allay some concerns about my usage.⁶

If I am to respond adequately to McEntee, I will first set up what I see as his argument in a way that, to follow contemporary popular philosophical parlance, will “iron man” it, or present it as strongly and robustly as I can, so I am not seen to be responding to a strawman representation. Nevertheless, my aim is not then to attempt to pick apart McEntee’s arguments in some form of critico-philosophical tit-for-tat, rather to try to lay out some visions for the discipline in a more positive frame. If you like, to suggest where and how I think a TWW-style project may sit. Exploring McEntee’s arguments provides the frame for us to see the difference of visions.

McEntee Fairly and Justly Described

McEntee objects to my representation of TWW as a form of wall-less systematic theology suggesting that it is rather a “community of inquiry,” or in his own phrasing a “Beloved Community of Religious Diversity.”⁷ Evoking Josiah Royce, Howard Thurman, and Martin Luther King Jr., McEntee describes this as a “community of interpretation,”⁸ suggesting, I believe, that we must move beyond a vision of simply contrasting perceptions and cognitions towards a vision that offers a way towards uniting various worldviews into “one life.”⁹ He sees this as related to what he terms “religio-spiritual experimentation happening today in the United States and elsewhere.”¹⁰ Furthermore, he suggests this beloved community is the place of “poets and prophets and sages,” suggesting, it seems, an inherent oneness across all human cultures, periods, and societies which he states comes from “a deeper place” inside human beings.¹¹ He further sees this related to Charles Peirce’s semiotics, arguing in particular that signs point to something “real” behind them.¹² To show the wide and global appeal, he puts this into relationship with Hyo-Dong Lee’s paper in the “flagship TWW volume,”¹³ and McEntee further calls upon Ruist scholar Bin Song who has affirmed a certain sympathy, even if a critical one, for TWW.¹⁴ Yet, to the best of my knowledge, neither figure directly identifies with TWW. McEntee’s “beloved community” therefore seems to encompass those whose ideas are congenial

⁶ I also make these comments as perhaps a response to a concern that I am suggesting that TWW is not, in any way, scholarly. McEntee’s work, and the TWW volume, have been, variously, peer reviewed, assessed by academic presses and reviewers, and found to be worthy of publication. The debate is a question of borders and the policing of what is regarded as being within and outside the academy (in its role as secular scholarship), as opposed to its quality within a confessional frame of scholarly writing as may fit within what I may term here, if in somewhat of a tongue in cheek way, a seminary without walls.

⁷ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 39.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 40, referencing Josiah Royce, *The Problem of Christianity* (1913, reis., Washington, D.C.: Catholic Univ. of America Press, 2001).

⁹ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 40, citing Royce, *Problem*, 303.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40, 42.

¹³ Hyo-Dong Lee, “My path to a theology of Qi,” in ed. Jerry L. Martin, *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (London: Routledge, 2019), 234–42.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

to him regardless of their own stated affiliation. A fair-minded reader may worry that I am not iron manning McEntee’s argument here, indeed, noting issues even before I have finished laying it out. I would suggest though that a fair appraisal and survey should make notes of what has, and has not, been done; thus, noting a need for more clarity around how and where this beloved community has its boundaries defined is simply, here, an observation for what needs strengthening in the argument.

McEntee nevertheless also notes the decolonial theory undergirding his own work. Claiming TWW as decolonial is key in McEntee’s rebuttal of my critique and so he seeks to claim this territory for the project; though the TWW volume lacks any engagement with the very decolonial scholars he mentions, suggesting that, at the least, more decolonial praxis is needed; in fairness, he notes that his work may not draw directly, or cite, such figures but that he sees “resonances of my own approach to decolonial praxis.”¹⁵ To give substance to this, citing a wide range of scholars, McEntee affirms that, with them, he sees “decolonial praxis” as “multiplicitous and pluralistic” and not entailing “a fundamental rejection of ideas that have emerged from Euro-Western trajectories.”¹⁶ He also suggests that, with figures such as John Thatamanil, he sees a “contemplative” aspect to his work which can be grounded in a decolonial approach.¹⁷

Key in McEntee’s decolonial theory is the conception of democracy, and he places this firmly, but without, he says, any sense of “American exceptionalism” within his own US context.¹⁸ His exploration of democracy is quite substantial, and takes particular note of the BLM (Black Lives Matter) movement as a reaction to racism in the USA.¹⁹ He relates this also to the need to rethink the religion-secular binary, which categories he correctly notes are “co-constructed”.²⁰ At the same time, drawing from Vincent Harding, McEntee argues for “creative, imaginal work connected to the heart” as part of “decolonial labor” to create a new vision.²¹ He relates his democratic theories along these lines also to Gloria Anzaldúa’s “borderlands” work, especially her concept of *nepantla*, a Nahuatl word that connotes “in-between-ness.”²² It is worth noting here that, in what McEntee says, we draw on similar ideas from similar theorists, for while I have not drawn from Harding, others such as Anzaldúa, Fanon, and Mignolo are part of my work in theorising a decolonial model for the study of religion.²³ Likewise, his argument for the

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46. I have not seen the scholars that McEntee claims as his decolonial inspirations cited in his own work or within the TWW corpus. As such, as noted, even if such things inspire both him and TWW in some way, the citational politics (who is, or is not, deemed worthwhile to cite and reference) does not follow through.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44n33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 44, 46–51.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 47. On this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 16.

²¹ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 48.

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ See, for instance, Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 422–23 where I explicitly bring Mignolo, Fanon, and Anzaldúa together. See Walter Mignolo, “Subalterns and Other Agencies,” in *Postcolonial Studies* 8, no. 4 (2005), 381–407 at 386; Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (London: Penguin, 2001 [1963]), 11; and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1987), 75. For some of my other work drawing on these, and other, theorists in relation to decolonization and postcolonial theory, one could also look at such works as: Paul Hedges, “Reflection: Rethinking the Possibility and Meaning of Dialogue in a Globalised and Religiously Diverse World: A Mid-Covid Perspective from Southeast Asia,” *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 9 (2022): 228–35; Paul Hedges, “Decolonising Interreligious Studies,” ed., Hans Gustafson, *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from a Field* (Waco: TX, Baylor University Press, 2020), 164–70. Paul Hedges, “Theorising a Decolonising Asian Hermeneutic for

co-construction (I might say co-creation) of the religion and secular concepts mirrors arguments that I, drawing from others, have also advanced. As such, in certain ways, we are not too far apart in terms of theoretical bases, however, the implications and arguments we draw from these may differ. Certainly, McEntee suggests that my understanding of the religion-secular co-creation “fails to anticipate its scope.”²⁴

Moreover, looking at McEntee’s arguments, we share some concerns about how the traditional forms of Western academia delimit the possibilities of thinking, and he suggests that: “Anzaldúa’s orientation is one that would have difficulty, perhaps, finding a home within current academic disciplines (certainly within the ‘secular’ academy), yet resonates strongly with the idea of a beloved community of religious diversity.”²⁵ Yet I find no problem in integrating her work, and I am not alone amongst contemporary critical scholars of religion in doing so.²⁶ Indeed, I think that McEntee is on to something important when he addresses how decolonial scholarship challenges the rigid boundaries of the secular-religious division such that aspects of the worldviews of some figures are seemingly excluded.²⁷ As I noted before, there are fissures, tensions, and not hard black-white boundaries. But I am getting ahead of myself.

