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**The Journal of Interreligious Studies**
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**Issue 34: "The Spiritual But Not Religious and Theology Without Walls"**
**January 2022**

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## *From the Editor-in-Chief*

On behalf of the publishers, editorial team, and staff of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, I wish our readers a joyous turn of the Gregorian year. There are exciting issues lined up for 2022. In addition to an upcoming rolling submissions issue, we have three special issues. First, in the works is the previously announced roundtable response to an incredibly rich research article by Katherine Janiec Jones of Wofford College (South Carolina) and Cassie Meyer of Sewanee: University of the South (Tennessee). Second, there is a special issue comprised of articles taken from the most recent Engaging Particularities conference at Boston College. Third, Lucinda Mosher, senior editor of the *JIRS*, has organized a special issue on comparative theology, interreligious studies, and music.

I am very excited to share the news of an upcoming publication: *The Georgetown Companion to Interreligious Studies*, edited by Lucinda Mosher. It will be released June 2022. (Alas, supply-chain problems have delayed even this.) Keep an eye out for it!

Finally, please navigate to irstudies.org to sign-up for our newsletter (through mailchimp) on the main page.

## In This Issue

This issue is guest edited by Bin Song of Washington College (Maryland) on the topic of Theology Without Walls and the Spiritual But Not Religious. It discusses—constructively and critically—how the Theology Without Walls project may or may not be beneficial to the growing SBNR demographic. Dr. Song provides a thorough introduction to the issue, which closes with four book reviews:

- *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, by Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (reviewed by Joseph Kimmel
- *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective*, by Paul Hedges (reviewed by Joseph Kimmel)
- *Theopoetics and Religious Difference: The Unruliness of the Interreligious: A Dialogue with Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller*, by Marius van Hoogstraten (reviewed by Axel M. Oaks Takacs)
- *Christian-Zen Dialogue: Sacred Stories as a Starting Point for Interfaith Dialogue*, by Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph SVD (reviewed by Thomas Cattoi)

Thank you for your continued support and interest in the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*. Enjoy this issue!

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
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# Introduction to the Special Issue: Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) and Theology Without Walls (TWW)

Bin Song

*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 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.

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[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.

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 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.

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[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.prri.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.

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.

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[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 publications[7], 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 individuals' diverse spiritual experiences with continually renewed understandings of ultimate reality.

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[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.

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 creedal 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 creedal 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 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.

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[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.

## 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 panel[13]. 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 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.

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[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.

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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# Walls and Borders: Theology and Regionalism After Religion

Paul Bramadat

*Although it is difficult to object to the openness of mind and generosity of spirit one can observe in Theology Without Walls (TWW), both the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) and critical scholars of religion may find the tone and ambitions of the movement somewhat alienating. I outline two key features of the SBNR cohort: First, while there are certain very common values, practices, and assumptions one can expect to see, one also encounters a resistance or even just indifference to speaking of a coherent set of practices reflecting a consistent perspective. Second, the way individuals define themselves and establish patterns of belonging suggest SBNR people are just as site-specific as members of conventional religions. I illustrate the second observation through some reflections on the Cascadia region of North America. Forms of secularization have flourished here to such an extent that the region may well not just resist the liberal theological orientation associated with TWW, but might also provide an opportunity for movement members to think outside of the conventional boxes of religious identity.*

*Key words: spiritual but not religious; Cascadia; Religion at the Edge; Pacific Northwest; reverential naturalism; secular*

I appreciate very much the opportunity to reflect on the ramifications of the broader project sketched in *The Transreligious Imperative* (and evident in Theology Without Walls [TWW] as a general approach) for our understanding of the Spiritual But Not Religious (SBNR) cohort. My own work has been securely moored in the harbour of religious studies, with enriching excursions into the world of policy-makers and religious insiders. The conversation at the American Academy of Religion and in this special issue creates an opening to think critically about potential conversations we might imagine between people who intentionally place themselves outside of existing conventional religious structures and those animated by broadly ecumenical or interreligious impulses.

## TWW and SBNR

It is encouraging to see the efforts of those in this—admittedly rarefied—discussion to move beyond naïve expressions of the virtues of ecumenism, interfaith dialogue, and comparative religion. The commitment to think seriously about what it might mean for people raised in one religion, or more broadly one comprehensive interpretive scheme, as John Thatamanil puts it,[1] to engage, adopt, adapt, and perhaps also to practice another religion, is surely welcome in a period beset by so much tribalism and xenophobia.

In my reflections, I want to suggest that proponents of TWW, as an emerging field or approach, may find it useful to think not just about walls, but also borders. One way borders matter in thinking about religion in the contemporary period is that they remind us that all of the religious traditions, practices, and claims we study are situated somewhere, and unfold at some time. This seems fairly obvious, but what might it mean to advocates of the spirit and key intellectual problematique of TWW? After all, TWW intentionally prioritizes the ways "the divine" or "the sacred" might be manifest in traditions an individual might consider not-their-own. As a friendly outside observer of this undertaking, the thinking and writing of TWW seem to me to be mostly apolitical; or to put it positively, TWW's interest in politics seems mainly to focus on the ways that implicitly authentic and liberal Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, Hindu, etc. manifestations of the divine (just coincidentally) seem to have a predilection for complementary (liberal) ethical and theological stances. In any event, TWW was not invented for me or other religious outsiders, so it is not at all surprising that I might feel somewhat estranged by its internal logic.

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[1] John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2020).

It seems entirely reasonable that TWW theologians begin with the assumption that there is a divine that might make an appearance in or be sought in a variety of places. In addition to this initial assumption there is a conviction that it is the job of TWW theologians to think about how they might properly combine or interact with these diverse expressions of the divine. But why might they wish to do this? Well, this is desirable so that they might, as Jerry Martin (2020, 49) puts it, "know God, not merely about God."[2] From the perspective of a religious studies scholar who is himself (I guess) SBNR, but who pursues his research and teaching in a "secular" and "humanistic" manner,[3] I do not think about my research as a means by which I can experience, know, or even or learn anything about God. Rather, I am far more interested in how a given Christian got interested in meditation in the first place; what practices appeal to them and why; how much they know about the history of the kind of Buddhism they want to practice; what kinds of conflicts within the larger Buddhist sphere resulted in this person coming across this sort of Buddhism in a bookstore or on a website; to what extent are their interests, tastes and aptitudes produced by a certain ethnic, class, gender, racialized, national, and able-bodied set of intersecting identities.

After all, this imagined Christian has a name, gender, family, bank account, certain kind of education, and an aesthetic sensibility; they speak a certain language, have a certain passport, have a certain sexual orientation (or a range), and have a certain life expectancy. Some of these things are accidents of their birth in a particular city, state, country, and time period, and some of them are products of political processes that unfold over centuries, but all of these facts will help us understand why they think of the Christian divine as they do, and why they might have an interest in adopting certain Buddhist meditation practices. To put it another way, as a religious studies scholar, I am interested in the Christian person, their claims, their embodied practices, and the culture in which they live—not the divine as such.

This seems like a general and predictable critique a religious studies scholar might have of TWW in particular or even liberal theology in general. However, thinking about borders might have a bearing on the ways TWW proponents think about SBNR people as individuals or as part of a sociologically identifiable cohort. After all, as a social scientific category SBNR is notoriously hard to describe. Some "members" of this group are just passing through en route to being fully irreligious; some are en route to being conventionally religious; some are attracted to one spiritual tradition while others are attracted to multiple traditions; most have very little interest in conventional institutions—some detest them and others just think they are irrelevant to their lives. There are many projects going on at the moment, trying to understand and explain the so-called religious "nones" and the SBNR component of this group.[4] However, much of this work is in its infancy, so we need to be cautious about what we think we can say about this cohort.

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[2] Jerry L. Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2020), 49.
[3] Although I am myself of mixed-race (South Asian and Anglo-Saxon) descent, and was raised as a Unitarian Universalist, I am now most engaged by the philosophical and embodied spiritualities associated with postural yoga, especially Ashtanga yoga.

Nonetheless, two relevant features of these individuals and these clusters of belief and practice stand out for me. First, there are—as many of the people in this conversation know—certain very common values, practices and assumptions one can expect to see in the lives of SBNR people. Many of them participate in a fairly recognizable though not tightly bounded "therapeutic regime" to use Thatamanil's useful category, even if it seems to me we are a long way from identifying a coherent "interpretive scheme" that ties the group together. That is to say, while one might quite predictably find SBNR individuals in yoga studios, meditation retreats, Christmas services, acupuncture clinics, and at their local bookstores seeking a book of poetry by Rumi, one should also expect a resistance (or even just indifference) to speaking of a coherent set of practices reflecting a consistent perspective (a regime linked to a scheme). Second, the way individuals define themselves and establish patterns of belonging suggest SBNR people are just as site-specific as that Christian with an interest in Buddhism. Over two decades of teaching on and research into contemporary religion and spirituality in North America convince me that location matters: it matters if the Christian or the SBNR person in question lives in Mumbai, Montreal, or Miami; it matters if they are wealthy or poor, living among Muslims or Christians, if they are Francophone or Anglophone, women or men, and so on.

## But Not Religious

Sometimes an abstract interest in regionalism becomes personal, and then professional. My own curiosity about my adopted home in Victoria—situated in a region many of us call Cascadia—inspired me to lead an international research project on the religious, irreligious, and spiritual characteristics of the Pacific Northwest bio-region. *Religion at the Edge: Nature, Spirituality, and Secularity in the Pacific Northwest,* will be released in 2022 with University of British Columbia Press.

What is it like here? This may seem like a digression, but let me say for the record, that I have never been to outer-space. Nonetheless, if I were to try to explain to a small child what it is like for humans to travel or live in space, I think I would know what to say. After all, I have been imaginatively inhabiting space for decades through pop culture and documentaries. I could describe what these media tell me about the experience of weightlessness, the danger, quiet and cold of space, and the sublime beauty of a universe seen without interference from streetlights.

Teaching religious studies in British Columbia is not unlike teaching terrestrial people about outer space. Here, in the northern half of Cascadia, the expanding majority of my students have nearly no direct experience of religion beyond what they might see in a film, and even then it is usually the backdrop for a plot that is not really about religion. I was reminded of this fact this year when I was asked to supervise a senior honours student who was a double major in History and Religious Studies. Although she had an interest in pagan forms of religion in the region, I discovered that she had *never* been inside a church (or any other religious building) of any kind. This was not exactly on principle, although she was aware that churches had been responsible for many bad things. Rather, it just happened to be that she had a strictly academic interest in religion, and none of the social or ritual activities of her friends and family required her to darken the door of a church.

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[4] One of the most promising is led by Lori Beaman at the University of Ottawa. See: https://nonreligionproject.ca/

It has not always been this way in Canada, or in Cascadia, of course. Once upon a time, we could assume everyone in our classes had at least a nominal, or a loosely recollected, religious (usually Christian) affiliation. But when I moved to British Columbia (from the Canadian prairies) in 2008 I came to see that the region was, in the words of one colleague of mine, "born secular." Moreover, conventional religious institutions that do exist have quite shallow roots. A great many of my students were raised in families in which it was often the parents or grandparents who had walked away—often with a shrug rather than any spite—from organized religion. This is true of the US side of Cascadia, too, though the deinstitutionalization and secularization processes are arguably a few decades more advanced in Canada.

The survey we conducted in 2018 as part of our *Religion at the Edge* project confirmed that 49% of British Columbians and 42% of residents of Cascadia South (Oregon and Washington), would be considered "religious nones."[5] This makes the region nearly twice as non-religious or unaffiliated as most other parts of the continent. Among people under 40 years old, a significant majority of the region's respondents are nones; among people under 25, I would speculate that the number of nones would be in the vicinity of 65–70%.

These are large figures, and I should point out that inasmuch as any religion is naturalized and privileged in the region, it is clearly Christianity, and usually some kind of Protestantism. As well, it is true that the levels of ethnic and religious diversity in Vancouver, for example, greatly exceed what you would find anywhere else in the region, and it is also true that Indigenous spiritualities are far more prominent on the Canadian side of the border. Nonetheless, in British Columbia, all Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Jews, Jains, Buddhists, and traditional non-Christian Indigenous people *added together* equal about 12–15% of the population.

Many nones are interested in spirituality, though what that means is something about which debates are currently on-going. Our project and the life experiences and teaching careers of the project collaborators confirm that there is a strong SBNR cohort in this region, but it strikes me that the "BNR" component of this group is not as strong within this cohort as it is elsewhere, since most of them have never rejected their own or their family's religion. Instead, they—especially those under 40—simply *have never had* much interest in or attachment to conventional religiosity.

Let me return now to the SBNR-TWW connection. It seems to me that the individual imagined by TWW was generally raised in, and probably still belongs to, a specific religion (even if just nominally), and might now wish to encounter the (possibly same) "divine" or "sacred" as conceived by, contained in, or promoted by another religious tradition, and to do so in an intellectually credible, personally meaningful and morally conscientious manner. Concomitantly,

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[5] See Sarah Wilkins-Laflamme's report on this survey at: https://uwspace.uwaterloo.ca/bitstream/handle/10012/13406/Cascadia%20report%20part%202%2006-2018%20combined.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y

I wonder if (indeed it seems to me that) the SBNR person being imagined by TWW has disaffiliated with a religion at some point in the past, but lives in a city or region in which there is a comprehensible and comprehensive dominant religious form (Christianity, in this case) not very far under the surface of society; furthermore, this person might have an interest in combining the spiritual aspects of one or more capital-R religions, and they might want to think about how to do that in the best way.

The situation among many of Cascadia's SBNR's is quite—though not categorically—different than this. Within our interviews and field site visits, one could see evidence of a considerable interest in recognizable spiritual practices and perspectives. For example, in British Columbia, approximately 41 percent of our representative sample indicated that they had engaged in yoga in the last year; the frequency of practice varied between daily (4.8 percent), weekly (14.5 percent), monthly (8.1 percent), or once or a few times annually (13.3 percent). When these practitioners were asked if they experienced their practice as spiritual, fully 55 percent of them said definitely or probably yes (13 and 42 percent, respectively). This means that approximately 20 percent of all British Columbians frame their postural yoga practice as a means of increasing their spiritual wellness, wholeness, and awareness. To put the size of this cohort in perspective, it is the equivalent of *all* self-identified Anglicans and United Church Christians (the two largest Protestant denominations), *plus all* Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Jews, and Sikhs in the province.

## And Not Religious

Spiritual modalities are alive and well in a province sometimes called "British California," that is home to Eckhardt Tolle and Lululemon. For the most part, the SBNR cohort under 40 years of age might be better described as SANR, or "spiritual and not religious," since they do not have any personal or familial memory of ever being religious and they live in a culture in which well over half of their peers would not prioritize identification with or participation in a formal religious tradition. In this space, religion truly is the exception, not the rule. These people are irreligious only in the way your life-long vegan friend raised in a family of vegans could be called a non-meat-eater. I mean, your friend does not eat meat—but that might not really capture very much about how they do eat and why.

So, what can we say about these SBNRs and, again, what is the connection to the TWW? Here I arrive at the edge of a taxonomical chasm. I started the project with a strong initial hunch that many of my neighbours in the region had an interest in spirituality and outdoor activities, broadly understood. Some describe themselves as spiritual, as I suggested. Yoga studios and meditation groups are ubiquitous; there are also some extremely interesting examples of non-denominational and post-institutional and outdoors-based forms of Christianity that we see here and there and that time does not permit me to consider. To make a long story short (the longer story will be in *Religion at the Edge*), my intuition, and many of our participants, suggested that the region (especially the Canadian side of it) is definitively post-religious in the same way your vegan friend is post-meat.

While conducting our fieldwork, interviews, focus groups, and surveys in the region, I kept expecting to find evidence of eco-spirituality, nature religion, metaphysical religion, religious naturalism, and the like. I did not, or at least these categories did not seem to capture what we saw and heard. Nonetheless, there was something I intuited not very far below the surface, beyond the regular metaphors, that seemed to represent a default orientation to religion, nature, and spirituality. "Reverential naturalism" was the term I coined to describe the variant of naturalism that could not be reduced to a flat positivism but also did not quite resemble what we normally mean when we talk about nature religion or eco-spirituality. Throughout our study we observed the presence of an overarching meaning-conveying narrative according to which a deference to and, for many, a veneration of nature is framed as a distinctive, even definitive, feature of what it means to live well in the region. This meta-narrative seems to be the common ground on which people who might *also* be Muslims, Christians, agnostics, or atheists, can stand together. Like public health care in Canada, the beguiling beauty of the natural world binds people together and helps to explain the motto on a licence plate option offered, rather unironically, by the provincial government: *British Columbia: The Best Place on Earth*.

So, what might it mean to imagine a SBNR "theology"? To use this emic TWW concept in this region is, in my view, a lost cause. Perhaps SBNR people elsewhere might be more receptive to the overarching project of TWW, but many of the concepts at the core of the overarching project, as I read it, are rather inert in the region, especially in its public and intellectual arenas. Nonetheless, it might be fruitful for theologians, among themselves, to think about what it might mean to do theology in the Cascadian context. Taking the specific political, geographical and historical features of this place and its people seriously, though, would require paying close attention to the emergence of a galvanizing form of naturalism that is not oriented toward the divine, but may still open up opportunities for reverence. Given the precipice at which we all now stand as a species, we might learn a great deal from the ways Cascadian SBNR residents engage with an ecosystem that resists institutionalization at the same time as it entreats something akin to sacralization.

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# Why the Theology Without Walls Program Fails Both as Scholarship and a Resource to the SBNR: A Friendly Condemnation

Paul Hedges

*This paper argues that, in many ways, both particular writers within the Theology Without Walls (TWW) program and the whole endeavor fail to meet the requirements of critical scholarship. While raising important issues of contemporary relevance, its search for a TWW is reminiscent of older perennialist ventures and seems to fall prey to many of the same failings. It is largely and often grounded within white, Western, colonial, male, and Christian norms which are taken as representing a universal base for theorizing without concern for power dynamics or decolonizing scholarship. It is suggested that the related field of comparative theology offers a far more sophisticated and viable platform for exploring religious difference that can attend to both theological and critical concerns. The impossibility of being without walls, or our inevitable locatedness, is argued as part of this.*

*Key words: Theology without walls, comparative theology, Robert Neville, theology, religious studies, critical religion, scholarship, spiritual but not religious (SBNR), decolonization*

## Introduction: What is TWW?

Theology Without Walls (TWW) is a recent, primarily North American (even US), program that has academic foundations but is more concerned, as I see it, with practitioner and insider theological questions, many of which can be seen as quite out of step with contemporary academic theology as a whole. Its prime moving figure has been the philosopher Jerry Martin who has helped define it via a recent landmark book.[1] TWW originated as an interest group in 2014 at the American Academy of Religion (AAR), later becoming a specific Group organizing its own panels, though also often in conjunction with the Comparative Theology (CT) Group. Nevertheless, I would argue that TWW lacks CT's academic credibility, and also differs from the latter's "crossing and returning" motif.[2] Martin's conception is that we seek to freely learn from every tradition, and he insists that "translating... insights into the terms of one's own tradition risks narrowness, distortion, and misappropriation."[3] Martin also states that: "The subject matter of theology is ultimate reality, not one's own tradition," and while he says there may be specific sub-sets, i.e. "Christian... Hindu... Islamic theology, etc.," he stresses that also "there is just

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[1] See Jerry Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020). While TWW is not a single program, nor with one agenda amongst its various contributors, I will nevertheless speak below of the TWW program as a somewhat monolithic entity. This is because at least as enunciated by Martin, and as seems inherent in some other key writers and thinkers, there is something of a clear sense of what the movement stands for. It should be noted that not every essay in the TWW book should be seen as representing a TWW voice, because various authors were simply responding to the movement or had been asked to contribute specific essays. Being an author in the TWW volume is not therefore in any sense to suggest that the person accepts the TWW ideological schemata I set out here.

