Is Transreligious Theology Possible?　　　　　　　　　**Open Access**

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Theology Without Walls: *Sic et Non*

Abstract: The emerging project, Theology Without Walls, is fascinating and potentially highly fruitful, particularly given the recognized imperative for doing theology in light of a religiously plural world. But it is also a project with daunting methodological and philosophical problems. In the first part of the paper, the author describes why he is attracted to the project and how it might bear theological insight. He also frames the project along the lines of multiple religious belonging, comparative theology, and the current cultural zeitgeist. In the second part of the paper, he challenges how such a project would actually work, given various religions' diverse and competing metaphysical claims which undergird their theological principles. Finally, he questions whether such a project would undermine the very purpose of theology for the kind of public most inclined to being influenced by it. His title's *Sic et Non* (Yes and No) refers to both his commending Theology Without Walls and challenging its viability. He concludes that the collective weight leads him to challenge the project, at least until it provides a method that satisfactorily addresses his fundamental concerns.

Keywords: comparative theology, religious pluralism, interreligious dialogue, transreligious theology

Theology Without Walls: *Sic*—Yes

I have a fascination for the Theology Without Walls (TWW) project and its possibilities. Frankly, however, and am also in a quandary about its viability. So, perhaps like many investigating TWW, my thought about whether doing theology fully inter-religiously is wise or even possible is both *sic et non*: yes and no.

I recognize in myself a predilection to a more universal framing of things religious and thus am inclined to be sympathetic to the project. In fact, I recall giving a public lecture on theologies of religion where, during the question and answer period, I was asked where I stood. My answer was that I found myself something like a 1/3 Christian inclusivist, 1/3 perennial pluralist, and 1/3 post-modern mutualist. As odd or frustrating this might have been for my listeners, it is all the more challenging to my own psyche. As a Christian, I find it very difficult to hold any position that is not inclusivism. I really do believe that Christ is not just my savior, but the savior of the world. Inclusivism argues that God's grace is active outside one's own confession and operative in the souls and indeed religions of others. God *is* the good and the true and those who pursue these collectively necessarily participate in God's saving grace.

But I see the limitations with inclusivism that lends itself to pluralism. Inclusivism is highly imperialistic. Because inclusivists see their own religious home as an absolute revelation, then the religious other is typically judged on this view as authentic according to the inclusivist's own paradigm. Religious others are not so honored by their unique vision or witness as they are imagined shadow representatives of the inclusivist's religion. The typical pluralist claim is that God transcends conceptuality and that no religious language or paradigm can speak of God as God objectively is. To me this seems obviously true

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and philosophically necessary.[1] So the extrapolation that any God-talk does not correspond to God *as* God makes sense. Such a philosophical commitment tends to relativize notions of revelation as if accurate to God as God truly is. Pluralists, such as John Hick or Paul Knitter, challenge us all when they ask, "What's in a name?" If there is only one Transcendent Absolute, and if that Absolute is beyond human conceptuality—itself designed for negotiating the created world—then whether this Absolute is called Brahman, Trinity, YHWH, Eternal Dao, Wakan Tanka, it matters little. Obviously, there are great differences in religions as responses to God, but what is being referenced is the same.

Another reason I am sympathetic to the pluralist position is that different religions often appear to describe the same kinds of transformation and the same kind of religious end-game. Consider the following medley:

– Plotinus (Greek philosopher): "Many times it has happened: lifted out of the body into myself; becoming external to all other things and self-encentered; beholding a marvelous beauty...acquiring identity with the divine."[2]

– Abraham Abulafia (Jewish): "[They] will be united with it after many hard, strong and mighty exercises, until the particular and personal prophetic [faculty] will become universal, permanent and everlasting, similar to the essence of its cause, and he and He will become one entity."[3]

– John of the Cross (Christian): "Having been made one with God, the soul is somehow God through participation.... For the will of the two is one will, and thus, God's operation and the soul's are one."[4]

– Jalāl ad-Dīn Rumi (Muslim): "The prayer of the holy one is different from other prayers. He has so completely dissolved his ego—nothinged himself—that what he says is like God talking to God.... His spirit grows wings, and lifts. His ego falls like a battered wall. He unites with God, alive, but emptied of identity."[5]