McEntee uses the term “rhetoric of the secular” to address both what he sees as typical of a certain form of academic discourse, including “scientific materialisms” as well as my own work.²⁸ This he links to what he terms a “hard constructivism” that he says “essentializes the notion of social construction” and becomes a “flatland ontology” which is “secular” or part of a “secularist gaze.”²⁹ To my mind, McEntee’s language here is reminiscent of Charles Taylor’s characterisation of secularism as creating a “flatness” in how we see the world, and which he challenges in the name of other ways of seeing the world.³⁰ McEntee himself sees this “hard constructivism” as “an orientation towards the nature of reality” and he terms it both an “ontological orientation” and a “religious orientation” stating that the latter “denotes a particularized view of the nature of reality and humanity’s place within it.”³¹ Here, again, like the flatness that Taylor speaks of, it is a world which sees its limits within the quotidian mundane reality of materiality, hence the “secular gaze” that McEntee uses which could be seen to relate to Taylor’s “secular age.”³² Affirming this interpretation, McEntee explicitly says that it is

Comparative Theology: Some Perspectives from Global and Singaporean Eyes,” *International Journal of Asian Christianity* 3.2 (2020):152–68; Paul Hedges, “Multiple Religious Belonging after Religion: Theorising Strategic Religious Participation in a Shared Religious Landscape as a Chinese Model,” *Open Theology* 3.1 (2017): 48–72; and, Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 2010).

²⁴ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 57. As an aside here, it should be noted that McEntee’s suggestion that I don’t get this is based upon his reading of merely one of my many articles. Below, I note further some places where I work through this more fully in the citations.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 49.

²⁶ See, for instance, her inclusion in Sarah J. Bloesch and M. Cooper Minister, eds, *Cultural Approaches to Studying Religion: An Introduction to Theories and Methods* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018).

²⁷ I discuss this in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 177, 383.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁹ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 51.

³⁰ Notwithstanding that McEntee, here at least, does not invoke Taylor’s work, I believe it can be seen as helping to strengthen his argument by showing how he aligns with such a significant figure and his work. See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³¹ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 51.

³² See Taylor, *A Secular Age*.

“lacking religio-spiritual depth dimensions.”³³ However, McEntee says that he does not dispute the validity of such a view; only the position that makes it “normative” or “hegemonic” in defining “scholarship”.³⁴

For McEntee, this normative hegemony fails his test for democracy as not being truly inclusive of all views within a diverse world, and he calls upon Arvind Mandair as he makes these arguments.³⁵ Indeed, he suggests that we see what Mandair terms a “return of the imperial as the empirical,” while he also draws from Derrida’s thinking on the problem of *religio*.³⁶ McEntee suggests secularity is prioritised against religiosity, and he refers back to his epigraph from Thatamanil that we can quote at length:³⁷

“[T]he labor of imagining the human—and that after all is what both secular theories of religion and religiously informed theories of religion seek to do—enjoy equal epistemological status. Neither can reasonably claim to be neutral or to enjoy privileged standing. Neither can credibly claim to possess a critical self-consciousness lacking in the other.”³⁸

I am here taking on McEntee’s arguments rather than Thatamanil’s, so I will note here the usage to which this quote is put, rather than what may have been Thatamanil’s original intention. What I will note here, in agreement with what I believe McEntee to posit, is that we cannot, absolutely, prove either theistic, non-theistic, or anti-theistic worldviews as “true”.³⁹ Hence, as claims about the world each does have a certain equivalency as ways in which people may orientate themselves within the world.⁴⁰ Yet we must remain wary, for this does not mean that each one has exactly the same explanatory power, is equally suited to every task, or possesses the same resources for thinking about our world. In other words, creationism and evolutionary

³³McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 51.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 51, 52.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 53, referencing Arvind Mandair, “The Unbearable Proximity of the Orient: Political Religion, Multiculturalism and the Retrieval of South Asian Identities,” *Social Identities*, Vol. 10, No. 5 (2004), 647, doi:10.1080/1350463042000294287.

³⁶ Mandair, “The Unbearable Proximity,” 647–49, cited in McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 53.

³⁷ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 54.

³⁸ John J. Thatamanil, “Comparing Professors Smith and Tillich: A Response to Jonathan Z. Smith’s ‘Tillich(?)’ Remains,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Vol. 78, No. 4 (2010), 1178, cited in McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 34.

³⁹ I use these terms here for convenience, for the sake of this argument (rather than as absolute markers of how every worldview may be distinguished or categorized) to refer to theistic worldviews which posit a supreme creator deity (e.g. Islam), those we may typically term non-theistic (in this sense) religious worldviews (e.g. Buddhism), and those which deny any form of religious worldview, typically against some deity figure (e.g. atheism). The permutations of each are, however, varied and may also crossover, see Paul Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishing, 2017). It may also be noted, contra McEntee’s argument, that in many ways secularism is not a default because we still persist in applying the viewpoint that sees no need for a deity, or simply materialistic, as atheistic (a-theistic)—that is, as explicitly posited against a deity figure, or a necessary denial of the deity, when, for many, this may well not even factor into the equation. One may live in many parts of the world within a materialist worldview with no need to even think seriously about the theistic (or non-theistic, as I use the term here) option(s). Thus even in general academic language, we often use words that posit theism as a default, rather than secularism as a default. Of course, this sits within a wider realm of discourse, but I think it worth noting the bias that exists within the language.

⁴⁰ That, I would argue, either a religious or non-religious worldview may both be plausible, see Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement*.

theory are not simply two equally good ways of making sense of the evidence in front of us about how we got here as humans. McEntee does not make this argument—indeed I expect he would agree with me here that evolution offers the best current theory. As such, I may be accused of making a strawman of his arguments. But I am not making accusations towards McEntee, rather making a cautionary note: while I agree with the argument that McEntee makes, we may remain cautious as to what implications are drawn from it. I believe that McEntee does not endorse a relativist position, hence we may argue that some ways of seeing the world and analyzing it offer us greater benefits in certain contexts. It is not, therefore, a mistake per se to argue that for certain purposes we should prefer certain ways of proceeding, even if we cannot absolutely prove the epistemic-ontological foundations behind it: I, for one, would rather go to the secular-materialist hospital with my broken leg than to a faith healer. Again, let me state, I am not seeking to strawman McEntee here, rather drawing from what I hope is agreed territory, that for particular purposes we may find greater explanatory power and pragmatic employment for certain ways of seeing the world over others.

My caveat above provides a backdrop to McEntee's claim, building from Mandair, that "the ability to use, for example, Buddhist, Indigenous, Sikh, Confucian, Taoist, Hindu, or other ontological orientations as appropriate and normative sources for (decolonial) scholarly labor becomes marred by the need to adhere to secularist gazes."⁴¹ As such, McEntee makes the claim that by taking the "religio-spiritual" or "ontological" claims of all traditions seriously and as part of the global theological speculation, or the contributions of sages, poets, and prophets of the "beloved community", "that TWW represents an attempt to open up spaces of scholarly labor that avoid such repetitions of the colonial event."⁴²

Agreements and Disagreements

After making this argument, McEntee's paper turns to address what he terms my "confessional critique" of TWW. As I have indicated as I proceed, I believe that McEntee has a strong case which I will try to summarise briefly here: TWW does not seek to master other discourses with a single theological speculation, but is rather about developing a community of like-minded people devoted to seeking the truth which includes the religio-spiritual traditions found across all cultures and all times. Neglecting these traditions in favour of a flat secularizing vision does epistemic violence to non-Western worldviews, while perpetuating colonial discourse that proclaims—without any epistemic evidence—the superiority of the secular to the religio-spiritual. Inscribing secularism as a normative and hegemonic scholarly universal is therefore an act of imperialist aggression against non-white, non-Western, and Global Southern worldviews and ways of being. It also partakes in normalizing the conception of religion and secularism as distinct spheres when in fact they are co-created within a distinctive modern Western context and so are problematic Orientalist categories.