[2] Two key descriptive texts of what CT is, are Francis Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), and Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

[3] Jerry Martin, "Introduction," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 1–4, 1.

Theology, the *logos* of *theos*, of ultimacy."[4] In this, I find Martin's project leading beyond the walls of the academy into some form of perennialism and confessional project.

I see this as a friendly critique, seeking to influence the ongoing development of a young project rather than as a damning rejection, though I will speak quite harshly of much that I see as misguided. Further, I will address its relationship to the spiritual but not religious (SBNR) phenomena, which it seems to see itself in relation to. One argument of at least some parts of TWW is that we see a move from what may broadly be termed "religion" to "spirituality" in contemporary society, with "religion" standing for more rigid and institutional belonging to a specific tradition, and "spirituality" signifying a more fluid and non-institutional engagement with various techniques, practices, and beliefs in an ad hoc manner.[5] For some at least, TWW is seen as capable of providing a theology for the SBNR community, but I will suggest that TWW is not able to do so.

As a last introductory note, I see TWW exemplifying a recurring theme (certainly within the Western world but maybe also more widely) over the last one hundred and fifty or so years. A perception that the world has many religions[6] and that we cannot, without recourse to strictly unprovable confessional claims, show that one is correct has led many towards seeking a unity of all religions. In the nineteenth century, F. Max Müller believed that we would see a future global Christianity which combined the best of all religions, while Theosophists planned a new religious formulation drawing from many religions, again the perennialists of the mid-twentieth century had such views.[7] We could even see Ninian Smart's talk of a world or global theology as part of such a worldview.[8] As Jeffery Long notes, such views could also be found in the work of

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[4] Martin "Introduction," 1.

[5] The classic study of this purported move is Linda Woodhead and Paul Heelas, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). This distinction of "religion" and "spirituality", while a popular usage, is not analytically valid if we imagine a distinct split between two arenas, but may stand as a descriptive marker of a certain form of contemporary discourse and practice. See Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021), 128 box 5.6, and Anna King and Paul Hedges, "What Is Religion? Or, What Is It We Are Talking About?," in *Controversies in Contemporary Religion*, vol. 1, ed. Paul Hedges (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2014), 1–30, 22–24.

[6] I return below to this contested term and the notion that the world "has" religions.

[7] See, e.g., Blake Smith, "Counter-Revolution and Cosmopolitan Spirituality: Anquetil Duperron's Translation of the Upanishads," in *The French Revolution and Religion in Global Perspective*, ed. Bryan Banks and Erica Johnson, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 25–48. The perennialist position is essentially itself an unprovable faith claim that there is an inner unity centered on experience that unites all religions. This can be countered on various grounds which includes but is not limited to the following three: it is either simply a confessional claim and so not an academic one and so rests upon a faith claim which is not evidentially proven; it is an overly strong pluralism and so is not a scholarly form which advocates an "interpretation" rather than, as in the last point, a strong confessional claim (see the discussion of Hick and pluralism in what follows); its assertion of the primacy of experience is based in a Romantic and Schleiermachian framing which ignores the counter arguments that experience is, in part at least, linguistically constructed and so develops from within the system rather than being prior to it, a point which, arguably, cannot be proven either way absolutely but in the typically strong espousal of this as the "essence" of religion ignores the significance of doctrine, tradition, and formation and so offers at best a lop-sided view.

[8] Ninian Smart and Steven Konstantine, *Christian Systematic Theology in a World Context* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1991).

Vivekananda,[9] while there were also Muslim perennialists.[10] Such thoughts, typically said to be new each time they emerge, generate much excitement amongst those who believe they are on the verge of a breakthrough to a new religious consciousness or age, yet they all fade away and the problems of grand claims to system making founder on many grounds – one thinks, if nothing else, of Jean-Francois Lyotard's dismissal of metanarratives.[11] TWW will, I suspect, in the *longue durée*, prove to be another such fad.[12]

## Why TWW, as Scholarship, Can't Talk about Ultimacy

I would distinguish between at least three ways in which the sphere we term religion may be studied. These, it should be noted, represent Durkheimian ideal types which are perhaps not as neatly demarcated in actual practice as set out here. First, confessional theology, which speaks within the confines of a specific tradition (in the Western academy this has traditionally been Christianity [normally either Catholic or Protestant]). Given the heritage of Western universities, many theology (sometimes divinity) departments were originally confessional departments, and such an organization remains in many places (e.g., Germany). Confessional theology will assert its own claims about "ultimacy",[13] for instance, that God is revealed in the person of Jesus as the Logos incarnate and second person of the Trinity, or that Swaminarayan was an Avatar of Vishnu. While I employ (confessional) "theology" to speak about the ideological truth claims of various traditions, many of them would not use this term, or even have a *logos* about a *theos*. As such, it should be understood as a shorthand signifier for various discourses, though I will also problematize it somewhat below. Second, academic theology, which studies the claims of confessional theology, and intersects with it, but employs the tools of secular disciplines as the primary methodology and guide. It speaks about the way traditions make claims about ultimacy, and how these are constructed. Third, religious studies, which is the purely secular study of many forms of religion via such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, feminism, etc. Again, it may study particular claims about how traditions perceive ultimate reality. The particular nomenclature deployed will vary upon context (e.g., history of religions, divinity, etc.), while these three do not represent, as noted, distinct and clear markers, but rather represent a range of points where each slides into the other. For instance, religious studies about Christianity crosses over to academic theology, while a Buddhist who studies Buddhism within religious studies may also make, at times, more normative claims about their own tradition in a confessional mode. Again, an atheist may teach Christian theology and identify as a theologian, while a belonging-believing Sikh may identify with religious studies and teach and research Sikhism in an entirely "secular" way. I stress this because there is no absolute marker between what some may identify as a secular discipline of religious studies and a confessional discipline of theology. Nevertheless, pragmatically within the academy, there is a real difference, and as a non-confessional discipline, the study of religion sits solely within academic theology and religious studies.

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[9] Jeffery Long, "A Hinduism without walls? Exploring the concept of the avatar interreligiously," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 227-33.

[10] This latter camp would apply to such figures as William Chittick and more recently to Reza Shah Kazema, who have sought to defend a pluralist stance in relation to the Quran and Islamic tradition. On the perennialist tradition in general, see Harry Oldmeadow, "Metaphysics, Theology and Philosophy," *Sacred Web* 1 (1998). On Muslim perennialists in relation to the theology of religions, see Haifaa Jawad, "A Muslim Response to the Christian Theology of Religions," in *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospective and Future Prospects*, ed., Elizabeth Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiararchi (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 328-58.

[11] Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on the Condition of Knowledge* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1979).

[12] I would like to add a note inspired by one of my anonymous reviewers that another way of reading TWW is as part of a tradition that seeks to move beyond an us-vs-them tribalism, which the reviewer notes includes "Locke and Schleiermacher, F. D. Maurice and Max Mueller, to W. C. Smith and John Hick." My reviewer also notes that this points to its being less original and groundbreaking than its proponents imagine.

[13] This term is deployed as an emic marker, as a TWW signifier of such things—it seems—as deity claims, nirvana claims, Brahman claims, etc. See Jerry Martin, "Introduction to Topical Issue Recognizing Encounters with Ultimacy across Religious Boundaries," *Open Theology* 4 (2018): 506-10, https://doi.org/10.1515/opth-2018-0039.

Before proceeding, I should note that what I have said so far may appear to represent "religions" as distinct traditions each with their own claims and identities. However, this is not the case and amongst voluminous debates some key points should be noted here: the term "religion" itself bears a history of Western, (Protestant) Christian, and colonial imposition in terms of its deployment; all traditions are inherently relational and syncretic rather than sitting in siloed bunkers distinct from each other; confessional claims can be made outside of specific traditions in terms of the typically historically delineated "religions" as we typically name them, i.e. via perennialist style theologies; theological and belief markers have never normally been key, and doing, practice, and strategic participation in rites and practices have been normative ways of doing "religion" through history.[14] TWW helps make clear that religions do not live in isolated and divided territories marked by clear borders; however, it is far from alone in such a claim and has not as yet added substantially to our understanding of this (though, as a young and growing program, it is perhaps a tall order to ask for it to have done so).

I have drawn a basic distinction above to separate confessional claims from scholarship: making truth claims versus examining and exploring such claims. In so far as the academy is a secular place (of course, there are religiously affiliated universities, but the study of religion may occur within a religious studies or academic theological framing), confessional claims about belief are left at the door. This distinction is actually not so simple; but, for now, I will park it here.

While it may be unfashionable these days to stress Enlightenment principles in academia, Immanuel Kant did sterling service in distinguishing between noumena and phenomena. Or, in terms meaningful here, between the metaphysical realm of claims to know that which falls outside human comprehension and relates to ultimacy, and that which falls within the limits of human socially constructed language and the realms of our embodied senses. Scholarship within the academy falls solely within the latter.[15] Now, I am of course aware, that various types of "postmoderns" (whatsoever that may mean) and "critical theorists" (in which number I would count myself) have subjected the Enlightenment legacy to severe critique, importantly from postcolonial, feminist, and other angles.[16] That goes as read.[17] But, the point is how would we—in any academically credible way—seek to study what the TWW project has sought to define as

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[14] For a contemporary overview of many of these key critical debates, see Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2021).

[15] This draws from Paul Hedges, "Encounters with Ultimacy? Autobiographical and Critical Perspectives in the Academic Study of Religion," *Open Theology* 4: 355–72.

[16] For some discussion of these terms, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 9–15, 50 box 2.5.

[17] Though, a great many of these post-Enlightenment types do seem to hold great store by a devotion to G.W.F. Hegel who they say validates their critical theorizing, despite him being the arch-metaphysician and unrepentant Orientalist, but that is another debate. On Hegel's orientalist legacy see, especially, Arvind-Pal S. Mandair, *Religion and the Specter of the West: Sikhism, India, Postcoloniality, and the Politics of Translation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

"ultimacy". All we see are competing forms of discourse. These may be identity claims or power claims and relate to such things as gender and colonialism.[18] In particular, claims to special experiences may be treated with suspicion in academic study, though confessional study may treat them with reverence, with a methodological agnosticism being arguably key in scholarly discourse.[19]

## What We Can Study and How to Study It

TWW, it seems to me, would wish to dismiss the claims I have made above and opt instead to claim a direct access to knowledge about ultimate reality. Now, we could argue about whether Kant is correct about his noumena-phenomena distinction. There may be, assuming a certain posited form of ultimate reality exists (and let's not forget that we actually can't prove or disprove this one way or another—if TWW writers have the magic key to do this, perhaps they would be so kind as to enlighten the rest of us?), the potential for unmediated direct access to it, such that, for instance, certain religious/ mystical experiences may really be giving us knowledge of it. But how would we know? And, how would we know which ones to trust? In a far more sophisticated philosophy of religion approach than I have seen in TWW writings, John Hick sought to develop a theory for making sense of how a pluralist position could be posited assuming that an ultimate reality exists.[20] Note Hick's caveats that keep his work, I believe, bounded within scholarly discourse: he does not make a confessional claim but advances "an interpretation"; this interpretation is bounded within a hypothesis of how this would work if there were a common Real to which all these traditions responded (it was never in his scholarly works a claim that such a Real existed – his personal views advocating for pluralism go beyond this); and the claims made are within the claims made by the traditions about their access to ultimate reality, not claiming to be saying what ultimate reality itself is.[21]

Further, I am aware that at least some supporters of the TWW project will push back against these ideas, suggesting that normative claims could be clearly grounded within religious studies.[22] I would thank Bin Song for noting that one of these, Robert Neville, taught normative, i.e., confessional[23], philosophy of religion under the remit of religious studies at Boston University. (Indeed, philosophy of religion as a whole may be more inclined to normative judgements than I allow, but I think may also be done as a critical discipline.[24]) Neville has formulated the extremely impressive Comparative Religious Ideas Project (CRIP). At least part of this sits comfortably within a religious studies remit, where the discourse of traditions is compared, and as Neville and Wesley Wildman note what they uncover is "what the religions we studied say about ultimate reality,"[25] rather than any claim about "ultimate reality" itself. Nevertheless, Neville's own more philosophical comparative work perhaps veers towards a confessional tone, though it is extremely rigorous and philosophically sophisticated.[26] But,

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[18] See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapters 6, 5, 10, and 7, respectively

[19] See Hedges, "Encounters with Ultimacy," 360–-62, see also Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 197–99, on "mystical" experiences, and on methodological agnosticism, 49 box 2.4.

[20] The main mature outworking of Hick's pluralist hypothesis was John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), but this should be read alongside nuances, defenses, and alterations he made to his hypothesis over the years, most importantly in John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism* (London, SCM, 1995).

[21] It is often, erroneously, asserted that Hick's usage of Kant was posited upon a stark division of humanly knowable phenomena and an entirely unknowable and inaccessible noumena, however, a careful reading of Hick in his earlier work, and as clarified in his later work (see previous note) makes clear that his division is not the same as Kant's. Rather, for Hick, we have access to human traditions as phenomena about their experiences of a noumena as our main scholarly data. The noumena he believed, if we assume it exists based on reports, can be accessed, but is only known to most of us in terms of tradition-specific claims and reports about it. His usage drew from Kant's terminology to draw an important distinction, rather than manifesting a hardline Kantian division. This is explicated clearly also in Hick's sympathetic and fair commentators (against those who seek to draw an "easy" rhetorical score against Hick's ideas because this false representation makes Hick's hypothesis fail), see, for instance, Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology of Religions* (London: SCM, 2010), 122-24, and Perry Schmidt-Leukel, "Pluralisms: How to Approach Religious Diversity Theologically', in Paul Hedges and Alan Race (eds), *Christian Approaches to Other Faiths* (London: SCM, 2008): 85–110.

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[22] Some parts of this argument were first sent as an extended critique by email to the TWW book authors and has appeared on my blog.

[23] I realize that both Neville and Song would contest my representation of Neville's project as "confessional" as they present it as "normative" but not confessional (see Bin Song, "Robert C. Neville: A Systematic, Nonconformist, Comparative Philosopher of Religion," *American Journal of Theology & Philosophy* 40.3 (2019): 11–30). However, I see Neville's project as "confessional", in my usage of that term, on two counts. First, Song argues that because Neville bases his enquiries upon a notion of fallibilism, whereby a supposedly open-ended investigation is undertaken, it is not limited to a single confessional norm. However, it starts very clearly within a Christian basis as its guiding norms and then calibrates this by comparison with other traditions. An argument herein is that such initial grounding is both inevitable and unavoidable, we are "confessional" in this sense whether we want to be or not. However, supposing that Neville's system allows him to avoid this locatedness of embodiment and tradition, this would make his work a form of perennialism, that takes as a starting point the belief that "ultimacy" (howsoever it is defined) exists across all traditions and that we simply combine these to reach the higher truth. As such, it takes a particular committed stance to begin. This must be seen in line with the second point, which is that by being normative, Neville presents his work as speaking about the truth of ultimacy, and so assumes that this noumenal (used in a Hickian sense, see note 20) is a quality or phenomena that exists or can be captured by such investigations; it makes what we may term, however inadequately, a religious claim. However, here, against Hick it rules out a priori the equally plausible hypothesis that there may be no noumenal reality, the atheistic or materialist interpretation may be correct. Hence, it locates itself within a confessional worldview. While it goes beyond the limits of this paper to discuss this, a further weakness of Neville's approach is its grounding in American Pragmatism (see Robert Neville, *Beyond the Masks of God: An Essay Toward Comparative Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), 161 and Song, "Robert C. Neville," 12, 18). Such pragmatist philosophy, as well as being unable to internally ground its own definition of "usefulness" which is central to its *raison d'être*, lacks any internal mechanism to reflect critically upon its own categories, assumptions, and power dynamics, meaning that it needs to be supplemented by the kind of critical discourses that I mention herein. However, it would be the work of at least another paper to unpack these issues.

[24] It goes beyond the scope of this paper to engage what philosophy should or should not regard as its proper realm of discourse. However, one of my anonymous reviewers mentioned that TWW may fit within the philosophy of religion. Certainly, in as far as it addresses such things as arguments for the existence of a deity, religious pluralism as a stance, and other such matters, some philosophers of religion may see it as their aim to determine the truth or otherwise of statements and claims, and hence what may be normative or confessional truth claims. However, I would suggest that philosophy of religion when it is not stuck within the rut of a Western-centric, analytic epistemic frame would acknowledge (at least after Wittgenstein, if not after Kant) that language does not in and of itself grant us access to the reality denoted, and hence normative truth claims are not within the grasp of the philosophy of religion, hence its aims are more modest debates about the coherence of discourses and such matters.

[25] Robert Neville and Wesley Wildman, "Comparative Conclusions about Ultimate Realities," in *Ultimate Realities* (Comparative Religious Ideas Project series), ed. Robert Cummings Neville (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 151-85, 178.

[26] See Robert Cummings Neville, *The God Who Beckons: Theology in the Form of Sermons* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1999), Robert Cummings Neville, *Ritual and Deference: Extending Chinese Philosophy in a Comparative Context* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), and see also Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 14, 19. However, as I read it, Neville's work in this fashion is grounded in how traditions speak and so does not permit (though he may disagree) the jump to speak of ultimacy per se.

Neville's Comparative Religious Ideas Project only speaks about how human traditions speak about ultimate reality. This comparative work shows much commonality across traditions in terms of the human discourse they have created, and the possibility for speaking meaningfully across these traditions, including in constructive terms. This, notwithstanding pushback from some scholars in his Comparative Religious Ideas Project who believed that the traditions they spoke of (in this case, specially the Chinese ones) were not duly represented by the categories proposed, suggests the possibility of viable comparative work as I have argued elsewhere.[27] What, however, it does not do is provide us with access to "ultimacy", which is in part down to the limits of language, the power matrix of the traditions explored (primarily elite, male, etc.), and the fact that a non-religious answer makes as much sense of the world in which we live.[28] Indeed, while Neville suggests two reasons why TWW is important, I do not see this as overcoming the issues raised here. His reasons are: first, if we do it "*with* walls," then we only get "sociological" comparison of each community's claims, but he says "Most theologians are not satisfied with that and want their claims to be true"; second, we need people asking big questions about why the world exists, what matters in life and what is an ideal life, etc.[29] Yet, as to the first, I doubt that most "theologians", as Neville calls them, would be happy being told that they must blend their ideas into some form of common denominator in which their walls don't matter. We won't reach the truth by finding some liberal consensus on such questions.[30] All we have access to are the narratives of specific groups, in Brubaker's sense,[31] so variably socially conditioned narratives about ultimacy.

To go beyond this examination of human traditions is, I would suggest, with Kierkegaard, to take that leap of faith. It is to assert a particular version of claims as being true. Fine. Nothing wrong with this. But it is a confessional claim, not an academic one. One particular issue with such things as the TWW approach, which haunts much work in attempting to assert a pluralist theology of religions and interreligious dialogue, and needs unpacking by scholarship,[32] is that it takes a liberal approach in which it assumes that the "nice", "comforting", and "peace-loving" approaches represent "true religion." But, employing Scott Appleby's well-known phrase, what happens when we consider the "ambivalence of the sacred," the fact that these texts and traditions also give us justifications for war, slavery, genocide, and terrorism—and not simply in some aberrant forms, but in mainstream ways as we see in, as but one example, Saint Bernard of Clairvaux, the Doctor of Love of the Catholic Church, telling us that we should slaughter Muslims without mercy as a Christian duty.[33] The exemplar of love mysticism it seems, did not have much love for many of his fellow creatures! While TWW may tell us about all the common "nice bits" and about a deity they want to believe in, it will not remain credible as scholarship as long as it keeps itself to its selective cherry picking (of course, all confessional claims do this, so it is not a particular fault of TWW, but it points to its lack of scholarly rigor).