– Prasna Upanishad (Hindu): "He who knows, O my beloved, that Eternal Spirit wherein consciousness and the senses, the powers of life and the elements find final peace, knows the All and has gone into the All."[6]

– Yan Hui (Confucian/Daoist): "I allow my limbs and body to fall away, expel my intellectual faculties, leave my substance, get rid of knowledge and become identical with the Great Universality."[7]

Each of the above citations is representative of larger somewhat normative expressions within their respective traditions of high holiness and communion with an Absolute reference. What is striking is that these representative voices come from highly varied traditions and vastly different times and cultures and yet they seem to address the same fundamental dynamics. What is being represented here is a reconstitution of self whereby the original, pedestrian sense of self gets lost as one's deepest self-in-mystery recenters in the Divine. Here there is both a kind of identification with the Absolute as well as enough personal distinction for some kind of relationship to it.[8]

Additionally, I appreciate the voices of those pluralists who see how religions can complement each other. Bede Griffiths, for example, argues that the Christian truths of a personal God and Jesus as savior need to be somehow modified with the truth of Advaita Vedanta that witness to union with or even identification

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1 My presumption here is grounded in the following: concepts and the language used to convey them are human categories designed to reference the phenomenal world. Since God transcends the created world and is not simply a being among other beings, then God *qua* God cannot be reduced to human conceptualization. This does not mean that there cannot be an analogy of being between God and conceptualizations, but domesticating God to these concepts is a philosophical category mistake.

2 Plotinus, *The Enneads* 8.1, 334.

3 Cited in Idel and McGinn, *Mystical Union*, 30.

4 John of the Cross, *The Living Flame of Love* 3.78, 706.

5 Barks, *The Essential Rumi*, 163.

6 Mascaro, *The Upanishads*, 72.

7 Cited in Paper, *The Mystical Experience*, 91.

8 Of course Advaita Vedanta affirms the absolute identification of Atman and Brahman, but this is a minority view in Vedanta, as it competes with interpretations in, for example, the Shaiva, Vaishnava traditions as well as *moderate* nondualist positions such as those held by Ramanuja, Sudarsana, and Vedanta Desika.

with impersonal Brahman.[9] Others have argued that Buddhism and Christianity complement and complete each other. This has been variously framed as Buddhism representing *Wisdom* and Christianity representing *Love* or with Buddhism witnessing to *Silence* and Christianity witnessing to *Word*. While these framings could be challenged, it seems obvious that the religious other has gifts to bring to the table that one's own religion does not have and could learn from.[10]

Last, I resonate with a post-modern mutualist position. This position vigorously details the epistemic challenges in making universal claims. To this view, any assertion that aims at describing or assessing reality is made via a lens of interpretation, and no lens can address all issues or claims. Knowledge works, to the degree it works, through paradigms. And there is no universal paradigm that can incorporate all of them. In short, no metanarrative is possible. There is clearly something true here. In post-modern thought, the nirvana sought in Theravada Buddhism is irreducibly unique and cannot simply be flattened into a Western paradigm of salvation, heaven, union with God, and so on.[11] The fact that religions have their real and not just apparent uniqueness, however, tends not only to challenge the pluralist position, but also the conditions of possibility for doing Theology Without Walls: No metanarratives allowed. I will return to this point later.

I am also sympathetic to Theology Without Walls because of the current zeitgeist. We are academically and culturally becoming increasingly interested in the religious other as a necessary resource for self-understanding. The academic and cultural *publics* are actually quite different both in make-up and in intention. The academic public is most represented by comparative theology. On the surface this doesn't seem to be the right public at all. Comparative theologians typically look to other religious traditions to help them see *elements in their own tradition* in a new way. They aren't typically looking to rewrite their own tradition so much as to engage it based on their experience of the religious other.[12] On the other hand, mutual belonging is now becoming more common, particularly among comparative theologians; this because they reach deeply into another tradition, so deeply that they now normatively think in terms of it (at least to some degree). Incorporating insights from the religious other is now becoming typical to how they make religious sense of the world.[13]

The second public is, well, the public. Globalization has opened our consciences all the more to the religious other. And the negative images of religious fundamentalism have many wondering how they can make sense of religious claims that appear to compete. Is a larger perspective possible and could it be intellectually compelling?