In this summary, I may not have captured all aspects of McEntee's argument, but I hope to have got its gist and shown its strengths. Moreover, I believe that parts are correct and accord with arguments that I have made myself in various places. Yet, clearly, we diverge in other ways, and have different visions of scholarship and the study of religion. In the rest of this rejoinder, I

⁴¹ McEntee, "Theology Without Walls's Potential," 55.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 55.

will proceed in a threefold process. First, I will respond directly to some criticisms that McEntee makes of myself and my argument. Second, I will review some overlap in theory, but also note how we diverge in certain places. Finally, as suggested earlier, I will make what I hope are positive suggestions for developing the kind of work TWW envisages within the range of scholarship as I argue for it here. This will engage a strong decolonial argument which extends that of my initial critique and engages that which McEntee offers in defence of TWW.

McEntee agrees with me that a firmer decolonial focus is needed, and he notes: “TWW will also benefit from more explicit decolonial labor and postcolonial awareness.”⁴³ Nevertheless, he explicitly rejects my claims that this is missing in TWW, saying that it is “not only unfair, but also demonstrably wrong.”⁴⁴ It is not, though, simply my own claim, but one that other reviewers of the TWW volume have observed.⁴⁵ So where does McEntee think we have gone so wrong? For a start, McEntee names such figures as “John Thatamanil, Hyo-Dong Lee, Bin Song, and others”⁴⁶ (though who the others are is not mentioned) whom he sees as scholars engaged in TWW and fully aware of decolonial issues. I have addressed this above, so reiterate here that Thatamanil and Lee identify as comparative theologians in their work, and like some others (myself included) were invited to contribute to the TWW volume.⁴⁷ Song edited the special issue in which both McEntee’s and my own papers appeared, and has also written a not entirely unfavourable review, but voicing some critique.⁴⁸ However, none of these figures, as far as I am aware, identifies academically or personally with the TWW vision. McEntee’s characterisation of TWW as a “community” may mean that it is easier to claim anybody who has had some connection as part of it than my definition of it as a more intellectual movement. But we can hardly suggest that anybody whose work seems congenial to McEntee’s “beloved community” vision is part of the TWW project. I thus reiterate and fully stand by my earlier claims that the evidence we have about TWW points to it being something which takes virtually no account of decolonial issues: as noted above, we do not see scholars working on postcolonialism or decolonization cited in the core TWW literature, and those writers who could be seen as exemplifying this do not directly identify with TWW even if they have agreed to write for its

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 55–56.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴⁵ Leo Lefebure, 2020, “Theology, Walls, and Christian Identity: A Review Essay,” *Salaam* 41.2: 100–7.

⁴⁶ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 56.

⁴⁷ I will, as an aside here, offer a rebuttal of one particular response that McEntee makes to me. In my original article, I suggested that Thatamanil’s paper in the TWW book neglected his Indian heritage. This was not because, as McEntee avers, I do not understand that Thatamanil has an Indian heritage from which he draws in his work. I explicitly note, in other work, that Thatamanil’s comparative theology is deeply indebted to just this heritage (for example, Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives*, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 44, while my forthcoming review of Thatamanil’s new book, *Circling the Elephant*, forthcoming in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, will also make this point). Rather, my point is very directly that as he has been asked to write into and engage with the TWW agenda, I see Thatamanil’s contribution to the TWW unusually neglecting this heritage with him speaking much more as an American (in a way that any white Anglo-Saxon Protestant of that nation may speak) than as an Indian American. His identity seems to me erased as he comes into the TWW agenda. This, I suspect, is a matter for a response from Thatamanil as to whether he finds my representation of him in this chapter accurate. Hence I leave it as an aside here in this note, rather than raising it directly in the exchange with McEntee. However, it may be observed that in seeking to show Thatamanil’s Indian heritage, McEntee cites from such texts as *Circling the Elephant* rather than his TWW chapter.

⁴⁸ Bin Song, “Review of *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*,” *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 32 (2021): 107–10.

projects (as I myself was invited to contribute to the landmark TWW book, and I have also been included in two TWW journal special issues⁴⁹).

As noted, despite McEntee's reply claiming decolonial scholars inspire him, they are simply not cited in TWW (nor, as far as I have been able to see, in any papers he has published). The politics of citation demands that such sources are made clear and explicit. Furthermore, despite McEntee's claim to include such figures as Thatamanil, Lee, and Song for TWW, this belies their own personal affiliation and autonomy in naming. Hence, as per my original critique, I see no evidence of it being anything but, or if I were to be softer primarily, a movement of "white, Western, American middle-class men to assert their belief that they remain unbounded by any ties and can take as they wish from any part of the world"—which is the specific phrase of mine that McEntee described as "unfair" and "demonstrably wrong." He notes that: "Literally no TWW theorist is claiming such a stance."⁵⁰ This clearly, though, suggests that McEntee entirely misses the decolonial praxis issue; it may also be noted that almost all of his decolonial scholars (cited as his influences or as part of TWW) are men, leading into the other part of my critique.⁵¹ The ideological framing of whiteness (and with it wider Western, masculinist, and so on) presuppositions is not something which people put on as a particular identity, but gains its power from its taken-for-granted normativity. It is an unseen operational basis whose power lies in its very unseeness.⁵² Indeed, my challenge to McEntee, and the wider TWW community, would be to show me the evidence of their decolonial work—and not by listing a range of theorists one is influenced by. Three key questions for McEntee and the TWW community could be raised in this way: one, where are these theories and worldviews cited in your work, because this is needed to show you are seriously engaging them; two, how do they challenge the operational basis of your theory, because it seems suspicious to claim to seriously engage scholars and worldviews other than your own and simply find them reinforcing what you seemingly already think; three, in what ways can they be shown to underpin your epistemic vision, so what do they offer that is not in the sources you already cite, and this also reinforces questions one and two on the need to both cite and be challenged in the core of one's own being and ways of doing scholarship? Even having a few (tokenist?) non-white writers associated, but hardly central or committed, to your community/project/movement is not being decolonial. Show me the actual decolonial labour, and then I will change my critique. I will leave my direct response to McEntee's critique of myself here because, as noted, I would like to do more constructive than destructive work.

Therefore, I turn now to review some aspects where McEntee and I seem to agree, but also to note where the divergences occur. I have laid some of this out above, so can be relatively

⁴⁹ For example, Paul Hedges, "Why the Theology," Paul Hedges, "Strategic religious participation," and Paul Hedges, "Encounters with Ultimacy? Autobiographical and Critical Perspectives in the Academic Study of Religion," *Open Theology* 4: 355–72.

⁵⁰ McEntee, "Theology Without Walls's," 56.

⁵¹ On the importance of taking the position of women and their location, often equally excluded from traditional patriarchal modes of scholarship, as part of our theorising, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 10, see also, Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious*, chapter 5. Indeed, while I focus here on the lack of decolonial scholarship cited in the TWW literature, a lack of feminist scholars and viewpoints may also be noted. I particularly stress the former as that is the grounds McEntee has responded to me on.