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[27] See Paul Hedges, "Comparative Methodology and the Religious Studies Toolkit," in *Interreligious Comparisons in Religious Studies and Theology: Comparison Revisited*, ed. Perry Schmidt Leukel and Andreas Nehring (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016), 17-33, and Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 255-70.

[28] Paul Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue* (London: Jessica Kingsley Press, 2017).

[29] Robert Cummings Neville, "Paideias and programs for Theology Without Walls," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 7-13, 12, italics in original.

[30] We may also wonder whether there is any "truth" out there, certainly in any big "T" sense, but rather may not whatever truths we find be relational and based in community and provisional as we learn more and develop?

[31] Rogers Brubaker, "Ethnicity without groups," *Archives Européenes de Sociologie* 43.2 (2002): 163-89. Brubaker uses the term "group" to refer to the way that we, as humans, create specific "in-groups" and "out-groups" and assign identity to them. He notes the tendency in human thinking to what he terms "groupism", that is to ascribe permanency and reality to what are borders and barriers that only exist in human discourse (for instance, different racial or ethnic groups). Something similar, I think, occurs in the slippage we see in TWW thinking, where human claims about ultimate reality are then treated as direct experience and access to ultimate reality such that we can talk about it directly.

[32] For a critical assessment of interreligious dialogue, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, chapter 14.

That TWW's stated aims fall outside any critical or credible form of religious studies – as it is generally understood—I think goes without saying. Let me, nevertheless, note that there is no single and clear "secular" that can be identified apart from how we also define the realm of "religion", with these two terms acting as important markers for how contemporary society is classified.[34] While secularism is not, *per se*, hostile to religion—and may even embrace certain forms of religiosity[35]—the distinction between accepting confessional claims as a basis for ordering society and thinking, and not accepting such confessional claims for this is widely accepted. In this sense, in as far as it wishes to make normative claims about some form of ultimate reality, TWW is doing something which lies outside the academic religious studies remit within the contemporary academy as I have noted above. Of course, an argument could be made that the secular-religious divide is problematic, based in a Western and distinctly Protestant milieu and does not reflect a wider global picture of how religion may or should be studied, and I would fully accept the basis of this argument. Indeed, this may be the one major failing of my argument here: that I demand of TWW adherence to a specific secular-religious divide which demarcates the study of religion as non-confessional from confessional theology, a divide which I have elsewhere sharply critiqued because of its colonial and neocolonial prejudices, and also for its imposition of white, Western, masculinist norms.[36] Nevertheless, I believe that this is not the only rationale on which we must make the distinction I am arguing for here. Indeed, from these liberative lenses I will argue that TWW fails. Moreover, while space does not permit me to make the argument at length, I see the work of religious studies as I envisage it here as part of an important separation of society from the power claims of specific elites (typically, but not always, founded in those discourses we would term "religions" which would delimit human freedoms). I suggest that even without the secular-religion divide we must still be able to critically analyze truth claims (claims to ultimacy, truth, or the sacred, variously conceptualized) rather than only substantiate such claims or simply support specific ones. Even without positing secularism, an analytic distinction exists between promoting certain normative claims, and the open-ended and critical enquiry into such claims. I should stress here that, in part at least, my argument is a pragmatic one rather than one that may be fully analytic. That is, if the religion-secular binary is itself constructed and not stable, any distinction between confessional (insider / religious / theological) and scholarly (outsider / non-religious / not theological) will itself be unstable. However, there remain what I would term "real" differences in terms of the praxis and in the lived, material dynamics of the varying approaches, which justifies a pragmatic distinction that is adequate for analytic purposes.[37]

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[33] See Paul Hedges, *Religious Hatred: Prejudice, Islamophobia and Antisemitism in Global Context* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 73. Also, Paul Hedges, "Identity, Prejudice, and Mysticism: Exploring Sustainable Narratives of Peace Across Religious Borders," conference paper delivered at "Mystical Traditions: Approaches to Peaceful Coexistence" conference, Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies and Nazareth College (24 May 2021, online).

[34] For a recent, critical survey, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 373-88.

[35] See Paul Hedges, "The Secular Realm as Interfaith Space: Discourse and Practice in Contemporary Multicultural Nation-States,' *Religions* 10.9.498 (2019): 1-15

[36] These arguments are made variously within Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, see especially Introduction and chapters 5, 7, and 10.

## TWW, CT, and Scholarship

To some extent the above discussion may be seen as moot, as TWW does not claim to be religious studies, but places itself as theology. As an academic discipline, theology plays within the rules of scholarship, though, with Wittgenstein, we may note a variety of games of scholarship rather than there being a single one. I have above noted the distinction of academic and confessional theology, but we can expand and ask: as an academic subject what does it do? I will note a number of possibilities: exploring the historical trajectories of traditions as intellectual and social formations (historical theology); engaging philosophically with the claims of a particular tradition in terms of its rationale and beliefs (systematic theology); engaging philosophy as the primary tool to assess religious claims without recourse to such things as revelation (philosophical theology); seeking to engage with ways that social-psychological well-being may be enhanced by engaging traditional resources and human understanding (pastoral theology); exploring the philosophical limits and boundaries of traditions with a view to suggesting what further claims may be made about the beliefs and teachings of that tradition (constructive theology); engaging in in-depth readings of another tradition to suggest constructive philosophical formulations of the tradition (comparative theology); engaging with various disciplines to equip theological traditions with tools to engage a specific context or issue (e.g. feminist, postcolonial, contextual, etc.). This list is by no means definitive. Now, in all of these, theology engages the claims made by a tradition in relation to forms of academic reasoning. What it does not do *qua* scholarship, is claim that it is making direct claims about ultimacy, or whatever it says that is.

Now, and here the waters get muddy, what happens when somebody working as an academic theologian grounds their work in certain norms, e.g., a Roman Catholic or Muslim theologian (i.e., doing confessional theology). As an example, I would note the work of Francis Clooney who, following Anselm, has said that his CT is "faith seeking understanding."[38] Now, in this mode, CT combines comparative religion, academic theology, and confessional theology. Clooney may, for instance, work through the commentarial tradition of Srivaishnava and Catholic texts, comparing them as an expert scholar. Indeed, he stands as one of the world's foremost scholars of Srivaishnavism, and what often marks his work out is an incredible knowledge of the tradition to which he does not belong. Compared to the CT of Keith Ward, which may be said to be more like comparative religion, Clooney's is arguably marked both by a strong scholarly depth within religious studies but is also confessional. (That the work of many we may see as confessional theologians is sometimes more scholarly sophisticated than the work of some who may claim to be strictly secular religious studies scholars is another entanglement here.) However, even while placing himself within a confessional frame, I find much of Clooney's work passing muster as academic theology (though I realize that others may wish to draw the line differently) as his work explores the claims of these traditions. While he may make some normative suggestions or take devotional inspiration from this, he does not venture to make claims about where "ultimacy" sits in all of this. (There may be a pragmatic aspect in this given his role as a Catholic theologian.) Like Hick, perhaps, he offers a theory, or a reading, from his evidence.

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[37] The arguments behind this can hardly be unpacked here. But, roughly, as finite, embodied creatures evolved for hunting and gathering on the plains, forests, etc., we are not designed to accurately and definitively establish truth claims, but this does not mean that we cannot, as embodied creatures, make good enough assumptions about our world. For some wider epistemic and hermeneutic thinking on this, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, while I am working on a future monograph exploring the theoretical parameters behind the possibility of the study of religion that will address such questions.

[38] Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 11. But CT need not be confessional, see Hedges, *Comparative Theology*, 10-14.

There is no stark division between somebody doing theology, as a confessional act, and somebody studying religion, as a secular act. Indeed, the division between what we term religion and many other worldviews or ideologies is a porous and thin one, such that we cannot neatly delineate theology/ religion as wholly distinct from many other forms of human meaning making. Nevertheless, as I have indicated, I think we still have an important distinction between work grounded at its base in claims to be able to know about some posited reality *per se*, working as such within a confessional boundary which shuts off certain limits (which, despite its claims to be "without walls" is exactly what TWW, it seems to me, does), and open-ended enquiry into human traditions, discourse, and praxis. Moreover, what I would see as important in the latter is an engagement with contemporary scholarly tools to look at power claims, critical voices in how discourse is constructed, and the silencing of certain voices.[39]

In this sense, TWW, as Martin perceives it, seeks to make a type of claim that exceeds any scholarly discourse, and even some forms of confessional theology. Indeed, some norms must exist to make claims about what ultimacy is. Such claims, of course, are based in human and socially created forms of discourse, and are not based in some imagined sphere of "Theology" that has direct access to ultimacy *per se*. Not only is it not doing theology, or scholarship, as it exists after Kant, but TWW also fails to take account of any contemporary scholarly perspectives which show how power, standpoint, or other factors affect our perceptions and also how (even what) we perceive.[40] As such, we see various stances in the TWW, despite its supposed academic pedigree, that show a confessional or dilettante engagement with whatever theology or scholarship may be seen as today. It becomes a way for people to advance their own personal belief systems and claim them as academically validated stances.

A few examples from the pages of the TWW book, may make this clear. Firstly, some writers seem to work within a deeply monotheistic frame, and so we read: "The history of every theology begins with a revelation of some sort – the deity has conveyed its presence through some natural mediation, usually oracular or prophetic, the presence of the divine word and image."[41] Clearly the Buddha's realization lies outside the walls for certain of those who claim to be without walls. But the more serious point here is that TWW seems to operate on the assumption that we readily jump from specific human discourse into claims about ultimate reality without any recognition of the power dynamics of the language and discourse that formulate our norms, and so fails to be alert to feminist, decolonial, or other critical perspectives. Again, for others, the naturalness of a white, middle-class, American, consumer culture dictate what religion should be, so we read that we must "formulate a theology of religions" that foregrounds "human choice" else we will "regress to a naïve religious era…in which religious traditions were reified."[42] Notwithstanding, that the author here is correct that Robert Bellah lacked the conceptual awareness of Sheila to make sense of her religious choices, and far from being aberrant such syncretic lived religion is quite normative,[43] the author seems blissfully unaware that for vast swathes of humanity, both historically and now, the limits of their potential adherence to religious traditions is prescribed by such factors as class, race, geography, family tradition, etc. Free choice may appeal to an American religious individualist as the correct way to formulate our theories, but it is not a critical lens. Even when critical perspectives in the study of religion are taken on board, they seem to be done in a somewhat simplistic fashion, so we read: "Agreement concerning belief and practices clump together," and scholars classify these into "religions" with "five large clumps: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism," (amongst other "smaller clumps") which it is noted is "not a perfect representation of human religiosity" but "does reveal an important fact of human experience" that they relate to "human communities."[44] Here, despite acknowledgement of the problem of the world religions paradigm, it does not seem to be critically understood, with an assumption being that these traditions neatly map different vectors of religiosity divided by language and geography, with little understanding of the internal diversity of each tradition, nor the history of syncretic blending that informs each one, coupled with a failure to reflect upon the fact that these have often not formed the major bonds of difference in terms of religiosity in many cases.[45]

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[39] This takes me back to the earlier discussion about the problems of the Western and colonial construction of "secularism" and "religion" which grounded the distinction I made between what might legitimately partake in the scholarly (*qua* secular) study of religion and what lay beyond that (*qua* confessional theology). I do not wish to delimit scholarship to only those who use the "correct" critical tools, say the right "politically correct" things, or ask certain questions, but this I think helps ground my distinction in a way that avoids aspects of its colonial and racist heritage by noting that such open-ended enquiry is also a site of contestation against this heritage, even if this may be a paradoxical relationship.

[40] The sexist, ableist, colonial, and various other frames that shape much traditional "God-talk" should make it clear that many problems arise if the claim is that we jump from such claims to knowing ultimate reality itself!

[41] Kurt Anders Richardson, "Theology Without Walls as open-field theology," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 35–47, 38.

These examples have not been picked out because they are egregious examples of bad practice, rather each one—despite other potential strengths in each essay—gives a useful example of certain issues that seem to beset TWW. As advanced, it seems to be a project that takes little serious account of contemporary critical questions in scholarship and follows a somewhat naïve Western parochialism in which patriarchal, colonial, classist, and other critiques are held to be no bar to its quest for perennial vision that can simply be grasped by white men if they are willing to move beyond their own specific religious affiliation. In these terms, I may draw upon an argument made by Willie James Jennings that certain traditional modes of Western scholarship assume what he terms "white masculinist self-sufficiency" which he describes as "a way of being in the world that aspires to exhibit possession, mastery, and control of knowledge first, and of one's self second, and if possible of one's world."[46] In other words, knowledge may be grasped and possessed decontextually by the white, male knower without concern for the locatedness of the knower, an issue I develop further below.

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[42] Christopher Denny, "Revisiting Bellah's Sheila in a religiously pluralist century," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 25–34, 32.

[43] See Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 67–81.

[44] J. R. Hustwitt, "Dialogue and transreligious understanding: A hermeneutical approach," in Martin, ed., *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 153–64, 156.

[45] On these issues, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, especially chapters 1, 3, 7, and 13.

[46] Willie James Jennings, *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 29, but see also *passim.*

## TWW and the SBNR

Now, the above is not to suggest that some versions of a TWW may not be valid in other terms. The possibility exists for it to shape itself as a set of confessional theological reflections, though it may want to claim its confessional stance somewhat differently, that is to say without a particular tradition-based setting but in some free-floating realm of open enquiry; though, as noted above, there can be no free-floating realm of ideas because we all come with particular backgrounds, agendas, and preconceptions whether we recognize it or not.[47] Some have suggested that for the spiritual but not religious community (SBNRs; I use SBNRs to refer to people identified with this—as opposed to SBNR, which I use to speak about it as a concept), TWW may be a way to shape a theology. However, one question which arises is to whom this speaks? Do SBNRs want a theology? Indeed, is not the construction of a theology to account for the phenomenon of SBNR somewhat counterproductive to some aims of SBNRs to avoid a particular confessional stance. As noted above, any theology will come from somewhere and cannot be entirely free-floating and universal. Further, the idea of a "theology" may itself be something which does not appeal.[48] Moreover, if SBNRs wish to forge, it may be posited, their own individual spiritual pathways, does not a single (or any?) theology also run counter to this? Indeed, in the TWW book, Linda Mercadante deals with just this question, and concludes that "At the moment, the focus on self-authority, individualism, and distrust of institutions stands in the way of creating an SBNR theology that could be widely accepted."[49] Nevertheless, she certainly hopes that theology may in time become a tool that can be used to "excavate their buried beliefs and recognize that a disharmony… often hinders fulfilment, community, and spiritual growth."[50] Mercadante's views arise from her own fieldwork amongst the SBNRs, while elsewhere the various religious stances of those outside the folds of conventional religious belonging have been studied, who may be classed as SBNRs, "nones," or as part of non-religion.[51] Mercadante's work is part of an important body that shifts away from seeing the SBNR form of religion as illegitimate, but she seems to take a prescriptive stance in which it is assumed that to become a proper group they must veer towards having a developed theological standpoint.

In various ways the position of SBNRs can be described, as I suggested in my contribution to the TWW book, as a perfectly intelligible and credible way of doing "religion" when seen in a wider global context. But that is very different from seeking to create a system of theology, however wall-less it may be, for this group who have not requested it, and are by their nature incredibly diverse. My argument relates the contemporary Western (and more global it must be said) phenomenon of SBNRs to traditional Chinese (and more widely East Asian) patterns of religiosity that I term strategic religious participation (SRP) in a shared religious landscape (SRL).[52] In this context, most people did not belong to any specific "religion" (itself not a native term), but moved freely between the utilization of resources and ideas by each of the main and lesser traditions (i.e. Confucian social mores, Daoist rituals, Buddhist death rites, folk religion practices). Moreover, unlike Western notions of religion where crossing "borders" is seen as some form of illegitimate confusion or syncretism, this was just assumed as natural and normative because, to some degree, a wider cosmological theory was seen to be shared across all the traditions, hence they existed within an SRL. Notably, this applied at both elite and popular levels (while in the former there may have been a clearer home tradition, this did not disallow training, participation or learning in/from another tradition). Mercadante certainly points to aspects of a SRL amongst SBNRs,[53] however, for most people in the context of a traditional SRP in an SRL context a worked through theology was not needed. Indeed, such "theological" speculation took place within the context of the various elite traditions to a greater or lesser extent, but it related to areas where we see a more distinctly "confessional" set of borders. For instance, Buddhists would interpret the world through a Buddhist lens which would position Confucian and Daoist traditions in relation to it, and vice versa. As such, it is hard to envisage a theological system—which seems necessitated *qua* system—that does not act to exclude as much as include. TWW imagines itself without borders, but as noted in at least one example above it draws, inevitably, upon certain norms—in the case noted that a theology must have revelation imparted by a deity, which would immediately alienate many Buddhists and indeed many SBNRs.

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[47] Gadamer's notion of prejudice would be pertinent here, see, e.g., Paul Hedges, "Gadamer, Play, and Interreligious Dialogue as the Opening of Horizons," *Journal of Dialogue Studies* 4 (2016): 5–26.
[48] While somewhat tangential to my argument here, it could be argued that an intersectional comparative theology (or theology of religions, theology without walls, etc.) should be alert not just to the problems of the term "religion" in deciding its parameters, but also both "comparative" and "theology" as markers denoting particular contextual ways of thinking and doing the work. This is not the place, however, to pursue this further.
[49] Linda Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls: Is a theology for SBNRs possible?" in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 189–200, 198.
[50] Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls," 198. Regarding this, the assumption that "belief" is the defining category may be noted as a problematic trope in thinking "religion," see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*.
[51] See Linda Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), see also Lois Lee, *Recognizing the Non-religious: Reimagining the Secular* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), and Oliver Zakai Lim, "The Construction of Nonreligious Identities among Chinese Millennials in Singapore: A Qualitative Study," *Interreligious Relations* 23 (2021).

Now, an interreligious theology that does not feel bound by confessional borders (a comparative theology "after religion", we may suggest) may be constructed. [54] But, at least two issues remain. First, to be a scholarly and academic form of theology it would not assert claims about "ultimacy" but would be working within the discourse of the traditions themselves (as in Neville's CRIP). It would be perfectly possible to construct a confessional SBNR or interreligious theology, but TWW seems to want to have its cake and eat it by being both bounded by distinct confessional claims yet also claiming to be an open-ended scholarly enquiry that just works from evidence (rather than confessional groundings). Second, as indicated above, it would perforce be a grounded and confessional work. Even if we supposed that the theistic claims of TWW noted above are taken as an anomaly, and just the preference of one person rather than speaking for the project (though that it calls itself "theology" and assumes we can readily identify a clear and absolute "ultimate reality"—"the *logos* of *theos*"[55]—tells us something about its grounding and presuppositions!), I fail to see how it would ever get to never having any walls. For instance, is an atheist stance as valid as a theistic or "religious" one? Are we all composed of *qi* (in Chinese cosmology the psycho-somatic reality out of which everything is created) or are matter and spirit different? Is a monistic (Advaitin) interpretation of reality inherently superior to a theistic interpretation? Is there one absolute or many absolutes? I could go on, but I think the point is made. To some extent, of course, TWW could resort to a Hickian pluralism and leave all these questions undetermined and unknowable in our current context, but assuming an equality of spiritual paths. However, TWW has determined that it can access ultimate reality and tell us about it in a way that seems to me far more resolutely than any scholarly permutation of pluralism. Meanwhile, we also see those who believe that they can learn across religious borders, but see this—legitimately I think—as inevitably grounded in a tradition. John Thatamanil has recently expounded a Christian program for interreligious learning across borders,[56] Paul Knitter has argued that Christians can learn from Buddhists and that one can be both,[57] while within SBNR one could draw from various sources without privileging a single one as a "home" tradition, but there would still be grounding beliefs and ideas. Contrary to some idealism, a TWW must, it seems, have a home.