I personally have been inspired and influenced by other religious traditions. The *wu-forms* of Daoism, for example, have influenced my spirituality and I hope my way of acting and relating to others. *Wu-wei* (non-imposing action) has taught me to work with the energies at hand in a non-coercive way. *Wu-zhi* (no-knowing) has helped me to let go of my compulsive need to categorize things. Embracing *wu-zhi* allows even ordinary life to reveal itself as numinous and filled with great possibilities. Buddhism has been even more important for me. Buddhist various dimensions of *anattā* (no self) have helped me stop identifying with or clinging to my experience, and its understanding of the various forms of *dukkha* (dissatisfaction) has helped me relativize my desires. The list could go on.[14]

Finally, I am sympathetic to Theology Without Walls because when I see a religious claim again and again from various religions I pay attention. I assume it is true. This recognition encourages me to see how such a claim could be understood from various religious angles. In this sense, perhaps I'm doing something of TWW now. So all this suggests to me that TWW is an exciting project that has precursors and in some sense is already fruitfully happening. Thus I say *Sic*-Yes.

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9 See for example Griffiths, *Vedanta and Christian Faith*.

10 See for example Knitter, *Without Buddha I Could Not Be a Christian*; Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously*.

11 In my mind, the most decisive blow to pluralism comes from S. Mark Heim's *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*.

12 For a quick primer on the field see Clooney, *Comparative Theology*.

13 See for example Cornille, *Many Mansions*.

14 See Feldmeier, *Encounters in Faith*.

Theology Without Walls: *Non*—No

My provisional enthusiasm for Theology Without Walls is not unequivocal, for I also see it fraught with method problems that it simply may not be able to solve. Most religions presume a metaphysical system or commitments. Without these and without an attempt to defend these one becomes intellectually ungrounded. Theology involves *fides et ratio*: faith *and* reason. The great problem with attempting a kind of universal perspective, one that draws on many venerable traditions, is that they each assert a metaphysics that may not be commensurable with other traditions.

Take my earlier example of Daoism. As a Christian, surely I can learn from it and be influenced by its insights. But can I incorporate it into a *meta*-metaphysics with other traditions, including my own? Daoism is virtually *acosmic*. The closest Chinese word for cosmos is *yuzhou*, which expresses the interdependence between time and space. In Daoism there is no permanent reality or eternal substratum behind appearances, such as one would find in Western theism or Hindu Vedanta. There is just the ceaseless flow of life. Even objects are more like events that are intrinsically related to other events. Western metaphysical assumptions posit something like God (*theos*) as Ultimate Reality and Cause. From God comes an underlying creative organizing principle (*logos*) that reflects divine order and law (*nomos*). The Eternal Dao is not God, even God understood under another paradigm. Daoism flat-out rejects a Transcendental Absolute.[15] To claim Daoist acosmic metaphysics and Western theistic metaphysics as both true or able to be mutually united violates the principle of non-contradiction. One could possibly argue that one religion brings real insight under a certain rubric or paradigm while the other religion brings insight under a competing paradigm, but I do not see how one can say God exists and does not exist, and somehow carry on a theological project wherein God both exists and does not exist.

One of the great critiques of the pluralist position is that it tends to look for evidence from a predetermined pluralist perspective. It's frequently a conclusion looking for evidence. This has been the critique of Steven Katz and others. Regarding mysticism, for example, Katz argues that if you actually looked at the mysticism of various religions as their principals understand it, you would find that their understanding of Ultimate Reality and the way to Ultimate Reality are deeply specific to their individual religions. On this view, there is far more singularity than unity among mystical encounters and traditions. They simply do not unite as neatly as the pluralist or perennialist would imagine. I'm not certain Katz is completely right, but his scholarship and that of others speak of great caution and necessary care.[16] A corollary to this is that religions often reflect very specific and different religious aims. To align Theravada Buddhist nirvana and Islamic union with God does both a disservice. Each requires practices designed for very different religious agendas.