⁵² Hence the genealogical work needed to excavate it. For a study on this in the study of religion, see Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller, *Method as Identity: Manufacturing Distance in the Academic Study of Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019).

brief. Firstly, we concur that the categories “religion” and “secular” are socially constructed and co-created, so the logic of the one relies upon the logic of the other in delimiting that which falls within their sway. This is a modern, Western, and primarily Protestant development.⁵³ Secondly, decolonial labor is important and will destabilize a whole range of Western assumptions and prejudices, which will challenge some traditional notions of what scholarship is. Thirdly, there are connections between what we may typically term “religions”, what McEntee seems to term the religio-spiritual realm, across time and place. This, I should note, is very contested within both confessional theological terms⁵⁴ and in the critical study of religion.⁵⁵ However, I believe that we can make solid arguments for it from critical historical, phenomenological, neurological, and other discourses (as well as establishing what I may term strong pluralistic arguments⁵⁶).

To look at the differences, it may be useful to unpack this through exploring McEntee’s accusation that I am a “hard constructivist”. I have outlined above what I believe McEntee means by this, and it would certainly mark a radical difference if I were: McEntee, I believe, seeing a world infused by a universal spiritual essence that invigorates and underlies all things (I hope this is a fair description); and, myself (under his description), believing in an entirely materialist world that consists solely of the linguistic-cultural construction of humans with no hint of anything beyond this. Now, for the moment, I will leave my own “religio-spiritual” beliefs and praxis, or lack thereof, to one side (that I think it is possible to do this, for pragmatic and analytic purposes, may be something that McEntee sees as a problem; I return to this point below). Let’s talk about what I shall, for the moment, term “secular” scholarship. McEntee does not seem to think that my division is entirely untenable, and suggests that if we put people in “divinity school” (if I read McEntee correctly: places which work within a single confessional frame—that is, with walls) on one side, and everybody else on another then we can find what “seems like a very reasonable way to place a divide.”⁵⁷ McEntee’s problem, however, is that I don’t put the theologians with walls in one box, then make another box for everybody else. This, of course, would let various forms of what we may term liberal theology, SBNR spiritual exploration, and critical scholarship sit within the same frame, simply cutting off the “wall” folk. Much as it serves McEntee’s purposes, it is not a useful analytical division. In my paper, I made a division, which I suggested is more of a sliding scale than a clear and neat set of distinctions, between confessional theology, academic theology, and a secular study of religion. Now, I have moved a bit away from the hard constructivist issue onto how we divide academia and the role of theological studies in this, but I believe they are related. As noted, McEntee classifies the hard constructivist as making

⁵³ To note, McEntee does not unpack his theorization behind suggesting the “co-construction” of this binary and so I am making presumptions, but assuming his work draws from the same solid scholarly basis as my critique. See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 374–77.

⁵⁴ On these debates, especially around the theology of religions and related interreligious studies, see especially (chronologically): Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 2010); John Thatamanil, “Comparative Theology after Religion,” in eds. S. D. Moore and M. Riviera, *Planetary Loves: Spivak, Postcoloniality, and Theology* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2011), 238–57; Marianne Moyaert, “Christianity as the Measure of Religion? Materializing the Theology of Religions,” in eds. E. Harris, P. Hedges, and S. Hettiarachchi, *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Prospects* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2016), 239–66; Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2017); and, John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2021).

⁵⁵ For a recent overview, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 1.

⁵⁶ This has been part of my own particular work in developing theories of pluralism, and taken up also by Thatamanil in his own project, but see particularly Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*.

⁵⁷ McEntee, “Theology Without Walls’s Potential,” 57.

ontological claims, and ones which he also says are “religious”. In other words, it is a claim about the way the world is. It may even be said to be confessional in this sense, and perhaps the strict demarcation that McEntee sees me making would make me a kind of fundamentalist scientific materialist in his eyes?⁵⁸ However, I have not so clearly demarcated the world. Rather, I have noted a scale of degrees which does not separate confessional theology as utterly distinct from secular studies of religion, although it does place them at different ends of a sliding scale. As such, even though McEntee notes that he is drawing only from this one article rather than my wider *oeuvre*, this should alert him that he is not representing my argument. I have not made religion and the secular two binary and ontologically separated realms. Making this characterisation allows him to represent me as arguing in ways that go against decolonial praxis and assuming too hard a binary of religion and the secular, despite, as he notes, my resistance to doing so. This is not to say that McEntee and I are on the same page if we take away his misrepresentation of my thinking. We still see scholarship differently. With this, I turn to my final sections where I will set out what I may term a decolonial vision for secular scholarship, and in particular one in which the concerns that TWW wishes to address may be fairly considered.

Hats and Locations

I wear two hats, speaking as a scholar. Some days, I have on my “critical scholar of religion” hat, when I employ social constructivist discourses⁵⁹ that seek, as an outsider, in Russell McCutcheon’s words “to demonstrate the contextual nature of not just the subject under study but observing outsiders complete with their categories as well.”⁶⁰ This has certainly informed my work in critiquing TWW, and my invocation of McCutcheon may strike McEntee and others as clear evidence of my “hard constructivist” inclinations, seeking to pursue theologians and non-critical scholars as “data” and grist for the mill of “proper” critical scholars. Certainly, my critique may bring to mind a McCutcheonite dismissal of what he terms “[s]o-called scholarship” which “ought to be our subject of study.”⁶¹ I am not, however, a McCutcheonite, despite noting his sterling service to the field as part of a wider range of those I may describe as “critical religion” scholars who have strongly explored the implicit theological agendas often lurking within contemporary studies of religion. On other days, I wear my “theological hat.” I have explored how my academic and personal journeys intersect elsewhere,⁶² for I hold strongly that where we stand affects what we see, and as such as scholars we are never apart from our locatedness and positionality in terms of our embodied materiality.⁶³ As such, I sometimes write, given my initiatory position, as an Anglican theologian, reflecting upon the resources of that

⁵⁸ For a discussion of such a form of fundamentalism in the context of a wider usage and analysis of that term, see James Dunn, ed., *Fundamentalisms: Threats and Ideologies in the Modern World* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015).

⁵⁹ On the way I would understand and employ them, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 5, but see also the Introduction and chapter 9, among other places.

⁶⁰ Russell McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers: Redescriving the Public Study of Religion* (New York, NY: state University of New York Press, 2001), 74, referencing Benson Saler, *Conceptualizing Religion: Immanent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 1993). It should be noted that McCutcheon while finding common ground with Saler here nevertheless critiques other aspects of his work.

⁶¹ McCutcheon, *Critics Not Caretakers*, 22.

⁶² See, most particularly Hedges, “Encounters with Ultimacy?”

⁶³ Around these issues, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

tradition,⁶⁴ but as someone who would identify as a pluralist Anglican.⁶⁵ As I have noted above, I believe that both religious narratives and worldviews (of which there are many), and atheist narratives and worldviews (of which there are also a number) are both equally viable ways of making sense of the world. Hence, with McEntee’s invocation of Thatamanil I do not prioritise one over the other in any a priori sense. Nevertheless, I am still very much aware of my two hats. Worth noting here, it seems to me, is that, from McEntee’s stated position, my two hats are only one hat. He conflates theological stances that are not strictly walled (a pluralist is, surely, in the TWW beloved community of McEntee as he envisages it) with forms of secular scholarship; as noted above, he suggests divinity school/walled folk belong in one box, with all others being in another box.