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[52] For a more detailed study of this, see 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.
[53] Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls," 192–94.
[54] See, as an example, John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020).
[55] Martin, "Introduction," 1.

## Circling Back: A Decolonial Lens

In recent decades, a concern with decolonizing scholarship and the public space in the study of religion and interreligious studies has become prominent.[58] One might expect a new arising field or discipline to be alert to this, but one would be hard pressed to find much awareness about this in TWW. For instance, a critique that Leo Lefebure raises is that its arguments for the ready crossing between religious traditions speaks into the attitude, often termed appropriation, of Westerners that the resources of the world can be freely taken for their needs.[59] A situatedness of white, middle-class, American privilege seems to be the norm from which the book is written, where personal choice of religion is asserted as a norm.[60] Taking on board insights from Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller, its theoretical base remains highly white-centric, as has been noted of much scholarship in the study of religion.[61] In other words, the basic epistemic starting point for reflection operates from the presuppositions of those in the situation of global hegemonic power in ways that have been racialized by Euro-American ideology since around the sixteenth century.[62] This relates to the notion of white masculinist self-sufficiency raised by Jennings and noted above. For instance, there seems little awareness of the problematic Western and Protestant norms around terms such as "religion", "spirituality", or "secularism". Simply engaging many religions from around the world is not the same as taking on board postcolonial or decolonial critiques, and a lack of authors, theorists, and perspectives from non-white, non-Western grounds may be noted. The exceptions to this include Jeffery Long's essay citing Vivekananda as an example from beyond the West, Hedges' essay which goes beyond typically Western ways of imagining religion, and Hyo-Dong Lee's essay drawing from his Korean context, with the latter standing as a lone explicit Asian(-American) voice.[63] It is not, of course, to say that TWW may not resonate with some scholars from Asia, Africa, or elsewhere beyond the Western world, and at least one Ru (Confucian) scholar has written in sympathy for the project for seeing it offering a perspective beyond the domination of Western, Protestant perspectives in the study of religion.[64] Of course, this is also not to suggest that the work of white, Western, males is in any way inherently less legitimate *per se* (Jennings notes that people of color or women may, as much as white men, exemplify his white masculinist self-sufficiency), hence my critique does not concern directly the fact that TWW arises within the Western and principally from male writers. Rather, as I hope has been shown above, it sits, at best, uncritically in relation to a colonial and patriarchal legacy of knowledge construction, at worst it perpetuates systems of knowing that proceed from the presumed universalism of white epistemic norms and values in which white mastery may be claimed over other ways of knowing and thinking without consideration of the locatedness of ideas and concepts.

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[56] Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephant*.

[57] See Paul Knitter, "My Buddha-nature and my Christ-nature," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. Jerry Martin (New York, NY: Routledge, 2020), 65–72, but more fully in Paul Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not be a Christian* (London: Oneworld, 2009). I may note here that in the TWW book many of the strongest essays, it seemed to me, where by those already known for work in CT, e.g. John Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls as the quest for interreligious wisdom," 53–64, Knitter, "My Buddha-nature and my Christ-nature," 65-72, Francis Clooney, "Strong walls for an open faith," 213–26, and Hyo-Dong Lee "My path to a theology of Qi," 234–42 stand out. Other insightful essays also came from Neville, "Paideias and programs for Theology Without Walls", 7–13, Peter Feldmeier, "Is Theology Without Walls workable? Yes, no, maybe," 109–18, Johan de Smedt and Helen de Cruz, "Cognitive science of religion and the nature of the divine: a pluralist, nonconfessional approach," 128–37, Jeanine Diller, "How to think globally and affiliate locally," 172–88, and Long "A Hinduism without walls? Exploring the concept of the avatar interreligiously," 227–33.

[58] Paul Hedges "Decolonising Interreligious Studies," in *Interreligious Studies: Dispatches from a Field*, ed. Hans Gustafson, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press,), 164–70; and on the public space, see Paul Hedges, "The Global BLM Movement: Public Memorials and Neo-Decolonisation?," *RSIS Commentary* CO20127 (2020), available at https://www.rsis.edu.sg/wp- content/uploads/2020/06/CO20127.pdf.

[59] Leo Lefebure, "Theology, Walls, and Christian Identity: A Review Essay," *Salaam* 41.2 (2020): 100-107.

[60] Mercadante delivers a similar charge of "spiritual privilege" to SBNRs but fails to note the same malaise within the TWW project, see Mercadante, "Theology Without Walls," 190.

[61] Christopher Driscoll and Monica Miller, *Method as Identity: Manufacturing Distance in the Academic Study of Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2019). Their critique is of religious studies rather than theology, but the point remains pertinent.

Also, here, I must come back to my issue raised above, that a potential critique undermining my arguments is that I have started with a secular-religious divide that is implicit in exactly the forms of power dynamics which I have argued haunt TWW. Nevertheless, as I argued above, framing a space free from confessional control for open enquiry strikes me as a necessity for a liberative scholarly praxis, though the space does not permit this particular point to be argued through.

## Concluding Thoughts

A certain naivety seemingly underlies the desire to create a TWW, for we can never leave behind our own walls and presuppositions. We are located and that location shapes us. Every theological speculation is located within certain boundaries, and a Western, even white, Christian sensibility that seems highly uncritical of its own locatedness (in terms of such issues as race, gender, class, geography) seemingly besets TWW's speculations. Therefore, in the area that TWW has intervened, there is already, I would suggest, far more nuanced and skillful expositions in such areas as CT, the theology of religions, and in intercultural, decolonial, and postcolonial theologies. TWW remains, largely, a place for white, Western, American middle-class men to assert their belief that they remain unbounded by any ties and can take as they wish from any part of the world (it is, it may be suggested, even a neoliberal and capitalist spirituality or theology[65]). This locatedness will also, I have argued, make it an unviable starting place for seeking a theology for SBNRs, who may well not appreciate the proffered attempt.

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[62] On the development of Western racism and its imbrication with Christianity, see Hedges, *Religious Hatred*, chapter 5. For a wider discussion on some issues around race and religion, see Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 174–77.
[63] See Long, "A Hinduism without walls," Hedges, "Strategic religious participation," Lee, "My path to a theology of Qi." Thatamanil's essay is also by an Asian American, but he does not draw on his Indian heritage nor postcolonial thought as such in this essay, unlike in many other works—this may be suggestive that a TWW agenda may encourage a more Western-centric engagement than one critically engaged with a decolonising lens.
[64] Bin Song, review of *Theology Without Walls: The Trans-religious Imperative*, edited by Jerry Martin, *Journal of Interreligious Studies* 32 (March 2021): 107–110.

I have offered here quite a sharp critique, but I hope not an unfriendly one. I find many of its current working premises and trends to be somewhat worrying, and my call is for a better TWW, but this—I suspect—may be found beyond the walls of TWW itself.

* * *

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[65] I have not directly raised this issue above, but see, for instance, Craig Martin, *Capitalizing Religion: Ideology and the Opiate of the Bourgeoisie* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), and Hedges, *Understanding Religion*, 135-37, for a discussion and critique of such approaches.

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

Rory D. McEntee

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## A Question for Kate Stockley's "Consciousness Hackers"

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

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

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

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

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

I found convincing Jones's point that what is of most importance is not necessarily a coherent *methodology* for such students, but rather a willingness to live into the experiment itself. Perhaps one might return to the etymological roots of "methodology"—*met/hodos*, "in pursuit of a way," or even "with on the way," connoting a sense of the companions accompanying one along a "way." What Jones calls the "efficacious mishmash" that results from years of involving oneself in such interspiritual impulses, is then less about having a particular experience or understanding as about gaining a spiritual "know-how" that can serve others, spontaneously, in the unique context of *this* moment, *this* situation. Such transformative explorations may work almost unconsciously, manifesting their efficaciousness only intermittently throughout our lives, and this generally parallels the teachings of many contemplative traditions.

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

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

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

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

## Jeffrey Kripal's "Underdeveloped Mysticism" in Comparative Keys

Panelists received two essays by Jeff Kripal, as well as a wonderful panel presentation from him. Unfortunately, Kripal was unable to prepare a formal essay for this journal issue, but given that his essays resonated strongly with my own recent thinking—particularly in his desire to open up academic thought to more capacious ontological possibilities—I have included my brief response to them here. In the first essay, "Changed in a Flash: Kabbalistic Motifs in a Modern Jewish Visionary," Kripal discusses otherworldly, synchronicitous experiences of a contemporary "Jewish visionary" that ask us to "query our present flatland metaphysics."[6] Kripal's rendering of Elizabeth Krohn's near-death experience, and its subsequent eerie connections with the Jewish mystic Isaac Luria, is but one example of quite literally thousands, even millions, of experiential examples that challenge the preferential treatment given to certain ontological orientations within academia (usually revolving around a hard social constructivism or scientific materialism). Kripal believes that such ontological straitjackets "prevent us from seeing, much less understanding, the fantastic comparative patterns that are in fact everywhere in the history of religions." For his part, Kripal sees extraordinary experiences happening everywhere, and thus feels it is our job, as scholars, to normalize them through the use of imagination, where the study of religion can serve as a "philosophical tonic" that challenges materialistic ontologies.[7]

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

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

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

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

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

[9] Ibid., 255.

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

[11] Ibid., 255.

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

## TWW as a Beloved Community of Religious Diversity

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[16] Ibid., 303.

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

[18] Ibid., 235.

[19] Ibid., 234.

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

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

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

Royce's ontology of beloved community emphasizes that our capacity for such interpretative praxis does not arise from sense data or abstract concepts, nor from pragmatic leadings, but rather from a deeper place residing in the human being, the place from which poets and prophets and sages spring forth. Such a place, for Royce, is the true source of guidance and inspiration for the human family.[24] Interpretation then becomes "the great humanizing factor in our cognitive processes," ultimately allowing for the flowering of love within communities. The "will to interpret" becomes a prime motivating factor in building beloved community. As Royce put it, the Beloved Community, "whatever else it is, will be, when it comes, a Community of Interpretation."[25]

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

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

[23] Ibid., 240.

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

Royce's beloved community is, of course, rife with Christian theological overlay, not a problem in itself but perhaps making it suspect from the get-go. Nevertheless, provided it is properly mitigated with decolonial labor,[27] as seen in its further development by Thurman and King, as well as pluralized in the sense of adopting at least an openness to ontological pluralism, it seems to me *one* possible source for a fecund philosophical and epistemological framework for orienting a diverse community of inquiry that is undergirded by ultimacy (certainly Peirce's semiotics have proved to be a fecund source in general for academics).[28] Hence my reference to TWW as a beloved community of religious diversity. Such a community of inquiry orients one towards coming face to face with the *other,* not in a sense of hegemonic domination—nor with a naïve pluralistic openness—but rather in mutual responsibility for creative and healing interpretative praxis. For TWW, the potency of such acts lies not merely upon human conceptual apparatuses, but are also undergirded by the referent TWW pursues, namely "ultimacy." Thus, the TWW project is not so much about creating a Hobbit-crushing "systematic theology to rule them all," but rather a beloved community of religious diversity, where our interpretive praxis is undergirded by the referent we seek—namely the nature of reality as it is—in all of its subtle manifestations in and through embodied human consciousness.

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

[25] Ibid., 318.

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

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

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

Bin Song's pre-Christian reading of Aristotle opens up avenues for other religious traditions to develop their own versions of comparative theology apart from Christianized categories. These categories tend to revolve around a Westernized understanding of 'religion,' where Christianity serves as the reference point (hence notions of religiosity as "confessional," for instance). In contrast to this, a Ru identity is described as "non-confessional," and unable to be defined by a "commitment to any unalterable faith declaration or performance." Ruism is also "not an exclusive membership tradition," and remains ever open to new forms of knowledge. Bin Song develops his Ru perspective through readings of Ru philosopher Wang Longxi (1498-1583 C.E.), and calls this orientation a "'seeded, open inclusivism,' undergirded by a pluralistic consciousness." Ruism as a tradition embraces an ontological orientation that encourages practitioners to "incorporate elements from other traditions through a prudent judgment of their efficacy…thereby synthesizing them into a growing, organic body of human wisdom which nevertheless maintains continuity with classical Ruism." Bin Song also shows how a Ru perspective is aligned with the goals of liberal arts education more broadly. In fact, he characterizes a Ru comparative theology "as a liberal art *par excellence,*" allowing for its inclusion within a "broader community of whomsoever are intrigued by shared problems and issues in human lives. In a more concrete term, this community will be potentially extended to the entire humanity and include anyone who cherish the value of liberal arts education."[31]

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

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

[30] Ibid., 101

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

## Contextualizing Multiplicitous Modes of Decolonial Praxis

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

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[31] Ibid., 111-113.

[32] Martin, "Introduction," 1.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[42] Ibid., 5.

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

## Democracy, the Imaginal, and Decolonial Praxis

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

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

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

Harding argues that imaginative, liminal, and constructive work is absolutely necessary for decolonial labor, given that African-Americans "have insisted that the most authentic American dream is of a nation that does not yet exist." The "dream of America," which Black Americans have carried and contributed to more surely than anyone, for Harding "cannot be fulfilled, cannot be deepened, until it enters into a creative, transformative engagement with the best dreams of humankind."[46] Imaginative dreams and visions become "powerful mechanisms in the creation of new realities," especially when they are embodied, taking on flesh and blood in the concrete circumstances of life, such as they did in the civil rights movement, and are currently doing in the Black Lives Matter movement.[47] This is why Harding's insistence on creative, imaginal work connected to the heart, as a key for decolonial labor, does not subsist upon an airy sense of transcendence, but rather stems from conviction based upon "rugged, often blood-stained hope, hope fiercely breaking out of the dark-womb beauty that I have experienced."[48] There is a great need in democratic practice for listening deeply to multiplicities of voices and orientations, granting them the integrity necessary for creatively bringing forth new, and better, structures of democracy. In fastidiously upholding an anachronistic religion/secular binary, pathways essential to decolonial labor become blocked. I believe we need visions of religious studies, philosophy, academic theology, and the 'secular academy' that better align with democratic practice—as creative, imaginal, constructive work amongst multiplicities of ontological orientations, undertaken with an awareness of our embeddedness in the social contexts of our democratic life.

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

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

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

[46] Ibid., 8, 9.

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

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

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

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[47] Ibid., 39.

[48] Ibid., viii.

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

[50] Anzaldúa, *Light,* 108.

[51] Ibid., 29–31.

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

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

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

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

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

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[52] Ibid., 82, 83.

[53] Ibid., 22.

[54] Keating, "Re-envisioning," xxix; the quote within the quotations (as cited in the introduction) is from: Ernesto Martínez, *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013).

[55] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987; reis., San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 2012).

[56] Keating, "Re-envisioning," xxix.

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

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

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

Therefore, in support of such decolonial praxis, I now turn my attention to scholarly tropes and trends that work to domesticate, disregard, and even disqualify such orientations from the halls of academia. To do so is to work against the democratic and decolonial praxis outlined thus far.

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[57] Ibid., xxxiii.

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

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

## Rhetoric of the Secular

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

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

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

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

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

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

On the other hand, the secular becomes conjoined to form the term 'secular academy,' whose development has a particular history related to Western academia's long running, complicated relationship with religious authority and theology.[62] Here the secular academy gets juxtaposed with a kind of theological imposition or evangelization; it becomes 'not-theology.' This use is fundamentally different from (though not unrelated to) the democratic values described above, though this change in semantics is rarely stated explicitly. We can recognize that the historical development of the secular academy might reasonably be characterized as an attempt to uphold democratic principles, specifically freedom *from* an encompassing Christendom as regards the public education of citizens. Key to the present argument, however, is what has not yet even entered into the conversation, mainly any sense of the reductive ontologies we now so easily inscribe as academic norms. Reductive ontological gazes however, and democratic practice, are *not* the same thing.

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[61] To get a better sense of the delineation I am attempting to make here, Robert Neville's trenchant discussion of the insights and reductionisms of various scientific, phenomenological, and postmodern/critical discourses in the study of religion is helpful. See Robert Cummings Neville, *Religion: Philosophical Theology Vol. 3* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2015), Introduction (p. 1-20), and especially Chapter One, "Science and Culture" (p. 25–46). In Chapter One, Neville skillfully narrates how various discourses in the study of religion apply reductive modes of analysis that bring about the important insights they provide, while also carefully critiquing each one for what they leave out, namely a more ontologically expansive view of the study of religion (such discourses include cognitive science, evolutionary psychology, phenomenology, social science, and linguistic/textual-focused ["discourse only"] approaches). As a result, they remain unable to address so-called "first-order" questions in the study of religion. My articulation of a "beloved community of religious diversity" is nuanced from Neville's project in the following sense: the imagined teleological outcome for Neville's community of inquiry seems to be something like a shared understanding of reality through a study of the many ways human beings are religious. While I remain open to such a possibility, I can also imagine an ontological pluralism that wouldn't necessarily result in a shared understanding as much as shared sense of solidarity and mutual support and learning across diverse perspectives. That is, as a community of inquiry orients more surely around the nature of reality in "the infinite long run" (as Charles Peirce put it, noting that Neville places his theory within a Peircean semiotics), a reality that is itself multiplicitous may be uncovered, one productive of innumerable pluralistic and enactive ontologies. I remain indebted to Neville's long-running work in the field, and find my own thought resonates with many of his arguments. Neville's three volume *Philosophical Theology,* for example, provides a long-running argument for the acceptability and even necessity of first-order theorizing about religion within secular academic disciplines, especially philosophy, as discussed further below. See Robert C. Neville, *Ultimates: Philosophical Theology, Volume One* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2013); Robert C. Neville, *Existence: Philosophical Theology, Volume Two* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014); Neville, *Religion.*

[62] See also Bin Song's discussion of the separation of theology and philosophy as a result of Christendom, Song, "Comparative," 97-102. The secular academy remains beholden to the joint ontologies of a hard constructivism and a scientific materialism mainly due to such a split. Along this trajectory soteriological concerns had to be ceded to big "T" Theology due to Christendom, while philosophy could only pursue its agenda as a "handmaiden to theology." Eventually philosophy could be considered a legitimate discourse on its own, but only at the cost of ceding soteriological concerns to the Church, and then staying more or less within the confines of an ontologically reductive understanding of reality. This is how most contemporary Western philosophy still functions today, and became the normative stance of 'secular' education. However, we do not live in Christendom today, and the need to apply reductionistic ontologies as normative for professional thinking needs reconsideration. Once a religion/secular binary is undermined, and secularity recontextualized as living amongst religious pluralism, then there is no longer any legitimate reason for philosophical discourse to claim ontologically reductive orientations as normative for its practice. (For "big 'T' theology," see William D. Hart, "From Theology to *theology:* The Place of 'God-Talk' in Religious Studies," in *Religious Studies, Theology, and the University,* ed. by Linell E. Cady and Delwin Brown (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 93–109.)