Another concern with Theology Without Walls is its scope. What makes it exciting also makes it potentially unmanageable. When I said that comparative theologians are already paving the way, we would do well to listen to how circumscribed their projects tend to be. These scholars are deeply involved almost always in a single other religion, and then typically in only small segments of that religion. Only with this deep investigation do they find legitimate and compelling comparative projects. Consider, for example, the world's foremost exemplar of Comparative Theology, Francis Clooney. Clooney's career has focused almost entirely on comparing discrete aspects of Roman Catholic doctrine and spirituality to those found in very specific Hindu texts. Clooney writes, "[T]he opportunities present in the interreligious situation are most fruitfully appropriated slowly and by way of small and specific examples taken seriously and argued through in their details.... Interreligious theology is not the domain of generalists but rather of those willing to engage in detailed study, tentatively and over time."[17] TWW's scope appears so large that to do its aims justice one would have to be an expert in a variety of religions and incorporate massive amounts of claims. We ought to remember Alexander Pope's rhyming axiom: *A little learning is a dangerous thing; drink deep, or taste not the Pierian spring: there shallow draughts intoxicate the brain, and drinking largely sobers us again.*

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15 Ames and Hall, *Dao De Jing: "Making This Life Significant"*, 13-24.

16 See Katz, *Comparative Mysticism*, xii-xvi.

17 Clooney, *Hindu God, Christian God*, 164.

I recall a presentation in Berkeley years ago by the great Huston Smith, who showed extraordinary similarities among religions only to have the responder challenge his findings. At one point, Smith described how so many different religions recognized versions of angelic beings. While their images differed, he argued, they corresponded to each other. So to the category of angels he added bodhisattvas (Mahayana), jinn (Islam), devas (Hindu), kami (Shinto), spirits (Yoruba), and so on. The responder pointed out that Smith glossed over how these and other seemingly similar phenomena worked vastly differently in each religion. To align them, one had to take them out of their respective religion and strip them of their unique purposes in each religion. The post-modern critique of metanarratives claiming universality while actually representing only one lens or paradigm among other lenses is writ large for a more universalist project. If Theology Without Walls intends such a universalist project it may exactly suffer the same critique on an even greater scale.

I mentioned that there is a cultural public for Theology Without Walls, that is, those religious seekers or thinkers who have a hard time staking a specific religious claim in a world of many religious claims. This is the kind of public who would be served by Theology Without Walls, as it intends by its very nature to be inclusive. The biggest problem is that this public is more like an audience than a community. What is theology anyway? If it is, or at least includes, *fides quaerens intellectum*—faith seeking understanding— then it requires a faith commitment of this public that seeks understanding. The great problem here is that this public has no specific faith. Could such a theological project help this audience appreciate broad religious truth? Probably so. But it might also serve to keep such an audience *from* religious faith, that is, from a commitment with bona fide concrete engagement with God and the world. At the end of the day, we must ask: how would such a project help others to engage their religious concerns skillfully and robustly?

Religions are invested in community paradigms of practice, thought, and skillful means for transformation. As paradigms they have their own fences. These need not be towering walls of stone. They could be chain linked fences, permeable and even climbable. Still, aren't fences valuable? Dogmas in a religion need not to be imagined to control God or God-talk, but rather as necessary structures to form one's thinking and acting. The form itself participates with specific perspectives, spiritual practices, liturgy, and community life. If everything is up for grabs, then one has little to grab onto; no religious form.

Finally, how would it work? Would one read widely about other religions and construct a kind of unified set of agreed upon claims? Would one start with one's own tradition and hybrid it to other interesting and compelling claims and see what kind of religion or religious truth one ends up with? Would one seek a kind of Baha'i religion or theological edifice?

In conclusion, while my position is both *sic et non*, I think it currently weighs more heavily on the *non*. Theology Without Walls seems to me a bit too unmanageable. What it needs to succeed, to become more of a *sic* than a *non*, is a set of examples showing fruitful conclusions, and it needs a method that addresses difficult mountains to climb.

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