I fear that I will earn McEntee’s ire again as I progress, for I am once again going to invoke Kant, in this case his essay “What is the Enlightenment?”⁶⁶ In some ways, I believe that McEntee is also an intellectual descendent of Kant, for what is asserted in this short essay was humanity’s freedom from servitude to tradition: the possibility to move beyond the gatekeepers of tradition, and to search for ourselves, if I may say so, to go beyond walls. I am rather paraphrasing Kant here, but taking what I believe is the spirit of his work. It is a spirit that I believe TWW has inherited. To play somewhat fast and loose with intellectual history, this freedom of the rational mind, and a freedom from bondage to dogmatic religion (also a deeply Kantian motif), are roots of much of the modern world, including—alongside motifs from Romanticism—the perennialist tradition of Western thought that believes it can freely take from the world’s traditions, and identify the essence that ties them all together. As such, Kant’s racism and rationale for European imperialism should not be neglected.⁶⁷ It is somewhere, as a younger scholar, I would have stood with McEntee and TWW I believe, but my journey has taken me in a somewhat different trajectory. A trajectory that does not disavow the possibility for me to wear two hats (which, considering the internecine warfare between theology and religious studies is a dangerous place to try to occupy, and no doubt often places me in no man’s land taking shells from both sides). But this trajectory clearly distinguishes them as scholarly acts.

Having invoked Kant, let me now turn to the decolonial labor. McEntee is undoubtedly correct that taking not just non-Western, but also the Black American experience,⁶⁸ seriously leads us to decentre the strict religion-secular division that a modernist pedigree gives us; a matter I have considered in my own work.⁶⁹ This is an area that the critical study of religion is only just starting to address, and recent reflection by scholars such as Natalie Avalos include the way that her own indigenous American heritage means that separating out what we term the

⁶⁴ See, for instance, Paul Hedges, “Towards an Anglican Theology of Buddhism: Mutual Flourishing and Generous Love,” *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue* 26, no. 1 (2016): 37–56.

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, and Paul Hedges, “Is Christianity the Only True Religion? A Theology of Radical Openness to Religious Others,” *Interreligious Insight* 12, no. 2 (2014): 34–42. The former, in particular, notes some of the postcolonial resources I bring to my position as a pluralist.

⁶⁶ Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?” (1784), www.columbia.edu/acis/ets/CCREAD/etscc/kant.html.

⁶⁷ A matter I discuss in my own work elsewhere, see, for instance, Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 175, box 7.7.

⁶⁸ The issue of the Black study of religion as something that occurs within a system of oppression and in relation to believing communities has been discussed by a number of scholars. See, for example Driscoll and Miller, *Method as Identity*. This is not to say that Black scholars of religion must be Christian or indeed have any religious affiliation, of course they have their own autonomy, and it is not my aim to suggest what Black experience is, or should be, rather to report on how a number of black scholars have themselves explained it.

⁶⁹ See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 177–78.

religious from what we term the secular makes an unnatural divide in her experience of herself and her world.⁷⁰ I reference back here my note that my ready ability to divide myself—which relates to my awareness of my two hats as distinct identities I inhabit—is something I can do, but may not be a universal experience (Western “common sense” is not “universal” “common sense”). Yet this division of the world may not be a peculiar fixation of the modern, Western, Protestant male; it would be quite remarkable if it were.

Returning to Kant, in global perspective, critical reflection on power and tradition is not his, and his alone. It is not simply a legacy of the Western Enlightenment. Indeed, far from being a peculiar invention of the Western world, what we term secularism actually developed from a global conversation, with many of those we credit with its creation looking most distinctly to China and the teachings and traditions of Confucius.⁷¹ Envisaging a world without what they saw as a religious overlay was, for many early modern European thinkers, something first found outside their own tradition. While we cannot discount some inaccuracy and distortion, what may be termed Orientalism, in the Western reception of Confucianism, it is also undeniable that analogues to secularism existed within it for well over two thousand years.⁷² Likewise, a materialist tradition of philosophy existed in ancient India and both here and in China atheistic currents have existed for millennia,⁷³ and, we may suppose in many other places too; as Alec Ryrie has argued in the European context, atheists were perhaps more widely found in the medieval period than we typically recognise.⁷⁴ Now, I do not want to equate critical reasoning about the world with atheism, it would be quite incorrect to assert such a lineage: Kant, Hegel, Heidegger, Gadamer, and Derrida, while not orthodoxly religiously thinkers in any sense, were not averse to either direct theological engagement or at least engaging seriously with “religion” as a category. Importantly, therefore, taking what we may conveniently, but inadequately, term “secular scholarly norms” as key to scholarship is far from equivalent to a materialist hard constructivism. Moreover, these modern notions are not simply, nor only, Western in origin—neither epistemologically nor genealogically speaking.

Doing the Decolonial Labor

To some extent, what I am arguing, is that thinking about the world without a direct claim to its metaphysical qualities, simply engaging the human realm *qua* human realm is not only the prerogative of the modern Western world and its religion-secular division. From China to India we see such thinking, while in Ibn Khaldun, who many argue is the world’s first true social scientist, we see an Islamic basis for seeking to understand how humans construct their world within cultural terms and the dynamics internal to this.⁷⁵ Far from requiring a hard

⁷⁰ This is well discussed in the following podcast interview, Natalie Avalos, “Decolonizing Religious Studies and Its Layers of Complicity,” *The Religious Studies Project* (podcast, 17 August, 2020), available at: <https://www.religiousstudiesproject.com/podcast/decolonizing-religious-studies-and-its-layers-of-complicity/>.

⁷¹ See, for instance, Marion Eggert and Lucian Hölscher, eds, *Religion and Secularity: Transformations and Transfers of Religious Discourses in Europe and Asia* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), especially the chapter by Heiner Roetz, “The Influence of Foreign Knowledge on Eighteenth Century European Secularism,” 9–33.

⁷² See, Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 376, box 16.2.

⁷³ See, for a discussion, on materialist or “atheist” traditions globally, Paul Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement*, 21, 24–5, 162, 179; see also Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 204, box 8.7.

⁷⁴ See Alec Ryrie, *Unbelievers: An Emotional History of Doubt* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2022).

⁷⁵ See Syed Farid Alatas, *Applying Ibn Khaldūn: The Recovery of a Lost Tradition in Sociology* (New York: Routledge, 2015). For some brief notes see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 173–74.

constructivism, many routes can take us to exploring the human realm without reference to particular religio-spiritual claims. Doing this does not give us an epistemic priority, but it gives us tools and methods for exploration. Scholarship, in as far as it is scholarship, helps us to analyse where we come from, why we think like we do, and analyse (etymologically “to take apart”) the systems and methods and categories we use.⁷⁶ It is, to this end, that I find TWW lacking in scholarly rigour, and I will partly repeat some claims in my first piece, but alongside some further points brought in here.

First, is there a religio-spiritual realm (some “ultimacy”) which is a shared universal that all those traditions we typically term religions relate to? I think this is a legitimate question, but as far as I can see TWW takes it as an unquestionable precondition for its enquiry.⁷⁷

Second, assuming there is, or posited upon the possibility of such ultimacy existing, what grounds would there be for positing the shared common ground. Most religio-spiritual traditions have either denied such common ground or have framed it as a ground that favours only their answer as supreme. How would we get to know and argue for this is a question, but again (contra vast evidence) TWW seems to take this common ground as a given.⁷⁸

Third, doing decolonizing labor is not about citing the correct names. I have raised Kant here, and why not? If Kant can teach us something about doing decolonial praxis, then we should not reject it—regardless of what else may bother us about his legacy. Brother Cornel West has invoked Plato and Socrates in thinking about the Black experience in the USA—and, we may say, in doing the work of decolonization. Speaking about *paideia*, deep learning (as he glosses it), we must, West says, think about the examined life as something painful, being prepared to die in order to learn.⁷⁹ I do not intend to engage McEntee in a battle of who correctly understands decolonial theory and who doesn’t get it. (A very unedifying sight to witness two white males

⁷⁶ There may be some debate around this, and it may mark a difference in our stance, but that is part of what I have been explicating here. If I may briefly quote from Jonathan Z. Smith, who suggests that when a historian of religion does not accept either “the canon nor... community” as determinative of her “intellectual domain” then three criteria are needed: first, that any “exemplum has been well and fully understood”; second, that this serves an important theory, paradigm, or question in the academy; and, third, “some method” is needed that relates the example with the theory, or tying points one and two together (Jonathan Z. Smith, *Imagining Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1982), xi. Smith places this within a discussion for the necessity of understanding how and where our interpretive schemata arise, in this case “religion”, for the lack of it as a self-evident analytical concept or universal category grounds his study. For my attempt to make sense of how we deal with this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.