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

## "The Return of the Imperial as the Empirical"

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

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

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

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

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

What Mandair is after, as well as myself, is a "release of differential subjectivities." He goes on to point out that it is through a "weakening of the ego as the ground of social relations," or a "*primordial* interconnectedness of the self—its essential vacuity," that is the starting point for so much Eastern "thought and ethics."[70] In a different essay, Mandair questions, for instance, the "division of intellectual labor" between disciplines such as philosophy of religion, history of religion, and area studies.[71] Such division allows for each to inoculate itself against contamination from the object of study. Area studies, for instance, which developed through a need to protect South Asian cultures from colonialist impulses, nevertheless "manages to avoid the truly self-reflexive moment crucial to theory and thereby repeats a key procedure of Orientalism." In setting up a "safety zone" where "secularity protects its object from the hegemonic influence of Western religions," the ability to utilize alternate modes of thought as a normative source for theory is lost. In other words, the ability to use, for example, Buddhist, Indigenous, Sikh, Confucian, Taoist, Hindu, or other ontological orientations as appropriate and normative sources for (decolonial) scholarly labor becomes marred by the need to adhere to secularist gazes. The way in which secularity has been applied to protect such traditions, "in fact repeats the design of a past imperialism." Such a secularist gaze, for instance, prevents "Indic phenomena from being used as resources for conceptual thinking rather than being regarded as relics."[72]

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

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

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

[69] Mandair, "Unbearable," 659–60.

[70] Ibid.

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

## Paul Hedges' "Confessional" Critique

I now wish to address somewhat in-depth Paul Hedges' critique of the TWW project, which offers an opportunity to press the above theoretical reflections into service. I am grateful for Hedges's "friendly condemnation" of TWW, in the spirit of pushing the project towards "a better TWW." My response to his critique partakes of a similar spirit, both friendly yet firm in its rebuttal.[73] If Hedges's critiques are valid, then they would seem to represent something of a death knell for TWW. Clearly, this is his hunch, as he suspects that a "better TWW" will only be found outside of TWW itself. He critiques TWW on a number of fronts, including: as a "confessional" enterprise, for failing as "scholarship," as not applicable to SBNRs, as lacking diversity, and even as a colonial enterprise. I find many of these critiques wanting, and a few quite pertinent. TWW does need to diversify its community of inquiry, and this currently is something of a point of emphasis for those who have been drawn into the project. Whether it will succeed or not time will tell, but in order for TWW to enact something like what I describe above as its decolonial cache and potential for spurring democratic becoming, diversity within the community of inquiry will be essential. TWW will also benefit from more explicit decolonial labor and postcolonial awareness. These points seem eminently reasonable, and also are ones which I have no doubt TWW has the potential to address. Many of the theorists involved in TWW are well aware of postcolonial and decolonial work, and have extensively engaged it in other projects, including John Thatamanil, Hyo-Dong Lee, Bin Song, and others.[74] As mentioned, I am also currently working on a monograph that develops postcolonial arguments undermining a modern religion/secular binary and explicitly discusses decolonial labor and democratic praxis in contemplative keys, which this essay is modeled upon. Hence, I find the potential for TWW to address such critiques quite promising. Certainly, at this early stage of the project, such critiques are not a death knell, but rather a friendly push in decolonial directions.

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

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

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

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[74] See Thatamanil, *Circling;* Lee, *Spirit;* Song, "Comparative."
[75] John J. Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls as the quest for interreligious wisdom," in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative*, ed. by Jerry Martin (New York: Routledge, 2020), 53–64.
[76] Thatamanil, *Circling,* xiii.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Howard Thurman, the great African-American philosopher, mystic, scholar, and mentor for many in the civil rights movement (including Martin Luther King Jr.), would certainly fail such a test of scholarship. This is a matter addressed by Kipton E. Jensen in a new book on Thurman's importance for philosophy of religion. Jensen laments that "Philosophers have tended to dismiss Thurman as a religious mystic or a theologian, as though that somehow places him outside the scope of philosophical analysis."[79] Jensen argues that Thurman was a "profound philosopher" whose work "offers us something better than, or at least something different and more practically minded than, a philosophical system: he personified a philosophical life, one lived with courage and conviction, distinguished by service to the disinherited and downtrodden in what he understood to be a holy crusade for freedom and human dignity."[80] Jensen's description of Thurman's philosophy reminds one of Pierre Hadot's articulation of ancient philosophy as a "way of life," which has found contemporary resonance in the halls of academia (including by at least three TWW theorists).[81]

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

[79] Kipton E. Jensen, *Howard Thurman: Philosophy, Civil Rights, and the Search for Common Ground* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 5.

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

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

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

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[80] Ibid., xiv.

[81] See Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life.* The three TWW theorists I have in mind are John Thatamanil, Bin Song, and myself. See Thatamanil, "Theology Without Walls"; and Song, "Comparative."

[82] See fn 34, fn 35.

[83] Hedges acknowledges that Neville may disagree with him on this point.

[84] For references to Neville's three-volume *Philosophical Theology,* see fn 62.

[85] Neville, *Religion,* xvi. An introductory reading of any of the three volumes would bring this point home clearly. There are many examples of quotations one could choose from to illustrate this point. Here is but one more from the same volume: "The twists and turns of analysis in [*Philosophical Theology, Volume*] *Three* never lose sight of the first-order question … How can I or we be religious in ways that truthfully engage what is ultimate?" (Ibid.).

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

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

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

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

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[86] Ibid., xviii.

[87] Ibid., xvi.

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

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

To bring home this point about rhetoric of the secular, consider the following sentence from Hedges" critique: "That TWW's stated aims *fall outside any critical or credible form of religious studies*—as it is generally understood—I think goes without saying" (emphasis mine). At first this might strike one as a rather pedestrian statement, one that might generally be agreed upon. That is, until one considers all the people in religious studies it not only ostensibly leaves out, but also caricatures as *"fall[ing] outside any critical or credible form of religious studies."* What would Jeffrey Kripal, both a religious studies scholar and one of our panelists, who has argued for some time, armed with large amounts of evidence, for a much more capacious ontological openness in the field—feel about such a statement? Or Sri Lankan anthropologist of religion, Gananath

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

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

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

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

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

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

[92] See Song, "Comparative."

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

[94] Ibid., 12.

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

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

[97] Bush, *Visions,* 6.

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

## In Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

Katherine Janiec Jones

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

*Keywords:* *Spiritual but not Religious, SBNR, theology, Theology Without Walls, Buddhist, Christian*

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

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

The main question-threads that wove themselves throughout all my notes and reflections, I'm a little embarrassed to admit, were all about me, and how my own thinking about theology has changed over the years. I realized that like a lot of good writing, the essays in TWW became conversation initiators, or mirrors. The questions I was writing down in the margins of the book were questions about the essays themselves, yes—but they were also questions, I realized, about myself, about my own place in the academy, and about what I thought theology was and what it should do; and, for that matter, about what the role of the academy, and more specifically, of higher education, is, both in the current historical moment and more generally. Thus, I hope my own brief reflections about my self-interrogations, evoked by my reading of TWW, will link to a broader set of intellectual questions, and that these reflections, in turn, will get to the heart of the pressing, practical issues with which I left my reading of this book: issues that I think can be obfuscated and bypassed as a result of the use of technical disciplinary jargon behind which many academics (myself included) tend to hide.

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

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

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

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

I shall begin, then, with the question-threads I pulled out from the notes I took while reading TWW. Then, I shall move to some practical, pressing questions I was confronting while reading the book – questions from my professional life as a scholar and administrator in higher education, writing and thinking in late 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic, ongoing national civil rights crisis, and a great deal of pain and stress in terms of the way these crises were playing out on my own campus. It was impossible not to see the relationship between (1) the challenges and opportunities presented in TWW regarding theology with and without walls in terms of the emotional, developmental, affective impact of inclusive and exclusive communities, and (2) the lives of the students, faculty, and staff on my own campus, many of whom were begging people in positions of power to tear down past exclusionary walls of pain and division in an effort to foster the possibility of imagining a new campus built on reparative justice, healing, cooperation, and shared, inclusive, dialogical learning.

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

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

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

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

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

I think this intuition toward discomfort with a publicly proclaimed full sense of belonging to a single religious institution has to do with a deep knowledge that we—all of us—are always in process, and thus, always fluid in a way that can make the notion of single-group-belonging[1] challenging, especially when there will always be others in the group who cling very tightly to group identification and like to censure others on the basis of it. For them, "belonging" might mean one thing or one set of behaviors, and any change to that one way of being is perceived as a threat, and thus, as a challenge to the integrity of the institution. Largely for these reasons, even before I realized that these feelings were operative in my religious life, I generally hesitated to proclaim my deeply felt spiritual/religious group affiliations to others.[2]

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

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

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

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

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

American Academy of Religion (AAR). The Philosophy of Religion Unit focused primarily on Western (non-Buddhist) philosophy, and much of the work in theology that overlapped with it was in Christian theology. The Buddhist Philosophy Unit of AAR, on the other hand, did not exist until around 2006.[4] Meanwhile, work in Buddhist theology was not on my radar much at all; Roger R. Jackson and John J. Makransky's excellent volume on Buddhist theology (*Buddhist Theology: Critical Reflections by Contemporary Buddhist Scholars*) didn't come out until 2000.[5]

I bring up all these past connections—to my own somewhat late in life, circumspect studies of theology and to the authors of the essays in TWW—only to underline the fact that over the years since I was a graduate student, I have found myself drawn to and interested in both the work and the company of colleagues and scholars who do work in theology—specifically, comparative theology and theologies of religious pluralism. However, the more deeply I have read, studied, and spoken into this work, the more I have realized the extent to which there is a linguistic chasm between my training as a philosopher of religion within the framework of Indian Buddhism and the many people working as theologians within frameworks and disciplinary languages informed by Christian presuppositions. Put more simply, I have often found myself in conversations where I have no idea what the theologians are talking about,[6] even though I spent almost a decade in graduate school and have since spent two decades teaching in philosophy of religion and religious studies.[7] And so, I have wondered: what in the world is going on? Are our fields, and our concerns, really so incommensurable, really so far afield from each other? It couldn't be that Christianity is *that* foreign to me, I have reasoned, since I was baptized and confirmed as an Episcopalian within the Christian tradition as a young person. Another thing I have often thought about: if I have frequently found myself scratching my head when in conversations that purport to be about theology, even with my years of background in adjacent fields, what of our students? Do they feel lost, too? Or is this feeling of misty bewilderment context-specific to me?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

What do I mean by "our communities"? We all live within a series or overlap of many intersecting communities,[15] both imagined and named.[16] One community of which I am a part is that of scholars of religion. One could think of that community—"religion scholars" —as being one of a set of Russian nesting dolls of communities: there are both larger communities (larger dolls) that the "religion scholars" doll fits within, and smaller dolls (smaller communities) that fit inside of it. One of the larger communities within which "religion scholars" fits is all of academia, all of the communities that comprise the collective pursuit of learning. Some of the smaller communities that fit within the community of religion scholars include those of philosophers of religion and theologians. So, in sum, there are communities nested within communities, and each of them has its own languages, subdivisions, and tacit cultures.

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

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

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

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

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

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

But I can't help but think about situations where more is at stake. At the time of my original draft of this essay—the fall of 2020—those of us working in higher education in the United States had to ask ourselves a lot of difficult and important questions (questions we should have been asking all along, but which are clearly, I hope, unavoidable now) about access, equity, and justice in our institutions: questions about who the "our" is in the phrase "our communities." What does the language we use on our campuses—on our websites, on our syllabi, in our course catalogues—communicate about who we take to be who "we" are? Who is welcome on our campuses? Toward what ideals of an educated person are we creating curricula? And what structures do we have in place—or *not* have in place—on our campuses to facilitate putting those ideals into practice, to instantiate those ideas in real life? Language and community—like lived theology—can be paradoxical: it can, perhaps, facilitate, invite, and lead to mutual learning; or, it can exclude and wall people out. Therefore, we must be attentive to the language we use, lest in an effort to show meticulous fidelity to methodological concerns, we lose sight of context, and build up walls that prevent clear communication and invitational, open-hearted, dialogical learning.[17]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

[19] Martin, *Theology Without Walls*, 1.

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

* * *

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# Do the “Spiritual but not Religious” (SBNR) Want a Theology Without Walls?

Linda Mercadante

*Does the Theology without Walls have a purpose and audience in mind? Can one assume a most likely audience is the “spiritual but not religious?” The results of my interviews and qualitative analysis is that these unaffiliated persons do have nascent theological questions and issues. Without being an organized group, SBNRs seem to agree on what theological beliefs they reject, and also those they could accept. It is possible that a mini-meta-narrative is developing out of this. Would, then, they be open to a TWW? This paper examines if, in fact, they are interested, willing, and ready for such an enterprise…or are looking for something else. In either case, how can a TWW aid them in their thought-trekking?*

*Keywords: Spiritual but not Religious, SBNR, seekers, spirituality, theology, doctrine, Theology without Walls, TWW*

Why are we trying to construct a Theology without Walls? Is it for a specific audience? Or is this a scholarly exercise, albeit valuable in itself? If audience is important, are we creating this for a likely audience, the spiritual but not religious (SBNR)? Do we assume that SBNRs are “seekers,” perhaps looking for a viable religious community, identity, or tradition? Or do we assume that SBNRs, even if not interested in a particular religious home, are at least seeking a viable theology that can guide them in their spiritual practices?

For my book *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious,* I had hundreds of informal conversations with SBNRs and made numerous “site” visits to such places as yoga studios, spiritual retreat centers, and meditation classes.[1] I formally interviewed ninety (90) persons plus conducting two focus groups, adding an additional fifteen (15) persons, creating a total pool of 105.[2] The procedure I used is often called the “snowball” method as my search for interviewees and word-of-mouth from other interviewees brought in dozens of persons interested in speaking with me.[3] I created an open-ended semi-structured interview format that allowed me to explore SBNR beliefs in depth. As the sole interviewer, I worked to accommodate nearly everyone who volunteered. Although qualitative research does not claim to be representative, as does quantitative, I nevertheless endeavored to find a sample that covered a spectrum. Thus the interviewees represented a wide range of ethnicities, socio-economic groups, and gender-identifications, and included interviewees from the Silent Generation (born 1925–1945), Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964), Gen X (born 1965–1981), and Millennials (born after 1981).[4]

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[1] Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2] A description of the interviewees, including each generation interviewed, can be found in Chapter 3, “The Interviewees,” *Belief without Borders*, 35–67, including the “types” I found that cut across generations. I labelled these types: Dissenters, Casuals, Explorers, Seekers and Immigrants. Mercadante, *Belief without Borders,* 50–67.

[3] For more on method, see “On Methodology” in *Belief without Borders*, 263–69.

[4] Generation Zs (born after 1996) were minors during this research and not interviewed; but recent studies indicate that they are following the same trend as the Millennials, although possibly leveling off rather than accelerating. However, this may change since, as of 2021, most Gen Zs were still barely out of college. See, for example, Melissa Deckman, “Generation Z and Religion: What New Data Show,” *Religion in Public Life,* Feb. 10, 2021, https://religioninpublic.blog/2020/02/10/generation-z-and-religion-what-new-data-show/.

From this research, I can say with confidence that SBNRs do not fit the usual definition of seekers, that is, people who are seeking some specific goal, tradition, or religious home.[5] Since TWW does not claim to guide seekers toward any one tradition or religion, that assumption does not fit the enterprise. But does that preclude the interest of TWW scholars in the often observable, albeit eclectic, fascination of SBNRs with some religious traditions, sources, or alternative spiritualities? And does their interest hold the possibility of creating a new theology, one without walls, that will benefit and perhaps even provide an ethos around which SBNRs could organize or find common purpose? Additionally, given that this growing group prizes issues over institution—and, as I discovered, is drawn to progressive political and/or ethical positions—a significant percentage of SBNRs may want to find a way to organize to exercise their clout. TWW may be one way to aid in this quest.

In some ways, the generational differences in the SBNRs I interviewed were significant. The Silent Generation interviewees represented only about ten percent (10%) of the total. This is not remarkable, since all the ones I interviewed had been raised with traditional religious beliefs and practices. Those who did identify as SBNR were often unusual rebels for their time and were simply finished with organized religion. They would not be a likely audience for a TWW.

The Baby Boomer audience was much larger, representing somewhat over forty percent (40%) of the total. Unlike the Silent Generation, the people I met from this generation eagerly volunteered to be interviewed. Nearly all of them were proud to claim the SBNR identity. Like the Silent Generation, however, Baby Boomers were raised in a culture where religious affiliation was assumed. They came from a time, according to Will Herberg, where good citizens or worthy people were either Protestant, Catholic or Jewish.[6] In that era there was usually only a dim realization of the presence of other religions in America and only a few elites showed interest in alternative spiritualities. But Baby Boomers' whole world changed when, as impressionable teenagers and young adults, they encountered the "question authority" atmosphere of "the long 60s."[7] Given that, it was not surprising that all the Boomers I spoke with have grown suspicious of the exclusivism not just of religion, but even of denominations. They explained how they were disenchanted by what they perceived as a dour, judgmental, hell-fire-and-brimstone kind of religion where demands were many and rewards reserved for later.

However, a majority of the Baby Boomers I met continue to value spirituality. Although that term is defined in many ways and often overlaps with religion, for SBNRs spirituality is a personal quest, seen as heartfelt and genuine, while religion is thought to be too structured, organized, and even repressive of individuality. Although early framers of this split, Boomers began to search around for tenets that could be combined, and which offered a thought-world more open, tolerant, and less judgmental. Some have kept a remnant of the idea of affiliation and/or tradition, but now from a non-exclusivist place. As a large generation, they were raised in a group-oriented culture; as a result, the ones I met still often seek out alternative spiritual groups. Even so, they routinely see themselves as rebels, even if not radicals, feel obligated to question everything, and no obligation to stick with any one group or tradition.

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[5] Some of the additional resources by Linda Mercadante, Ph.D., on the SBNR movement and beliefs include: "Is a Theology for SBNRs Possible?" in *Theology Without Walls: The Transreligious Imperative,* ed., Jerry L. Martin (Routledge, 2019); "Belief without Borders: Examining Anew the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious," in *Being Spiritual but not Religious,* ed., William B. Parsons [Routledge, 2018]; "Selected Topic: The 'Spiritual but Not Religious' Movement," in *Religion: Social Religion*, ed., William B. Parsons, (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2016); *"Spiritual Struggles of Nones and SBNRs," Religions*, Oct. 2020; "Good News about the Spiritual but not Religious," in *CNN Blog* (Feb. 22, 2014), http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/02/22/good-news-about-the-spiritual-but-not-religious/; "Are the Spiritual but Religious Turning East?" in *The Huffington Post* (April 16, 2014); "Spiritual but not Religious: Knowing the Types, Avoiding the Traps," in *Oxford University Press Religion Blog* (Mar. 2, 2014); and "The Seeker Next Door: What Drives the Spiritual but not Religious?," *The Christian Century,* 129:11 (May 30, 2012): 30–33.

[6] Wil Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, reprinted edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[7] Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010).

Because of all this, SBNR Boomers might be interested in a TWW. Given their cultural or personal familiarity with religion, even if minimal, they do bring theological questions. They often start, however, by eliminating doctrines they find untenable, unbelievable, or restrictive. Most often they associate these with Christianity, both Protestant and Catholic. The predictable suspects are such doctrines as original sin—in fact, sin in general, as the idea of an offense against a higher power—exclusivism, a personal but transcendent higher power, and an afterlife that requires meeting the standards of the higher power and/or organized religion. They do not stop there, however. Perhaps because of a nascent longing for a lost spiritual narrative, they often go on to find replacement ideas that feel more adequate. For Boomers, theology still matters.