⁷⁷ “Ultimacy” is something that TWW seems invested in exploring as a supposed thing it can readily access. See the Call for Papers, <http://theologywithoutwalls.com/call-for-papers/>. On my response to this as a problematic assumption, see Hedges, “Encounters with Ultimacy?”

⁷⁸ Apparently, only the kind of religio-spiritual sharing that McEntee seems to favor counts as evidence; the religio-spiritual claims of exclusivists or figures such as Bernard of Clairvaux don’t seem to count. I have argued that assuming “mysticism” marks a peaceful, shared, and irenic common ground between traditions is naïve, ahistorical, and not a sustainable pathway to seeking peaceful co-existence between traditions. See Paul Hedges, “Identity, Prejudice, and Mysticism: Exploring Sustainable Narratives of Peace Across Religious Borders,” unpublished conference paper at “Sacred Texts and Human Contexts” conference (online, 24 May 2021), <https://www2.naz.edu/hickey-center-interfaith-studies-dialogue/programs/academic-conferences/sacred-texts-human-contexts/schedule/session-one-panel-two>.

⁷⁹ Cornell West, “Speaking Truth to Power,” *MIT School of Architecture and Planning* (YouTube Channel) (8 February 2018), available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Bc6TRjptKI>.

tussle over this.) Nevertheless, I worry when somebody cites a range of global figures, decolonial scholars and others, and sees them as neat pieces in a puzzle that supports their worldview and arguments. When radically differently inclined figures become supporting scaffolding for an ideological frame that already exists, then what has been learned? Is the work of decolonial praxis, the painful *paideia* of which West speaks, taking place? TWW, it seems to me, already has its answers and its system, and so no deep decolonial *paideia* is possible, we cannot be radically discombobulated in its system because we already have an answer, and only seek evidence that supports this; perhaps McEntee or others in TWW will tell me that it is a seeking rather than about answers, but all I have seen evidence for is the same old perennialist tropes (often Orientalist ones) as the frame for this “seeking”. No decolonial labor is possible in this schemata.⁸⁰

Fourth, scholarship is about tools that help us ask these questions. As such, we need to explore where we stand. We cannot take where we stand as being inherently a scholarly place. This relates to what I have already said about TWW. As such, scholarship must be radical in its social constructivist critique (different from the “hard constructivist” model that McEntee describes) because it takes embodiment, it takes location, it takes Otherness as serious challenges to itself, and as part of what it is and where it comes from. In other words, it looks at our locatedness (in all its forms: our words, culture, religious tradition, embodiment, and so on.) as constructed rather than natural and given. This is the legacy of Kant, that we question all tradition, and all systems of thinking, including our own, and this legacy includes Kant, West, Fanon, Plato, Derrida, Mignolo, Butler, Foucault, Spivak, Alatas, and many more figures.⁸¹ When “ultimacy” is the unquestionable ground, and anything which suggests we may not be able to explore it is simply attacked and contested, placed into a convenient “hard constructivist” box as though that proved it wrong (but, hey, maybe the hard constructivists are ontologically correct?), then we don’t have scholarship. We have walls—as I have suggested, the inevitable walls of any so-called TWW.

Fifth, my claim is not therefore for relativism, nor some free-floating scholarly realm of “objectivity,” something I have vehemently attacked; including critical systems that even if disavowing this nevertheless seek to assert this in practice.⁸² Indeed, it is a challenge not only to white, Western, masculinist self-sufficiency⁸³ but to all hegemonic systems of unquestioned certainty. In this camp of hegemonic certainty I would place TWW and relativism, the latter which places itself, by disavowing objectivity, into an untouchable position. Rather we must opt instead for self-reflexivity in our praxis.⁸⁴ Locatedness, as my first paper argued, is part of scholarship: gender, sexuality, class, race, nationality are all part of the politics of scholarship and

⁸⁰ McEntee, or other critics, may likewise argue that I too am using those aspects of a global and decolonial worldview that support my own stance. This, however, misses the very real point made here that my own position has been, and continues to be, challenged and altered in my working through of decolonial praxis.

⁸¹ For a discussion around how I would frame this within the study of religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, Introduction and chapters 2, 5, 7, 9, and 10 as key.

⁸² This is part of the critique that I raise in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, see especially chapter 2, but also relevant are chapters 5 and 9.

⁸³ This phrase is from Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2020), 29, and while the concept pervades much of the book, I would particularly also pick out pages 77–104.

⁸⁴ This is discussed in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 54–6, but for some wider reflection see Gavin Flood, *Beyond Phenomenology: Rethinking the Study of Religion* (London: Cassell, 1999), 35–8.

affect what we see and where we see from, an intersectional issue which seems to not be seriously considered by TWW.⁸⁵

Sixth, when we think of scholarship, my argument is not that this *must* be based in some *a priori* realm of secular materialism that lays the foundations. No. We live in a world that is messy, chaotic, and without hard edges. Our theory may be blurry and hazy, even contradictory in places, as we struggle to do the best that we can to make sense of data and our place within that data.⁸⁶ What makes us scholars, though, is that we ask questions about where we stand, critically interrogate every claim, including our own, and recognize the locatedness of our own positionality and the inevitability of that without falling into two camps: one, a stance that bemoans this, supporting variously a naïve relativism that says every position is as good as any other, or that everyone is “religious” because we all make worldview claims and so these simply compete and none can displace any other and we simply have competing belief claims;⁸⁷ two, a stance that locates some readily graspable absoluteness in its own position, whether this be transcendent ultimacy, materialism, a specific tradition’s claims to knowledge, and so on. Theory from beyond the West, as I have indicated above and is explored in my own work, must be part of this. For instance, the Buddhist tradition of thinking will teach us much about logic and the problems of thinking,⁸⁸ indigenous traditions place us in relation to land and the environment in ways largely forgotten through the Western enlightenment, and so on.⁸⁹ Furthermore, each tradition is not limited to simply what I have noted here; indigenous epistemologies and hermeneutics, for instance, must also be listened to.⁹⁰ But this is not to say, in a naïve claim to a

⁸⁵ That scholarship is inherently political is argued in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 18, and on such issues as race, gender, sexuality, class, see especially chapters 3, 7, and 10. Scholars who have made such things explicit in their studies of religious diversity are, if anything, notable by their absence from TWW.

⁸⁶ I talk about what I term methodological polymorphism, or “being promiscuous with theory” in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 8–9, while at another point—with specific reference to secularism, but with wider resonance—I note that not all theory “fits neatly together into one grand theory, and some bits are downright contradictory,” but rather “it gives us gloves to grasp those rough edges [of our data]” rather than being something which “smooths out the edges” (388).

⁸⁷ A now classic example of this within theology may be said to be the work of John Milbank and Radical Orthodoxy which sought to claim in our messy, indeterminate, and “post-modern” world that only Christianity, by resolving the conflict at a higher ontological level, gave us a basis for knowing. On the Radical Orthodoxy project, see as two definitive works: John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), and John Milbank, Graham Ward, and Catherine Pickstock, eds, *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999). For critique, including around this issue, see Gavin Hyman, *The Predicament of Postmodern Theology: Radical Orthodoxy or Nihilist Textualism* (London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), and Paul Hedges, “Is John Milbank’s Radical Orthodoxy a Form of Liberal Theology? A Rhetorical Counter,” *The Heythrop Journal*, 51:5 (2010): 795–818.

⁸⁸ For some of my own work on how Nagarjuna can help us think through hermeneutics, see Hedges, “Theorising a Decolonising Asian Hermeneutic for Comparative Theology.”

⁸⁹ See Natalie Avalos, “Becoming Human: ‘Urban Indian’ Decolonisation and Regeneration in the Land of Enchantment,” in eds. Greg Johnson and Siv Ellen Kraft, *The Brill Handbook of Indigenous Religion(s)* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 176–90.

⁹⁰ In some supposedly decolonial thought, there is danger in placing particular traditions in a kind of limited place where they can provide certain things to a global conversation—which, of course, sits within ground rules already laid by the West and its own ways of thinking—that maintains Western thought and tradition as some supposed universal and other traditions as partial correctives to certain issues. The way each and every tradition contributes to every conversation must be listened to, and this will also reshape the conversations, terms, tools, and ground rules. On this, see Boyung Lee, “Toward Liberating Interdependence: Postcolonial Intercultural Pedagogy,” *Religious Education* 105, n. 3 (2010): 283–98. On indigenous hermeneutics, see as one example, Upolu Lumā Vaai and Aisake Casimira, “Introduction: A Relational Renaissance,” in Upolu Lumā Vaai and Aisake Casimira, eds, *Relational Hermeneutics: Decolonising the Mindset and the Pacific Itulagi* (Suva, Fiji: The University of the South Pacific and the Pacific

decolonial stance, that somebody can simply claim one of these (or any other tradition, for example, Western perennialism, Indic Advaita Vedanta, or any confessional exclusivism) as their unchallenged starting point to do theory from as a unique privileged position if what they do is scholarship. Doing activism from such a stance, or making confessional claims is another matter, and can readily be done. As I have noted, this is not to claim a unique epistemic position for what I see as scholarship, but to pragmatically locate how we think about thinking and the kind of analysis we need to undertake. This, as I have also indicated above (but far more would be needed to argue it fully), is not to prioritize a particular Western tradition, either—because such questioning of tradition is not limited to the so-called Western world,⁹¹ and also because this questioning of traditions (including, even especially[?], questioning religio-spiritual claims) is the very prerequisite to actually do decolonial praxis. Hence, it is itself undermining the priority of the West which contemporary colonial heritages and neo-colonial hegemonic power dynamics have put in place.⁹²

Seventh, back to hat talk. As I noted above, and fully recognize, some scholars from beyond the general confines of the scholarly Western world find some discomfort in having to set aside, as they see it, a hat they wear as somebody from their community, tradition, and so on, in order to put on what is seen to be the hat of scholarship. It is, as it were, an unnatural bifurcation. This is, perhaps, the largest challenge that the vision I have set out faces. Nevertheless, I think that it is essential to scholarship. If we say it is not then we are in a position where we have to accept that everybody can come in and lob their own claims of partiality into the arena and have them accepted as part of scholarship. Let me very clearly say why this is not acceptable. Suppose somebody's Christian tradition underlies their racism (of course, this is not simply an intellectual exercise in imagination but a very real phenomenon), and they demand that their arguments about Shem and Ham be taken seriously as scholarly arguments; or, again, suppose a Holocaust denier says that it is simply another historical claim to be set alongside other historical claims—because everybody can come with their own truth claims into the debate.⁹³

Theological College, 2017), 1–14. It may be noted that I engage non-Western worldviews in my own work on the hermeneutics of interreligious engagement, see, for example, Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 59–62, 66–72, especially 70–2, and Hedges, “Theorising a Decolonising,” while I am currently undertaking further work to extend this limited engagement further.

⁹¹ For a brief note on this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 127–28, box 5.2, but also see the next note.

⁹² There is much that could be unpacked here, including the fact that much postcolonial and decolonial theory and praxis relies upon theorists we may typically see as part of the Western tradition of thought, especially Derrida (a key inspiration for such figures as Spivak) and Foucault (a key inspiration for such figures as Asad and Mignolo); though Derrida's position as an Algerian Jew is often neglected in most studies which simply place him within a Neo-Hegelian trajectory, see Biko Agozino, “The Africa-Centred, Activist, and Critical Philosophy of Derrida,” *International Journal of Baudrillard Studies* 8, n. 1 (2011), available at: www2.ubishops.ca/baudrillardstudies/vol-8_1/v8-1-agozino.html. Moreover, as I have indicated above at points, and noted elsewhere, there is a much greater interplay between what we typically term “Western” and “non-Western” (or “Eastern, etc.) worldviews than typically recognised. This is discussed at various places in Hedges, *Understanding Religion*—for example, at 98, 175, and 375; but see also J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997); Christopher Beckwith, *Warriors of the Cloister: The Central Asia Origins of Science in the Medieval World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012); Peter Park, *Africa, Asia and the History of Philosophy: Racism in the Formation of the Philosophical Canon, 1780–1830* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013); John Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); David Lyons, *The House of Wisdom: How the Arabs Transformed Western Civilization* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010); Jürgen Osterhammel, *Unfabling the East* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); and Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement*, 138–44.

⁹³ Deborah Lipstadt's work is clear on how such arguments must be framed, hence the title of her book *History on Trial (History on Trial: My Day in Court with a Holocaust Denier*, New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2006, dramatized in

Now, I hope obviously, I am not suggesting that any TWW folk hold such views, rather I am using an extreme example of what happens when we say that confessional positions (and, yes, as I have shown TWW is confessional and walled) can simply come in as starting points. McEntee and myself agree, I would believe, that certain confessional claims, certain claims to being scholarly arguments, certain forms of reasoning are simply not acceptable within the scholarly space.⁹⁴ Turning to a perhaps less extreme example: if claims to ultimacy are acceptable scholarly norms, how about when the person who claims that their starting point is that Jesus Christ was resurrected and is the Lord of All comes in and starts doing theology and claiming to do scholarship from that position? Are these all simply equal starting places? No. It is, perhaps, uncomfortable to be able to stand apart from your own prejudices and viewpoint.⁹⁵ It is not something that we do naturally as human beings. Moreover, asking somebody from a traditionally marginalized community/identity to come into a space (scholarship) that looks traditionally white, masculinist, secular, Christian, Western, and so on, for the purpose of asking questions about their own position will be even more uncomfortable. However, what I have argued above is that it is not necessary to deny where they come from, nor that they must deposit that at the door. Alternative ways of knowing and doing and thinking must become part of scholarship; while there are important issues around how the classroom is framed as a space of enquiry, and what conversations happen in the corridors of academia.⁹⁶ However, we do everyone a disservice if we assume that they can come in as unquestioned a priori stances. Would we welcome traditional hierarchical Brahmanical norms around caste as a basis for thinking and running institutions?⁹⁷ Many indigenous traditions retain patriarchal norms that we may say need to be questioned. As such, while not everybody may take to my hat analogies, I suggest that we need this awareness of our hats, and the possibility for different hats. It is harder for some people than others. Some people will find it maybe even traumatic at first, or simply think that they don't want to do it. Indeed, this is as true of some white American men as anybody else. After all, how else do people end up at places such as Liberty University? It is, however, essential to a liberative praxis in academia as well as for scholarship to become truly decolonial, for a hermeneutics of suspicion must underlay not only our attitude towards any external discourse but also our own self-reflexivity as scholars. Without it we are at great risk of merely peddling our

the film *Denial*, 2016), because she wanted to be very clear that it was not the Holocaust itself on trial. For some wider debates around how racism, antisemitism, and Holocaust denial can relate, see Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

⁹⁴ There is a wider difficult set of questions here about whether certain things are off limits or should not be asked or debated. I don't want to open up that particular Pandora's Box here.