Younger SBNRs are often different. The Gen Xers who volunteered to be interviewed represent the second largest cohort among interviewees, totaling about two-thirds of the Boomers. Often raised by Boomer parents, Gen Xers told me their parents insisted they would not force them into any religion and would be left free to make their own choices. The Millennials I interviewed represented about ten percent (10%) of the total. This group was smaller simply because fewer of the Gen Xers I met were interested in being interviewed. Even so, in both informal and formal conversations, those Millennials raised by Boomer parents offered the same contention. For them and especially those with younger parents, often religion was abandoned long ago, a remnant they may, at best, identify with their grandparents. While I found some in all generational groups who were rebelling against an Evangelical background, those were in the minority among my interviewees.

In the panel "SBNRs: Doing Theology Beyond the Walls" convened in the 2020 AAR meeting and to which my original response develops into this paper, Paul Bramadat identifies younger SBNRs as those with little if any religious background and largely to be found in the Pacific Northwest. There may be a preponderance there, but I found plenty of similar types in the Midwest and other locales I traveled to, including, for instance, upstate New York and Canada. Even Vermont, once solidly churched, has now surpassed the Pacific Northwest "none zone" in percentage of unaffiliated.[8] More than two-thirds of the younger SBNRs (and even some older ones) I spoke with do not have the cultural familiarity with religion that Boomers have, they are very often less interested in the same kind of quest, that is, openness to multiple traditions.

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[8] Patricia O'Connell Killen and Mark Silk, eds, *Religion and Public Life in the Pacific Northwest: The None Zone*, (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2007). Mark E. Rondeau. "New survey shows Vermont least religious state," in *Bennington Banner*, May 16, 2015.

It was common that the majority of these SBNRs have already decided that religion is from a bygone age, too politically charged, too judgmental, exclusivist, and so on. If they are seekers, it is another kind of seeking. They may practice yoga, meditate or read books on spirituality, but I did not find they were looking for a consistent thought-world. Even so, I did find that both older and younger SBNRs have nascent theological questions, even if they do not like the word theology or are not sure what it means. Many prefer the word "metaphysical"[9] but these two terms often produce similar questions for SBNRs, such as about the nature of reality, truth, what force may be larger than themselves, what is ultimacy, what happens after death, etc. This is clearly a growing audience and the TWW enterprise must take this contingent very seriously. But would they naturally be drawn to a theology without walls? Maybe, but not in a straight-forward way. It would take some effort to interest them.

Unfortunately, I think Hans Le Grand's hope that the Unitarian Universalist way could satisfy the types of SBNRs I met is unlikely to be realized. I spoke before the leadership of the Unitarian Universalist Association a few years ago at their annual conference in Portland. The reason they invited me was to find out why SBNRs were not flocking to them. After all, they *do* have an open, tolerant and relevant set of theological assertions, questions, ethics, and possibilities. They *do* use a variety of religious and non-religious sources as well as often supporting various alternative spiritualities. The leaders were puzzled, concerned, and distraught. They said to me: "They *should* be *our* people. Why aren't they?"

I suggested that SBNRs of all age groups are not seeking a spiritual home as much as a spiritual *experience*—something that is unlikely to happen when you are sitting in a pew looking forward and listening to someone preach. Better theology is not going to fix that. An open theology which encourages multiple sources and engages important questions is still unlikely to create what SBNRs seem to want—that is, experiences of awe, wonder, unity, self-discovery, even self-transcendence. Katherine J. Jones very competently describes the feelings of the vast majority of the SBNRs I have met. When I have spoken with SBNRs who have read my book, they sometimes get a bit disturbed. Why? Because, they insist, they do not want to be grouped with anyone else. They often think—proudly, I might add—that they are unique. But in my book, they find others echoing the very same things they are thinking, and it bothers them.

For a moment of self-disclosure, I grew up in a non-religious multi-ethnic home with a multi-faith background that was not practiced. Surrounded by religious families in my neighborhood of Newark, NJ, I went through many iterations including Roman Catholicism, atheism, and spiritual seeking. In the end, as a young adult I decided to join a mainline Protestant denomination. I did not find it confining, but rather, grounding. I never felt I had to buy the whole package, and there was not a singular package anyway. I found an identification with a complex, deep theological tradition both permitted and encouraged spiritual growth, intellectual exploration, and experience. Even though I eventually got ordained, I have kept all the facets of my background and my current multi-faith orientation. But it is good to know that in this tradition and others, many thinkers besides me have wrestled with the same questions I have. It is helpful to see the various answers they come up with and also see how that tradition continues to grow, expand, and change over time. In other words, commitment is not all bad and it does not have to be a straitjacket. It can even *encourage* one to experiment with a theology without walls.

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[9] Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

But practically none of the SBNRs I met were inclined to choose the path that I did. A new option seems necessary. Could a TWW provide tools with which SBNRs could create and refine a theology that suited this growing population better? Maybe. In my opinion, however, it would not be sufficiently attractive just because it is accepting, unlimiting, tolerant and open. Now, if a TWW could set some conditions that would help SBNRs recognize and reflect on spiritual experience, it might find more interest. If, going further, a TWW could be created that takes spiritual growth seriously, explains what it is and why it is important, and encourages practices to enhance that, that may well generate significant interest.

From that perspective, I think the work that Kate Stockly and Jeffrey Kripal highlight is important. The SBNRS I have met are seeking an experience that takes them outside or *deeper inside* themselves. Maybe the spirit tech approach will appeal to them.[10] I have not found any SBNRs yet who have seriously taken that path, but I have only talked with a few hundred. This might ultimately lead them to theological questions on the back-end, rather than the front-end, but we cannot be sure. However, I agree with Kripal that these experiments are proto-religious and may lead to theological exploration.[11]

It is very important to notice that no matter the generation, SBNRs consistently agree on what beliefs they reject, such as the original-sin type of doctrines mentioned earlier. However, it is also critical to realize that the SBNRs I have met do, in fact, have theological questions. I found much agreement on what these issues are all across socioeconomic, age, and geographic differences. In addition to the questions termed as "metaphysical" mentioned earlier, these include such philosophical/theological issues as whether there is an approachable knowledge of ultimate truth, the existence of truth in itself, the reality of transcendence, and others.

Even so, I found the majority of the SBNRs I spoke with had a mini-meta-narrative that reached beyond their personal meaning-making stories. In fact, nearly all of my interlocutors shared many similar aspects of this narrative, even if some of the details differed. The vast majority of interviewees agreed on such things as what doctrines to reject, what progressive political views to support, and what spiritual experiences they seek, such as wonder, awe, and self-actualization or self-transcendence. They often insisted there is some sort of after-life, that a committed spiritual community is optional, and that there is no individual higher power which is personal and relatable. While I suggest these views are unlikely to be adopted by the majority of Americans, their existence is worth noting in a group that is otherwise quite diverse. This discovery is also significant since today any overarching narrative is often seen as hegemonic or repressive.

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[10] About Stockly's work on spirit technology, please refer to Wesley Wildman and Kate Stockly, *Spirit Tech: The Brave New World of Consciousness Hacking and Enlightenment Engineering* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, 2021).

[11] About Kripal's work on proto-religious experience in the context of SBNR studies, please refer to Jeffrey Kripal, "'Comparison Gets You No Where!' The Comparative Study of Religion and the Spiritual but Not Religious," in *Being Spiritual but Not Religious*, ed., William Parsons (London: Routledge, 2018), 253–67. For more details of the works of Kate Stockly and Jeffrey Kripal discussed in this paper, please refer to Rory D. McEntee's "TWW's Potential as Decolonial & Democratic Praxis: A Response" in this special issue.

So far, the mini-meta-narrative of shared aspects seems to have emerged as a direct opposition to a conservative Christian theology and its linkage to a right-wing political agenda. It is unlikely, however, that this mini-meta-narrative will result in the creation of a new religion, largely due to an SBNR hesitancy to belong to and trust definable groups/institutions. Instead, the freedom to try many different practices, paths, and a "pick-and-mix" approach to theological ideas pertains to most I have met.

However, the majority of the SBNRs I talked with have never had the chance, the training, the tools, or the mentors to help them think through their thought-experiments. They were regularly excited that I was asking them theological questions. Interestingly, almost all insisted no one had ever asked them about such things, much less provided resources they could use. Routinely, after the interview, they said they were grateful I had given them so much to think about. As a result, even if their primary goal is spiritual experience, self-transcendence and/or self-deepening, I think many would welcome help in identifying their issues as theological. Many would be grateful for tools to support them in thinking theologically. And many would welcome guides who show them how the realization of their goals may well require these theological tools. Given that, a theology without walls is potentially a valuable contribution to the SBNR phenomenon.

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

Hans le Grand

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

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

> *The conception of theology as imaginative construction can provide Christians (and others) with methodological justification and procedures for drawing more widely on the resources of the various religious and moral traditions of humankind, as we seek to envision in new, better informed ways the cosmos in which we live and within which we must find our place. In this larger and wider human conversation that is increasingly getting under way, In Face of Mystery represents but one voice, drawing principally from Christian monotheistic resources. I hope its publication will encourage other voices (non-Christian as well as Christian) to speak out, articulating holistic visions significantly different from mine*
>
> —Gordon Kaufman, "Some Reflections on a Theological Pilgrimage"[1]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

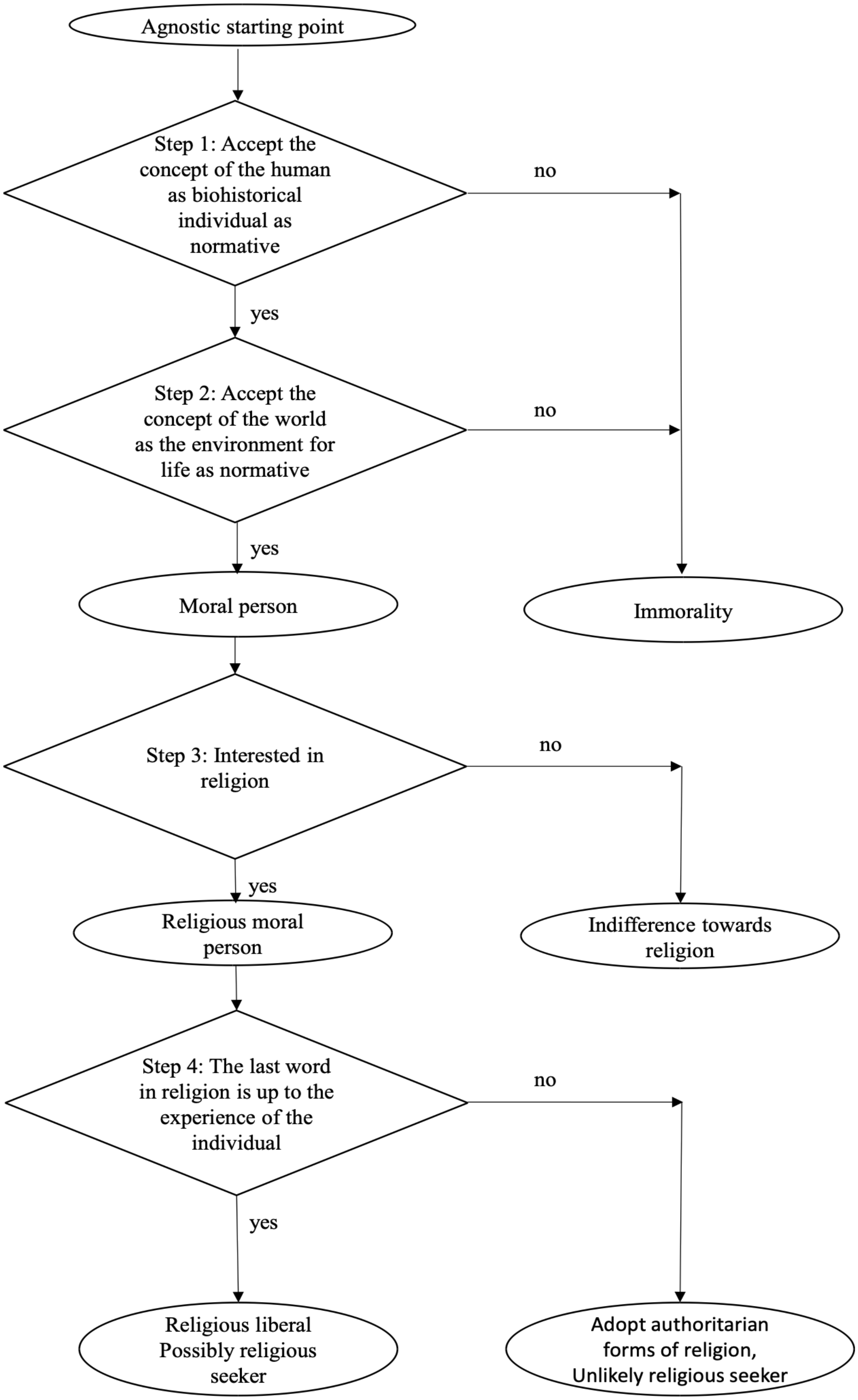
Agnostic starting point
Step 1: Accept the concept of the human as biohistorical individual as normative
no
yes
Step 2: Accept the concept of the world as the environment for life as normative
no
yes
Moral person
Immorality
Step 3: Interested in religion
no
yes
Religious moral person
Indifference towards religion
Step 4: The last word in religion is up to the experience of the individual
no
yes
Religious liberal Possibly religious seeker
Adopt authoritarian forms of religion, Unlikely religious seeker

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

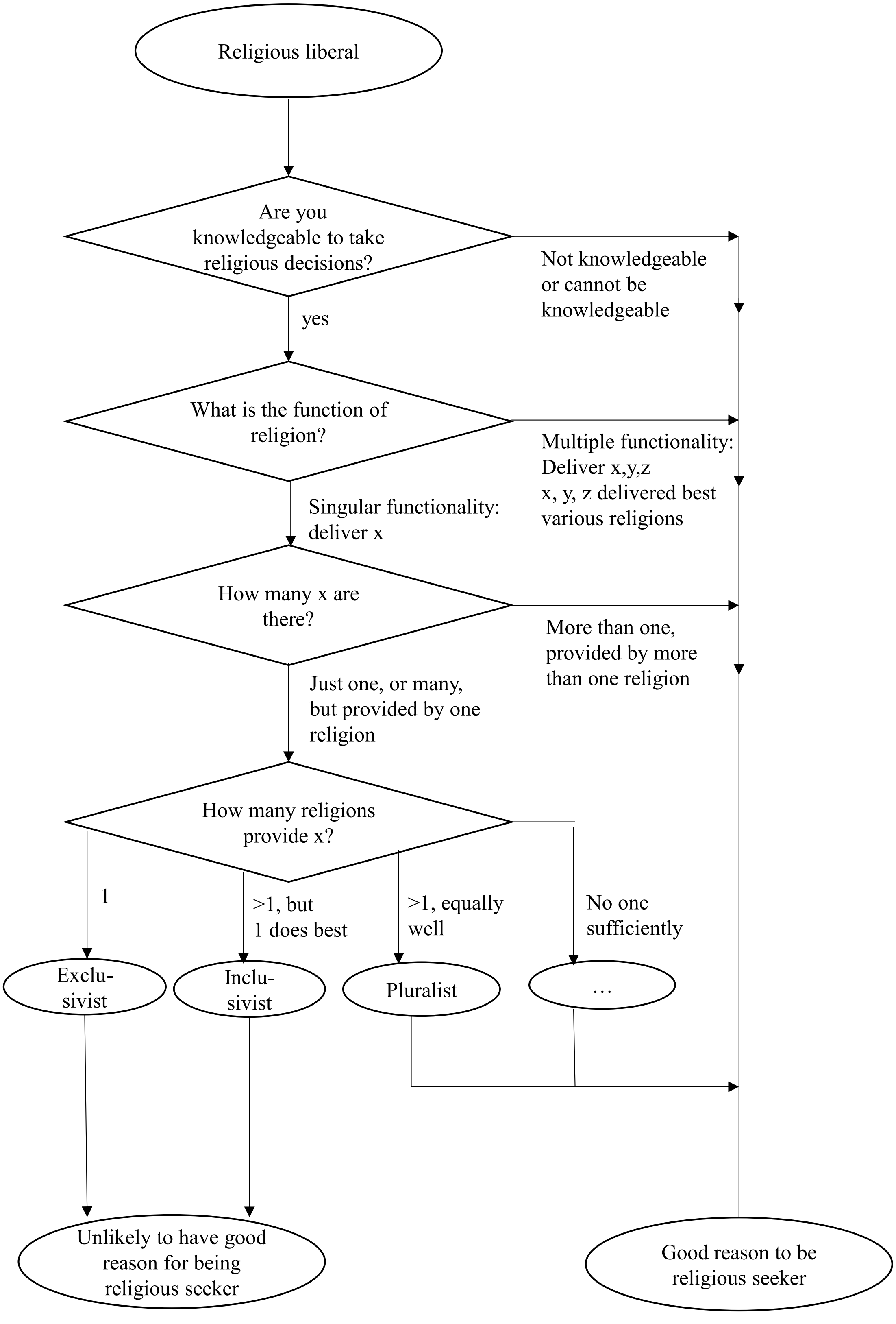
Religious liberal
Are you knowledgeable to take religious decisions?
Not knowledgeable or cannot be knowledgeable
yes
What is the function of religion?
Multiple functionality: Deliver x,y,z x, y, z delivered best various religions
Singular functionality: deliver x
How many x are there?
More than one, provided by more than one religion
Just one, or many, but provided by one religion
How many religions provide x?
1
>1, but 1 does best
>1, equally well
No one sufficiently
Exclu-sivist
Inclu-sivist
Pluralist
…
Unlikely to have good reason for being religious seeker
Good reason to be religious seeker

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

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

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

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

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

There is no organizational body housing the majority of religious seekers, and therefore there is no generally accepted creed defining what they are and what they are not.[9] However as stated, the group of religious seekers considerably overlaps with SBNR. For this group, Linda Mercadante, a scholar who did important empirical work in the field of SBNR, in *Belief Without Borders* has made a very useful mapping that is also generally valid for religious seekers.[10] In short, Mercadante finds the following common characteristics for SBNR: They are generally open minded and pluralistic, in the sense that all people can have their own truth. There is a concern with existential questions and ultimate reality, but an antipathy to institution, authority, dogma, and exclusivism. They have a liberative ethos, they look for authenticity/authentic self in a process of spiritual growth and they are interested in afterlife and human nature.