⁹⁵ I use the term here in a Gadamerian sense of preconceptions and worldview, rather than in its usual prejudicial sense, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 53 box 2.6. For some of my wider reflections on this, see Paul Hedges, “Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons,” *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 4 (2016): 5-26, and Paul Hedges, “Comparative Theology and Hermeneutics: A Gadamerian Approach to Interreligious Interpretation,” *Religions* 7.1 (2016), <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7010007>.

⁹⁶ As a note, one exercise that I currently use as an assessment in my MSc course on method and theory in the study of religion is a Reflective Essay which asks students to bring their own standpoint and positionality into dialogue with the issues, methods, and theories raised in the course. Hence, rather than bifurcating themselves, I ask my students—may I say both pedagogically and pastorally?—to bring, at least potentially, their whole experience into play in an exercise of academic analysis.

⁹⁷ Some argue that caste is something imposed and enforced by British colonialism. However, it is historically attested (across traditions) and within textual sources. The Dalit experience must also be considered. For a contemporary account of a liberative and comparative Dalit theology, see Joshua Samuel, *Untouchable Bodies, Resistance, and Liberation: A Comparative Theology of Divine Possessions* (Leiden: Brill, 2020). See also Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 102, box 4.6.

own prejudices in new guises and looking for that which will confirm our own biases as supposed evidence.

Griffiths, again, in Lieu of a Conclusion

Let me return, then, to Griffiths. Whereas once I was enraptured of his vision—seeing the unity of the Christian mystical tradition with the treasures that he saw in such traditions as Buddhism, Hinduism, and others as one unified system—I now feel we must ask questions.⁹⁸ If what I learn about, for instance, Buddhism only reinforces my existing worldview, then I strongly suspect that I have missed some very important things that Buddhists have to say. If I see the truth of religion in those carefully cherry-picked irenic mystics who, I suggest, extoll a single unity, then what am I to make of all those exclusivists, militants and others who are all—and often genuinely—inspired by the very same religio-spiritual systems to take their path. Are they all only foolish and deluded, and only I am right?⁹⁹ Indeed, what McEntee does not consider—but what is key in the decolonial critique in the study of religion—is the very concept “religion” itself (let alone the contested territory of “spirituality”).¹⁰⁰ While he cites Derrida and his aside about “*religio*” and its translation, there are much deeper issues concerning what is effaced, the racial bias in the term and its employment, and other factors.¹⁰¹ The erasure of the otherness of the Other still seems to loom large in TWW.¹⁰² We must not essentialize our worldview; rather, we must see it as part of what we challenge. Whereas once I’d have wished to build from what Griffiths had “discovered”, I now see that—I would say more fruitfully—asking how he has “constructed” what he sets out and what is the basis of this worldview is where scholarship should take us.¹⁰³ This is not to say that he is not correct. Griffiths may well be correct that an inner unity unites Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism and many other traditions. But scholarship, particularly a decolonial scholarship (I may even, provocatively, add a Kantian decolonial scholarship), cannot start here. What various critical stances, from feminism to decolonial theory, have shown us is that our epistemologies are all standpoint epistemologies.¹⁰⁴ TWW, I have argued, is likewise a

⁹⁸ This notion of a “mystical tradition”, we may note, is also in need of critical investigation. See variously Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 198–99, box 8.5, Hedges, “Identity, Prejudice, and Mysticism,” and Hedges, “Encounters with Ultimacy?”

⁹⁹ See Hedges, “Identity, Prejudice, and Mysticism.”

¹⁰⁰ See, for instance, Anna King and Paul Hedges, “What Is Religion? Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?” in ed., Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Contemporary Religion* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 1, 1–30, 22–24; or, more briefly, Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 128, box 5.6.

¹⁰¹ On the decolonial problems of religion considered within the study of religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapters 1 and 7; and from a theological perspective, see Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), but see also Hedges, *Comparative Theology*.

¹⁰² Such a stance accords with an argument by Ulrich Beck, “The Truth of Others: A Cosmopolitan Approach,” *Common Knowledge* 10, no. 3 (2004): 430–49: “In any form of universalism, all forms of human life are located within a single order of civilization, with the result that cultural differences are either transcended or excluded. In this sense, the project is hegemonic: the other’s voice is permitted entry only as the voice of sameness, as a confirmation of oneself, contemplation of oneself, dialogue with oneself. An African universalism, for instance, would hold that the good white has a black soul” (433). My thanks to Axel Takacs for suggesting the connection to Beck’s work.

¹⁰³ This is, of course, me speaking with my scholarly hat on. However, even if I were to put on my theological hat, or perhaps a “spiritual seeker” hat, I think that I would need, today, to be wary and rethink how I employed Griffiths’ work.

¹⁰⁴ See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 244–45. This, it should be noted, is a specifically feminist contribution as a theoretical basis, and its neglect further reinforces my wider critique of TWW foregrounding white, Western, masculinist positionality as an unquestioned norm which assumes that other voices may, at best, be additional footnotes to this supposed universal viewpoint, but not of any significant interest in and of themselves.

standpoint. It is, moreover, a standpoint that does not acknowledge its own standpoint. This does not give me a secularizing gaze, nor make me a hard constructivist. Rather, I suggest, the vision I have set out here is a more stable basis from which our decolonial praxis can begin,¹⁰⁵ it is the basis of liberative action that does not prescribe, but seeks (with Freire) to see us as learners as much (or more so even) than teachers,¹⁰⁶ and so it is necessitated for us to do scholarship *qua* scholarship. Amen.¹⁰⁷



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¹⁰⁵ I will emphasize this question of beginning the work of decolonization, for it is not a thing “to do” nor simply to be “attained,” but rather an ongoing process. See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 2, 5–6, 178–79. I may also note that Avalos frames “decolonisation as a process of becoming,” which she notes, we may add, “makes the spiritual dimension of Native resistance salient” (Avalos, “Becoming Human,” 189). Also, in addressing how we decolonize, an important paper is Leon Moosavi, “The Decolonial Bandwagon and the Dangers of Intellectual Decolonisation,” *International Review of Sociology* (2020), DOI: 10.1080/03906701.2020.1776919.

¹⁰⁶ More could be unpacked here. However, for the purpose of keeping us on track, let me just briefly note three points. Firstly, critical scholarship may, even should, have a liberative praxis within it; but, I have argued, this does not mean the teacher prescribes an answer but may raise issues. This relates to my own inspiration from Freirean pedagogy. See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, particularly the Introduction. Secondly, while I do not discount the legitimacy of being a scholar-activist, not all scholarship is activism and not all activism is scholarship. See *ibid.*, and also Paul Hedges, “Interreligious Studies: Engaged Scholarship as the Study of Religion, or Being a Scholar-Activist,” keynote address at ESITIS Bi-annual conference, University of Münster (Westfälische Wilhelms-Universität), Münster, Germany (April 2017), unpublished paper. Thirdly, back to the hats: I am, in theological mode, inspired by liberation theology, or liberationist themes. See Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*, 3, and would, in the more-than-a-decade since writing that, more emphatically describe myself as a liberation theologian. I leave this point here.

¹⁰⁷ I may shock fellow critical scholars of religion with this word, but why may we not say “Let it be so” to what I have proposed?