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

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

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

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

## Theological loci

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

## The human, the world, and ethics

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

> Step 1: *The decision to accept the view of the human as a biohistorical individual as normative*
>
> Step 2: *The decision to accept the view of the world as the environment for life and human life in particular as normative*

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

## Towards being religious

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

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

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

Kaufman makes the step towards being religious by stating: "I will propose that we make some decisions about certain broad metaphysical issues that bear directly on how we understand human existence. It will not be possible any longer, therefore, for us to claim that our procedure is based on a widely accepted modern faith-consensus"[14] The religious interest of religious seekers is related to Kaufman's proposal but is not identical to it. Key is the word "decision" as used by Kaufman. That word suggests that something has *to be concluded*, i.e. it becomes *stable*. For religious seekers, the process of metaphysical orientation is *unstable*, moving back and forth between various perspectives weighing the merits of each at every moment, without final decisions. Thus, instead of the proposal as worded by Kaufman I propose to word the question of religious interest as a step of faith in the following way:

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

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

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

## Truth

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

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

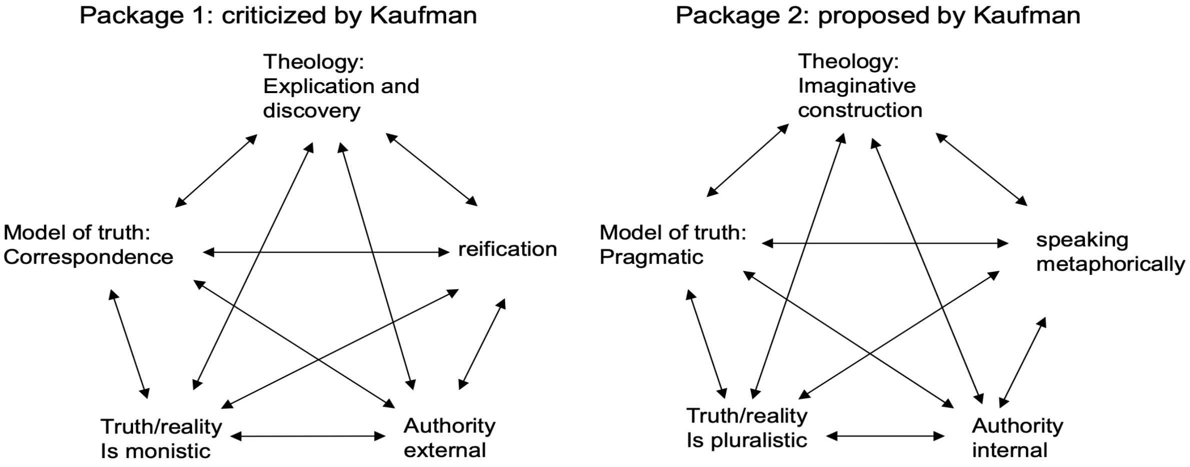
Package 1: criticized by Kaufman
Theology: Explication and discovery
Model of truth: Correspondence
reification
Truth/reality Is monistic
Authority external
Package 2: proposed by Kaufman
Theology: Imaginative construction
Model of truth: Pragmatic
speaking metaphorically
Truth/reality Is pluralistic
Authority internal

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

The first issue is that Kaufman proposes to practice theology as imaginative construction in contrast to theology as explication (of revelation) and discovery (of the truth) in revelation or in rational activity. In literature, this issue is discussed extensively.[15] The latter, is now generally called "dogmatic theology" or "systematic theology," while the former is called "constructive theology." Here, Kaufman's defense of theology as a discipline of imaginative construction was groundbreaking by making constructive theology the new standard in the field.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Also here, the choice between the classical package and Kaufman's package is not a choice between the correct and the incorrect, as both packages can be adhered to coherently. Neither, is the one morally right and the other morally wrong as both can support a religious moral stance as constructed earlier. However, adhering to the classical package is at odds with religious seeker's instability on key theological loci and their hierarchy of reflection. Thus this choice should be formulated as a step of faith on behalf of the religious seeker. Assuming that indeed all five issues are intertwined, it suffices to define the step along one of the five issues while the intertwining makes sure that steps in the other four issues follow implicitly. To keep as close to the findings of Mercadante as possible, I choose to use the last issue (i.e. the one on authority) as explicit and determinative:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Instability

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

The first reason is agnosticism. Religious seekers may claim that they do not know which religious tradition is best (in general, or for them specifically). They may think so, because they feel they lack the experience or knowledge to make a considered decision. This may be temporary. Maybe these religious seekers are looking for a religious home ("seekers" in the narrow sense as defined by Mercadante[22]) and in that temporary process of finding a (new) religious home, may aim at acquiring enough knowledge to make a considered decision. But the reason for the agnosticism may be much more fundamental. If we think there is no way we *can* know anything for sure about the ultimate, for example because we think that every religious experience is determined by our cultural or personal background and therefore is not objective (as Kaufman does), that is a strong reason to refrain from deciding among religious traditions/interpretative schemes (although Kaufman does not refrain from doing so). Why choose between sources of insight if we have no objective and universal criteria to decide between them, especially if we realize that these various sources offer varying amounts of insight for different individuals and because for one individual these sources offer varying amounts of insight over time, dependent on the situation? It seems to me that this agnosticism, as a major factor determining our stance towards issues of religion and spirituality is too often fundamentally neglected by theologians. At least it is a valid reason to be a religious seeker.

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

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[22] Mercadante, *Belief Without Borders,* 60.

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

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

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

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

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

We are now left with considering one last situation. Assume we believe that the functionality of religion is singular (provide *x*) and there is just one *x*. Now we have to ask the question, "How many religions provide *x*?" Here the classical framework of Alan Race comes in.[27] The choice is between: "only one religion offers *x*" (exclusivism), "more than one religion offers *x*, but one religion does better than the others" (inclusivism), "more than one religion offers *x* best" (pluralism); but, in this case, "no religion offers *x*" has to be added. The exclusivist and inclusivist options give reason to adhere to one religious tradition because that tradition is the only one that offers *x* (exclusivism) or that it is offers *x* most optimally (inclusivism). The third option points to the possibility that the insights of more than one religion may result in salvation, and in such a case you might have a good reason to be a religious seeker in order to include all relevant insights in your spirituality. Thus, you may want to pursue the one salvation as offered both by Buddhism and Christianity, each in their own way, and you want to combine them for optimal result. The fourth option in comparable cases would lead to atheism.[28] However, formulated in this way, this conclusion is not appropriate. It may be that none of the traditions offers x alone, but that together they do offer *x*. But also, it may be possible that no religion offers something that is necessary for *x*. The last possibility may apply for example if one considers *individual authenticity* to be an essential element of *x*. In that case the potential of any religion to fully provide *x* is limited. However, this last case does not exclude the possibility that various religions can inspire the individual. Therefore we can conclude that both the third position (more than one religion can fully provide *x*) and both versions of the last position (no religion fully provides *x*) may lead to religious seekerism.

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

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

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

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

> Step 5: *the decision to take at least one of the following four reasons to be of more importance than any reasons* not *to be a religious seeker:*
>
> a) *The acceptance of the idea that we cannot weigh the relative merits of the various religions because we are not knowledgeable or cannot be knowledgeable to do so.*

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

b) *The acceptance of the idea that religion has more than one essential function and that various religions serve these various functions best.*

c) *The acceptance of the idea that religion has essentially a singular functionality (provide* x*), but that there are various* x*-es, which are provided by more than one religion.*

d) *The acceptance of the idea that religion has essentially a singular functionality (provide* x*), and that there is just one x, but that either more than one religion fully offers* x*, or none of them does so.*

## No Conclusions

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

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

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

* * *

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## ***Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*. By Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. xiii + 321. ISBN: 978-0802874665. $35.00, hardback.**

*Doing the Work of Comparative Theology* aims to complement previous introductory guides to the field of comparative theology by moving beyond the emphasis on "guidelines" and "methodological explanations," in order instead to do "the actual comparative theological work" (pp. 10–11). Describing itself as a "guide" and a "primer" for comparative theology (p. 10), this book seeks to offer readers not so much a set of guidelines for how to do comparative theological analysis but rather a set of case studies in which the author compares the views of the Christian tradition with those of other religions. Four other religious traditions are set in comparison with Christianity throughout this work: Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. Bookended by an introduction and a brief epilogue, the heart of the book consists of ten chapters, each of which compares a Christian understanding of a particular theological topic with views on this topic expressed respectively in the other four traditions. These ten topics proceed sequentially as follows: Revelation and Scripture, the Triune God, Nature and Creation, Humanity and Human Nature, Jesus Christ and "Savior" Figures, Atonement and Reconciliation, Spirits, Salvation and Liberation, Religious Communities, and Eschatological Visions and Symbols.

This text might be most helpful for a Christian audience that desires a basic introduction to several non-Christian religious traditions. A setting such as an introductory course on world religions taught at a Christian liberal arts college would likely be a good fit. The book provides broad information about certain widespread religious features (e.g., scriptures) across several traditions, presenting and framing this information through explicitly Christian categories (e.g., "atonement"). This explicitly Christian framing runs the risk of obscuring complexities, as well as implying incorrectly that such categories are native also to the non-Christian religions discussed in this text. However, one could argue that, while necessarily distortive to a certain degree, this framing nevertheless provides a point of access for Christians who otherwise might remain unaware of other religious traditions.

But is this multi-religious introduction an example of "comparative theology"? How so? I think it is important to clarify the text's potentially confusing assertion of doing "actual comparative theological work" (p. 10). "Comparative theology" over the past couple of centuries infamously has referred to many different kinds of practices vis-à-vis spiritual traditions other than the one with which one personally identifies. So while, for instance, this book favorably references (particularly in its introduction) the comparative theological work of Francis X. Clooney, SJ, this book engages in comparative theology via a notably different methodology from that employed by Dr. Clooney. This is important, because while both approaches might be (self-)referred to as "comparative theological work," the actual outcomes and conclusions of this work are significantly different. Whereas the studies of Dr. Clooney proceed through the careful, juxtaposed reading of two specific texts from different traditions—a method that deliberately avoids grand comparative statements about traditions as reified wholes—*Doing the Work of Comparative Theology*, by contrast, speaks directly at that very broad level. For example, regarding the theme of "atonement" by a "Savior" figure (ch. 6), this book eschews a focused comparison of how one specific Christian text presents atonement, set in juxtaposition to a text on atonement from a different religio-spiritual background. Instead, Kärkkäinen's book first summarizes extremely briefly the "Christian theology of atonement" (p. 161), with only a cursory mention of the vastly important differences among various strains of "Christianity," followed by a sweeping analysis of Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and Hindu views on atonement—all in under ten pages!

Such an approach can certainly be called "comparative," but it performs its comparative work in a significantly different manner than the comparative theology of scholars like Francis X. Clooney, Hugh Nicholson, S. Mark Heim, and other contemporary comparative theologians. There is nothing inherently problematic with this difference, but the unique comparative style of this book—with its attendant advantages and drawbacks—should be recognized: On the positive side, Christians who are largely unfamiliar with other religious traditions will likely find this book quite helpful in providing introductory comparisons of several traditions across ten important aspects (important, at least, to a Christian theological perspective). Hopefully such Christian readers, however, will not stop their comparative reading with just this introduction: it may offer a helpful place to begin, but there is much deeper, more nuanced comparative work to explore and from which to develop one's understanding of both Christianity and other traditions.

More problematically, this book's approach may tend to reinforce the mistaken idea that all religions are different in detail but are basically the same in kind: that is, the book's methodology of surveying multiple religions across several categories betrays, and problematically reinforces, the notion that Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism are all basically the same kind of entity, each having its own idiosyncratic set of emphases and characteristics (even though, for instance, the question of whether is Buddhism is a "religion" is very briefly acknowledged [see p. 75]). This mistaken notion rests upon a flawed, Western understanding of "religion," a complex concept (not adequately defined or described in this book) with a long, troubled history intersecting with colonialism's oppressive legacy.

In sum, this book is likely to be quite helpful to Christian readers who want to begin learning about how their religious tradition compares with those of others. But I would encourage such readers to view this text as a starting place and not an endpoint: if readers truly want to deepen their interreligious knowledge, develop their capacity for comparative theology, and/or engage in the "hospitable dialogue" across religions advocated in this book, *Doing the Work of Comparative Theology* might usefully offer some signposts to launch their journey, but it should not be thought to provide a complete map.

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**_Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective_. By Paul Hedges. Brill Research Perspectives in Theology. Leiden: Brill, 2017. vi + 89. ISBN: 978-9004358461 and 978-9004358454. $84.00, e-book and paperback.**

Paul Hedges should be commended for this critical overview of comparative theology (hereafter, CT), as he deftly weaves together a volume that is both succinct (a mere eighty-nine pages) and loaded with rich analysis. This slim work manages to accomplish multiple goals in short order: providing an introduction to CT, including a brief historical overview of the field that charts its major changes over time; offering a critical analysis of CT, in light of both the scholarly deconstruction of "religion" and oft-neglected "subaltern" perspectives; and supplying a philosophical hermeneutics which offers intellectual grounding for comparative projects.

These aims are achieved through four well-organized sections. Preceding these, a short introduction opens the work. It alerts the reader that the following text will focus on the "contemporary practice" of CT rather than "historical questions," and thus will proceed in a "thematic" manner that also attends to "future directions and prospects" (2). The first major section ("Part 1: Defining, Exploring, and Mapping a Field") then opens by critically analyzing the "Old CT" (OCT) and "New CT" (NCT) framework of comparativist Hugh Nicholson. This analysis offers a brief historical overview of CT. It both presents and then critiques the OCT/NCT paradigm, which distinguishes between CT as commonly practiced in the nineteenth century (i.e., often with the polemical intention of showing Christianity's "superiority" in a hierarchy of so-called "world religions") and CT as pursued by contemporary scholars like Francis X. Clooney, S.J. The rest of Part 1 is then dedicated to "tracing a lineage of the normative academic pedigree" of CT, which Hedges critiques as "very white, male, and Western, and arguably focused upon reified traditions and notions of religion that has tended to prioritize elite, literate, male textual lineages" (9). The lineage then outlined by Hedges focuses upon the comparative practices of three main scholars: Francis X. Clooney, S.J., Keith Ward, and Robert Neville. Analysis of CT as practiced by these scholars touches subsequently upon several other sub-issues: how CT relates to the theology of religions, CT's methodology, CT's relationship with confessional goals, and its impact upon theology more generally.

Part 2 ("Comparative Theology after Religion") then addresses the role of CT in a context where terms like "religion" and "world religions" have been thoroughly deconstructed. Hedges endorses a position of "soft deconstruction": that is, while acknowledging the value of critiquing reifications and mistaken assumptions in the "World Religions Paradigm" (WRP), terms like "religion" ought not be done away with completely, as they help to "define an arena of human culture that can usefully be discussed and classified" (33). In regard to CT, this "soft deconstructivist" position acknowledges that an uncritical embracing of the WRP can foster gross misunderstandings. However, this danger does not mean that CT ought to be abandoned altogether. Rather, Hedges urges comparative scholars to consider dimensions of religious practice (e.g., material elements) that are often overlooked in favor of comparing texts. He also names the danger of "essentialism" as an enduring risk to be aware of in any attempt to do CT "after religion."

Part 3 ("Discourses on Power and Representation") questions whether CT is itself "a subaltern voice," is a practice that "gives space for subaltern voices," or is "simply a vehicle for main/malestream discourse and rhetoric" (40). This section builds upon the preceding part by highlighting the dangers of orientalism and appropriation in comparative study, questioning whose voices are heard—and whose might be appropriated—in the course of doing CT. But quite helpfully (and hopefully), Hedges moves beyond this critique to suggest also that CT itself, as a kind of "Third Space," might counter "hegemonic and essentialist Christian and colonial discourses" (46–47). Such potential, however, is never guaranteed and offers more so an ideal towards which CT scholars might strive rather than a description of standard comparative practice. In support of the inclusion of more "subaltern" perspectives in this work, Hedges then highlights the few notable places where women and feminist theory appear in CT, before considering the "subversive" nature of CT conceptualized broadly.

Part 4 ("Comparative Theology, Hermeneutics, and Interpretation") then concludes this overview of CT by exploring potential sources for its philosophical grounding. In response to critiques of the "thin" theorization beneath CT (58), Hedges argues that CT methods and hermeneutics can rest quite solidly on the interpretive theories of figures like Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, as well as the linguistic philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. In addition to showing the philosophical relevance of these thinkers to comparative scholarship, this section also discusses a few hermeneutic "tools" or "lenses" intended to convey what happens in comparison through concrete images, rather than staying at the level of abstract philosophical arguments. These conceptual "tools" are double transformation, hospitality, and liberating interdependence. Finally, a brief conclusion, which notes several trends in contemporary CT, wraps up this work.

In sum, Hedges' text is a relatively short, yet deep dive into comparative theological scholarship. Quite brief in its treatment of CT's historical roots, the book focuses primarily on the contemporary practice of CT, including both present trends and areas for further growth. The book's clear and accessible style is likely to be welcomed by anyone desiring a brief but cogent introduction to contemporary CT. As such, the book could work quite well in a college-level theology course.

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### ***Theopoetics and Religious Difference: The Unruliness of the Interreligious: A Dialogue with Richard Kearney, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller*****. By Marius van Hoogstraten. Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck. xi+259 pp. ISBN: 978-3-16-159800-5. $118.00 (paperback)**

In this book Marius van Hoogstraten effectively seeks to develop a non-hegemonic, non-reductive, and non-pacifying conceptualization of the interreligious. The author's goal is to propose a non-totalizing theory of religious difference that does not seek a "bird's eye view" of de facto religious pluralism. Rather, van Hoogstraten attends to the interstitial spaces in which religious communities and discourses have historically met and mutually shaped each other; this attention to the "in-between" spaces demands a theopoetics of religious difference. If this project seems both daunting and messy, it is because, as von Hoogstraten demonstrates, the tendency is for theologies of religions to propose a universal and universalizing theory that at best ignores, and at worst tames, "the unruliness of the interreligious." Theologians of religion have come to expect a "grand theory of everything"—or a "grand theology of every religion"—that organizes all traditions under a universal system; but these theories or theologies often end up *controlling* or even *subjugating* differing traditions under themselves, despite their best efforts. Van Hoogstraten endeavors to offer instead a theopoetics that embraces not only disruption, subversion, critique, deconstruction, suspicion, and negation, but also creativity (*poïesis*) and imagination toward something radically new. Instead of peaceful coexistence, a theopoetics of the interreligious conjures "co-resistance: a shared commitment to subverting the way 'religion' and 'religions' are employed to exert control and a shared search for becoming togetherness, constantly emerging from the cracks and fissures of our difference" (234).

This is an excellent contribution to the field and the book itself is a treasure-trove of insights. Nonetheless, there are some criticisms, in my view. While van Hoogstraten does an expert and admirable job of constructing a theopoetics of interreligious difference, he repeats the error leveled at theologies of religions for the last several decades: the inked spilled *talking about* religious difference would be better used *engaging religious difference* through careful attention to other traditions alongside other practitioners. In this case, his praise for comparative theology is noteworthy, even though the book lacks any sustained engagement with discourses that are non-Christian, non-White, and/or non-Western. It seems that van Hoogstraten's book is a reflection on his own experiences in interreligious encounters. Consequently, the book appears to be expositing critical reflections, *theoria*, from his interreligious experiences, *praxis*. Scholars taking the time to practice first and theorize later are few and far between; this move is thus welcomed, but more could have been said in this regard.

Notwithstanding, it is odd that in a book seeking to develop a theopoetics of interreligious encounter, one that endeavors to be non-hegemonic, non-universalizing, and open to that which is radically new, disruptive, and subversive of "tradition," the *primary* and *predominating* interlocutors are those hailing from Western, Christian, and White traditions (one exception is Kwok Pui-lan, whose eminent scholarship makes a brief appearance in chapter one). Furthermore, there is little to no careful engagement with other religious traditions; and while it was not his project to do so, it bears mentioning given the purview and goal of the book. Kearney, Caputo, and Keller are exceptionally qualified and intelligent in these matters and their discursive genealogies, scholarly and religious traditions, and academic schools of thought should not preclude them from contributing to such an important topic, of course. However, the reader would have been served well had van Hoogstraten addressed the lack of interreligious and intercultural engagement with non-Christian, non-White, and/or non-Western genealogies, traditions, and schools of thought.

Additionally, van Hoogstraten offers critiques of various pluralist systems in his book: (1) they often operate through a "bird's eye view" or even "God's eye view", a sort of enlightened position of "being in the know"; and (2) they perpetuate dualist categories, viz., those wise and enlightened about the true nature of religious traditions and how they relate, and those foolish and unenlightened. But it is unclear how any theology of religious difference cannot succumb to those criticisms, even one as robust and as near to non-hegemonic as van Hoogstraten's theopoetics. Indeed, those two critiques could be leveled against any totalizing and universalizing "grand theory" proposed by the Western academy, especially insofar as they don't attend carefully and critically to those discourses marginalized by dominant scholarship. The subaltern *can* speak.

The book is organized into five well-researched and eminently clear, cogent, and coherent chapters, at least for those with foundational knowledge concerning the topic at hand. In other words, the book is more suited for graduate students or upper-level undergraduates who are at least familiar with some of the following fields: theology of religions, philosophical hermeneutics, deconstruction, and process thought. After a short introduction in which van Hoogstraten opens with a personal narrative that situates the project and then summarizes the book, Chapter One ("Theologies of Religions") sketches "the main lines of the debate in Christian theology around the meaning and relevance of non-Christian religious traditions, and, secondarily, of interreligious encounter" (9). Van Hoogstraten does an excellent job of presenting four aspects of theologies of religion roughly in the order of how successful they have been in dealing with "the unruliness of the interreligious." These are (1) pluralism and the pluralist hypothesis, (2) the Trinitarianisms of Gavin D'Costa and S. Mark Heim, (3) comparative theology as explicated by Francis X. Clooney and Marianne Moyaert, and (4) postcolonial feminist contributions, which challenge the implicit imperialism and hegemony that many theologies of religions perpetuate. Van Hoogstraten finds the open-ended and non-generalizing conclusions of comparative theology and the destabilizing imagination of Kwok Pui-lan's postcolonial feminist theology to be strong critiques of the more universalizing tendencies of religious pluralism and trinitarian inclusivism. The self-described "marginal" nature of comparative theology, however, undermines its ability to disrupt and shape confessional theologies, a problem van Hoogstraten thinks voids some of its potential. In the end, all approaches except Kwok's theology of religious difference explicitly or implicitly strive to tame the unruliness of the interreligious. In her postcolonial feminist theology, Kwok does not seek to contain anarchy, but embrace it, to form "a *pact* with [the] anarchy [of the interreligious], guided by the intuition that its instability might prove to be particularly *good news*" (62).

From here three chapters follow, one for each scholar van Hoogstraten considers particularly insightful for the uniquely inflected poetics they propose: Richard Kearny, John D. Caputo, and Catherine Keller. Deconstruction plays a role for all three thinkers, though it is central to Caputo's writings; while Richard Kearny's work primarily engages philosophical hermeneutics and Catherine Keller's scholarship is heavily shaped by process thought. These chapters are sustained analyses of the thinkers' scholarship with an interpretive and constructive eye toward drawing out a theopoetics of interreligious encounter. In this way, each chapter focuses on the aspects that support van Hoogstraten's project. Nonetheless, they are impressive introductions on their own. For instance, Chapter 2 could be assigned as an independent chapter that introduces students to Richard Kearney's project, and the same for Chapter 3 and 4 regarding John D. Caputo and Catherine Keller, respectively.

Richard Kearny provides van Hoogstraten with theories of narrative, narrative identity, and narrative imagination to show how the self is constantly being remade and reinterpreted in the context of a community and a "tradition not built on a given and fixed ground but instead on an interminable process of critique and re-telling" (77). Kearney's *anatheism* suggests that negation, deconstruction, and suspicions permit us to rediscover God not as absolute act and a fixed given, but as a potential and a gift. These two aspects complement his rumination on hospitality by suggesting that not only the other but also the self is marked by a strangeness; indeed, the encounter with strangeness is what drives his anatheist Christianity marked by narrative imagination. Van Hoogstraten finds these ideas conducive toward interreligious encounter but finds Kearney's application of them lacking. Ultimately, Kearney slips into an exoticization of the strange or the other and, more importantly, seems to offer a "conditional pluralism," i.e., religious traditions are lacking insofar as they do not offer a version of his anatheism. In a way, Kearney is a more theoretically rich but only slightly improved version of Hick's pluralism: "Kearney's account thus remains unsatisfying. At best, it is underdeveloped; at worst, it is problematic" (107). Van Hoogstraten will apply the theoretically rich aspects of Kearney's thought to the constructive portions of his book (Chapter 5) but ends suggesting that Kearney may just perpetuate a dualism: those whose faith is anatheist, and those whose faith is not, and implicitly the former is superior.

He then engages John D. Caputo in Chapter 3 and Keller in Chapter 4. Caputo is famous for this "radical" or "weak" theology, something which may be termed "deconstructive theopoetics" (111). Van Hoogstraten spends time introducing the reader to deconstruction and its relation to (and difference from) negative theology. The eschatological, prophetic vision of Caputo's weak theology is important for Van Hoogstraten's theopoetics, to be sure; it provides him with the *anarchic*: "faith means a pact with the impossible, the subversion of what is, the *anarchic*" (128). Anarchy is a central principle of a theopoetics of interreligious encounter—unruly, messy, subversive, and disruptive, but also creative and life-giving. From Caputo van Hoogstraten draws the importance of subverting tradition "not out of hatred, but out of love" (136) precisely because the tradition is always more than what is there. When analyzing Caputo on the interreligious, his "theopoetics" becomes central to van Hoogstraten's project. This *poiesis* is a "creative discursive construction" and an "evocative discourse" both of which evoke "an unnamable faith in the to-come" (139). According to van Hoogstraten, for Kearny "conditional pluralism" was an issue while for Caputo "Quasi-Pluralism" is an issue. This quasi-pluralism once again implicitly perpetuates a dualism: those who know about the non-exclusive nature of truth, and those who don't: "[this non-exclusive understanding of truth] separates those who are seeing enough to know that they are blind (such as Caputo himself) from those who are blind enough to believe they are seeing—might we be in danger of drawing a line between *us*, who are wise and postmodern, and *them* who are backwardly (pre)modern?" (146). Additionally, this quasi-pluralism may accidently suggest a "deep truth" at the heart of all traditions (147-150).

Chapter 4 on Catherine Keller is another impressive summary and analysis of erudite scholarship. Van Hoogstraten finds in Keller's rich and complex œuvre the most potential for a theopoetics of religious difference. Keller's panentheism, theories on relationality, process thought, "the deep," apophasis, aporia, and explicitly political apocalypticism and theology provide the necessary aspects to support the lacunae in Kearney's and Caputo's thought. Here we see how van Hoogstraten recognizes the explicitly *political* nature of his theopoetics of religious difference. Relationality is central here: each tradition is constructed in the interaction with another tradition, and it may be said that each tradition is formed only in the context of "the other" and does not exist *except in relation*. Numerous historical examples are given. In the final part of this chapter, van Hoogstraten engages Keller's work on the interreligious, with special attention to Christianity and Islam. These traditions co-constitute each other in the context of imperial contestation—pre-modern empire historically and neo-imperialism presently. Religion is never just religion; it is also politics. And politics is never just politics; it is also religion. Van Hoogstraten labels Keller's implicit theology of religion "relational pluralism" (195), just as he labeled Kearney's "conditional pluralism" and Caputo's "quasi-pluralism." Relational pluralism suggests a "togetherness, or relationality, [that] is less about establishing or postulating a unity, and more about the suggestion that the religions are already mutually enfolded. It is not just recognition that something, perhaps something divine, happens within the other tradition: It is the recognition that something divine happens *in the interaction*" (196). Religious difference "is not a matter of fully-formed religions encountering one another as relative strangers, but instead how it is part of a complex, politically charged, and violent history" (199). Once again, however, van Hoogstraten finds the problem of "in group" and "out group," as it were, even within Keller's attempt at a non-hegemonic, non-essentializing theology of religions. It is worth quoting his critique in full, as it exemplifies the problems he found in both Kearney and Caputo and the insurmountable difficulty of constructing a non-elitist theology from a place of privilege—i.e., the Western academy:

> At some level, however, my concern remains that Keller's relational pluralism is primarily capable of building relations with like-minded progressives of other religions…To avoid reintroducing a dichotomy, this time between those of us who are wise enough to understand the relational and multiplicitous nature of reality and those others who are not, it is crucial to constantly reexamine "the log in our own eye," our own positions of privilege, and the way progressive or liberal structures can, again, become structures of exclusion. When Keller asserts the reality of pluralism in society "constrains the cruel exclusivisms that perpetually tempt Christianity," however, it appears to me that this challenge remains limited to that part of Christianity Keller identifies least with, leaving the rest of us high and dry. The process/feminist/postructuralist theologian, in other words, does not seem unsettled by interreligious encounters at all. They are profoundly comfortable with change, difference, and the fluid, non-privileged status of their own tradition, recognizing the divine multiplicity everywhere they go. So I wonder if this reads religious difference as *already* rendered harmless to Christianity—if the discussion of religious difference in a cosmopolitan setting erodes or superficializes the "difference" of that difference (200).

In other words, progressive Christians are open to difference…to a point; conservatives, traditionalists, exclusivists, and dare I say, "Trump supporters," do not fall within the purview of acceptable differences to which progressives are called to be open. (Though this is arguable, and

Keller clarifies her point in an e-mail exchange with van Hoogstraten.) I applaud van Hoogstraten for making this critical point; it is something we all need to understand in the present context of increasing polarization.

Prescinding from the accuracy or not of how van Hoogstraten is characterizing Keller's theology, some may argue that he is not being fair here—or perhaps not going far enough with his critique. How is any sort of "theory" or "theology" that seeks to understand human, cultural, and religious difference not going to appear at least with a shade of exclusivism or a tint of universalism? As the famous German sociologist, Ulrich Beck, argued, "the project [of universalism] 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,"[1] and consequently those "not the same" are excluded. Are we not back to the critique leveled against theology of religions by comparative theologians decades ago? Stop theologizing about religious traditions and practitioners and start doing theology with religious traditions and practitioners. Should not have van Hoogstraten just gone further in his critique? The Western, academic obsession with grand theories and theologies will ever only be hegemonic, elitist, and subjugating—so long as it excludes the voices that have been marginalized by dominant discourses in the first place. Additionally, perhaps Keller and others are exemplifying the "paradox of tolerance:" unlimited tolerance of even the intolerant would result in the destruction of tolerance as such: whether progressive or conservative, we should really be on guard against the intolerant (especially the intolerant who possess the political power to enact their intolerance in society or communities).

Nonetheless, van Hoogstraten constructs his "Theopoetics of Unruly Difference" in Chapter 5, and it is a substantial and inspiring attempt at doing the impossible, viz., constructing a non-hegemonic approach to religious difference and interreligious encounter that celebrates unruliness and unpredictability: "It would embrace the challenge that the confrontation with difference may present to settled certainties and to structures that exclude and oppress" (203). This is necessary and laudable, especially since this theopoetics prizes moments "when things get shaken up, when we are forced to reconsider the terms of our togetherness, as it is these occurrences that can bring us into deeper relationship" (203). Here van Hoogstraten gives a nod to comparative theology, which succeeds as an example of a theopoetics of the interreligious but fails in letting the insights disrupt and subvert confessional theology. Given that comparative theology has been primarily spearheaded by Catholic theologians, it seems this is more due to the stubbornly conservative nature of institutional theology than to the failure of comparative theology tout court. Academic, non-comparative Catholic theologians impact institutional theology arguably just as infrequently as comparative theologians.

Another significant insight van Hoogstraten makes is that "the religious" has always been "the interreligious" (220).

Ultimately, though, I am left most inspired by his turn to interreligious community, solidarity, and co-resistance as constitutive of his theopoetics of religious difference. Taking his thoughts beyond what he has written, religious communities are left subjugated by a global, neoliberal, neocolonial, and racial capitalist system. Interreligious encounter is certainly disruptive and subversive of one's own tradition; but, more pertinently, it should help us to see how it is only in relationship, solidarity, community, and co-resistance that structures and systems of oppression can be overturned in search of a "utopian community…that *may be*" (237). In this way, van Hoogstraten is describing a *theory* for relational solidarity; the problem is that the *practice* of relational solidarity is very difficult, especially given how structures and systems reinforce individualism and self-segregation away from different-minded people and with likeminded peers (in terms of politics, race, class, religion, and so on).

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[1] Beck, Ulrich. "The Truth of Others." *Common Knowledge* (New York, N.Y.), vol. 10, no. 3, Duke University Press, 2004, pp. 433, doi:10.1215/0961754X-10-3-430.

This is where van Hoogstraten attempts to evade the criticisms of any sort of theology of religion. Coming to an interreligious gathering with a theopoetics in mind leaves us open to the radically new—even to those positions that we prejudiciously deem exclusionary and xenophobic and then consequently label the *persons* and *communities* expressing those positions as backwards, hateful, and merciless. How so? Perhaps because there is a story (Kearny) behind those attitudes (one's own and the others') that needs to be deconstructed (Caputo) with an eye toward developing a relational bond in God with them (Keller) and discovering *some truth* in the *process*. Indeed, it is true that even labeling oneself as "compassionate" places one in the group of "those with compassion" over and against "those without compassion," thereby creating an exclusionary framework. But as I tell my students, a key faculty for learning about traditions and cultures other than one's own is the imagination, and ultimately imagination leads to empathy, even when it is difficult.

In our politically polarizing context of 2022, this is much needed: what sort of experiences have happened to a large swath of Americans such that they are so distrustful of medical sciences, so skeptical of the government, so prone to disinformation, to refuse a vaccine that billions of other residents of planet earth are literally dying for? What is their story? Is there *some truth* to their positions? What is it? There is a protracted list of polarizing topics to be added: the anthropogenic climate crisis, election results, the persistence (or not) of systemic racism, medically safe access (or not) to abortion, how United States history is taught in public schools, the political situation in Palestine and Israel, and, in general, the mistreatment (or not) of the poor, marginalized, and/or minoritized in our neoliberal, racial capitalist system. Given relationality, how am I responsible for polarization? Compassionately listening to the stories in relational solidarity is extremely difficult to do, and perhaps theopoetics can help—notwithstanding some of the aforementioned critiques.

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## *Christian-Zen Dialogue: Sacred Stories as a Starting Point for Interfaith Dialogue.* Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph SVD. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press. 2021. xviii+192pp. $29, (paper). ISBN: 978-1-5064-7077-1.

In recent years, scholars committed to interreligious dialogue or comparative theology have sought to broaden the scope of their endeavor, moving away from an almost exclusive emphasis on textual interpretation and reflection and increasingly turning to other forms of religious expression, such as art, music or ritual. In this sense, Joseph's agile volume on Christian-Zen dialogue can be said to resist this trend, once more foregrounding texts as the starting point for an interreligious conversation. Unlike Francis Clooney's erudite exercises in textual juxtaposition, Joseph O'Leary's comprehensive reassessments of Christianity in light of Madhyamaka Buddhism and its doctrine of conventional truth, or the Christian commentaries on Buddhist texts penned by Perry Schmidt-Leukel or John Keenan, this work adopts a more explicitly methodological approach, and does not focus on a specific pair of texts. The goal of the project, however, is arguably quite ambitious: the author sets out to offer a hermeneutic map for a joint reading of Christian and Buddhist works, takes as a starting point the transformative impact that these texts exert on their audience. In other words, Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph challenges us to rediscover the original attitude of openness that is required to receive these texts with a posture of humility and vulnerability.

The history of the Christian church in the first few centuries of its existence is the history of the emergence of a Christological and Trinitarian consensus, in a dynamic where doctrinal definitions also provided the Christian community with institutional boundaries. Behind the doctrines of the Trinity and the hypostatic union, however, are the stories we read in the Gospels- stories about Jesus. There also are stories told by Jesus to his disciples: narratives that seek to transmit information, but that, more often than not, also seek to open up new spiritual horizons, challenging their readers' complacency and calling them to an experience of *metanoia*. Joseph reminds us of the analogous trajectory that marks different schools of Buddhism: behind the elaborate speculative constructions of Mahāyāna philosophy, one finds the pithy directness of the Zen *kōans*, which eschew detailed and comprehensive narratives, but deliberately startle or puzzle their audiences to invite them to reflect on the ineffable character of awakening. The author's reflection on the narrative strategies of the two traditions underscores the transformative impact of these texts, whose primary purpose is to sustain their readers' ongoing struggle for salvation or awakening. At the same time, Joseph's exhaustive map of the epistemological strategies undergirding Gospel narratives and *kōans* does not overlook the substantive divergences that exist between the two traditions' approaches to anthropology, soteriology, and the conceptualization of ultimate reality.

Jijimon Alakkalam Joseph SVD is a Roman Catholic priest from Kerala, in Southern India—a region where Christianity was present long before the arrival of European missionaries in the early modern period, and which was long characterized by a relatively peaceful co-existence between different religious traditions. Indeed, as Joseph points out, from his early childhood the stories of the gospel and the stories of the Hindu tradition of his neighbors provided the background of his education and of his spiritual growth as a Catholic. His academic trajectory, led him eventually to focus on the Buddhist tradition and conclude a PhD in Buddhist studies at Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, where he continues to work as an assistant professor. In this volume, he is attempting to articulate in a more academic fashion the kind of questions with which he was already wrestling in his youth—namely, how do the texts from these traditions actually transform us? Do Christian and Buddhist texts exert their spiritual impact on their readers in an analogous way, or is there something that is specific to each tradition that colors their distinctive hermeneutic strategies?

This short monograph is divided into three parts. The first section emphasizes the importance of interreligious dialogue for our time and moves on to explore the different 'types' of text that one can find in the four Gospels and in the Zen tradition. Quoting Sandra Schneider's work on New Testament hermeneutics, Joseph emphasizes that sacred stories are 'carriers of experience', or in other words 'carry these experiences into shapes' (45). The spiritual experiences that are described come to acquire a paradigmatic character—one could even talk of them as "classics" that we seek to emulate, and against which we assess our own spiritual record. Resorting to the hermeneutic phenomenological approach by Paul Ricoeur, the author endorses the latter's critique of structural reductionism, and outlines his understanding of the "surplus of meaning" that any text comes to acquire as it distances itself from its original setting. The spiritual significance of a sacred text will then emerge from the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the reader (57). Both the New Testament and the *kōans* can be said to have a surplus of meaning that interacts with their recipients and comes to shape their understanding of their own subjectivity, their spiritual path, and their notion of ultimate reality.

The second part of the volume addresses the content of these sacred stories. In Christianity ultimate reality takes the personal form of the Triune God, whereas Buddhism envisages *nirvāna* or the Buddha nature as a fundamentally impersonal reality. The problem of evil is addressed by the Christian tradition through different theologies of the atonement, whereas in Buddhism the notion of liberation is conceptualized mainly as an insight into the absence of an abiding self. Finally, both traditions view the cosmos as a manifestation of the divine or the irreducibly enlightened character of all reality, offering a springboard for a much-needed reappraisal of the role of the natural environment in the spiritual lives of their practitioners.

The third part (comprising just a few pages) is a final reflection on the way the sacred stories of these two traditions lay the foundations for a spirituality— "a world in front of the text," in Ricoeurian parlance—that is appropriated by their audience, thereby reshaping their understanding of the world as well as the very thrust of their spiritual trajectory. This last part of the volume left this reader somewhat disappointed—the author lays the foundations of a Ricoeurian approach to interreligious textual hermeneutics throughout the previous two parts, but merely suggests how this method could be applied to the texts discussed previously, as if the entire monograph were a long introduction to an experiment in interreligious hermeneutics that has yet to be carried out. Perhaps, however, this was the intention of the author all along: provide us with the tools for a new approach to interreligious dialogue that will disclose numerous new perspectives in the future.

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