Is Transreligious Theology Possible?   **Open Access**

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Is Transreligious Theology Unavoidable in Interreligious Theology and Dialogue?

Abstract: This article investigates whether transreligious theology is unavoidable in the doing of interreligious theology and dialogue. In so doing, it opens with three examples that point the way to transreligious theology (Wilfred Cantwell Smith, Keith Ward, and Francis Clooney). Various prefixes are then defined and distinguished from one another as they are often applied to the term "religious" (*uni-, intra-, multi-, cross-, inter-*, and *trans-*). These prefixes are then applied to the terms "dialogue" (transreligious dialogue) and "theology" (transreligious theology). In particular, transreligious theology is set apart by a) taking seriously the fluid and porous borders of religion and religious identities, and b) its requirement of generating something novel beyond the already established religious traditions. The question is then asked whether transreligious theology is unavoidable in the context of interreligious theology dialogue, given the vast complexity of religious identities. The article culminates by addressing two lingering challenges to transreligious theology, the perceived specter of creeping syncretism and the possibility of "frustration overload" due to the overwhelming complexity of religions and religious identities.

Keywords: religious identity, transreligious theology, interreligious dialogue

Preparing the Way for Transreligious Theology

There are already various fruitful approaches that point the way toward transreligious theology. In a recent publication[1] I called for doing theology interreligiously, however it may be deemed that such an approach already houses seeds of transreligious theology. Doing theology interreligiously, as I understand it, simply refers to the commitment to take seriously the claims of other religious traditions while wrestling with and reflecting on theological questions within one's own tradition since many of the great questions of life have been dealt with, in quite sophisticated ways, in the various religions of the world. To illustrate this method, and to suggest examples that point the way to transreligious theology, this section highlights the approaches of Wilfred Cantwell Smith (world theology), Keith Ward (doing theology comparatively), and Francis X. Clooney (comparative theology).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith proposed "world theology" in his well-known book by the same title.[2] In his view, a new era is upon us in which we ought to recognize that all people share a common religious story grounded in one universal "faith" expressed through many different particular beliefs.[3] In the doing of

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1 Gustafson, *Finding All Things In God,* 288-312. This section of this article draws significantly on chapter 14 of this book.
2 Smith, *Towards a World Theology*.
3 I am indebted to Jim Fredericks' examination of Cantwell Smith's theology in Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 79-89.

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"world theology" our common religious story emerges, which involves people of faith reinterpreting their beliefs in light of this common experience of faith. Of the thee thinkers I offer here as examples of pointing the way to transreligious theology (defined in the next section), it is perhaps Smith that comes the closest to it, especially in his suggestion to no longer categorize theologies under religious designators such as "Christian" theology, "Islamic" theology, "Hindu" theology, and so. Instead there only ought to be "world theology," which draws on all of the theologies of the world's religious traditions as a move to articulate the universal faith through the various particular beliefs of the religions.[4] In such a mode of inquiry, I suspect, the theologian is asked to think across the theologies of world religions, hence its appropriate resonance with transreligious theology, and critically modify their own beliefs in a manner that will adequately harmonize with beliefs from other religious traditions resulting in system of beliefs being continually developed by people from around the world, and of all religious identifications, who remain consciously aware of the one history of universal faith that undergirds all separate religions (with their distinct particular beliefs).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith's rationale for this includes the recognition that without such a transreligious theological approach that takes seriously the claims of other religious traditions, particular theologies will lose relevance and die. To support this argument, he points to developments in the history of the Christian tradition which necessitated the revision of theological beliefs, language, and philosophical categories. The discovery of Greek philosophy in the Middle Ages as well as the emergence of modern science and its discoveries about the physical world forced a rethinking of religion. Now the time has come for the reality of religious plurality to encourage a similar constructive rethinking as well.[5] Failure to do so, Smith contends, will demonstrate that the theologian: a) doesn't take the claims of other religions seriously, or worse b) she is not aware of the claims being made by other religious traditions, and thus, just like the theologian that ignores the influence of Greek philosophy and modern science, her theology will be dismissed as uninformed, uneducated, ignorant, and inadequate. It seems rather clear that Smith's approach of "world theology" can most certainly be understood as a fruitful example of an approach that points the way to transreligious theology, or perhaps understood as a 20th century pioneer of it in his own right.

Keith Ward, with his approach to philosophical theology, can be identified as a modern pioneer in the contemporary field of comparative theology. His project represents one of the most robust examples of striving to investigate key philosophical theological concepts across the world's religions in a fashion that influences how he, as a committed Christian theist, understands God's disclosure in Jesus. In an impressive five volume series[6] he rethinks, in light of the world's religions, major Christian themes (e.g., revelation, creation, human nature, community, and human fulfillment). However, unlike Wilfred Cantwell Smith's proposed "world theology," Ward understands his project as one of Christian theology. His five volumes represent his attempt to develop a Christian systematic theology that is "radically influenced by a global religious perspective" as well as "to show how the world's major religious traditions can interact positively and fruitfully in the modern world."[7] His project demonstrates the attitude that "once an understanding of faith as acceptance of exclusively correct propositions is given up, one can no longer simply say that the Christian faith has the only truth, and that all others are wrong. If faith is a response to a disclosure of the divine in this community, then why should there not be different disclosures of the divine in other communities?"[8] Ward understands that

> The great religious traditions are histories of developing reflection on the primal disclosures that constitute a tradition. In their meeting, the opportunity exists for conversations in which each tradition is modified by its greater empathy for the insights embodied in other traditions. It is in this way that diversity, and the freedom it requires, can be helpful to the discovery of the partiality in one's own views, and thus of a more expansive truth.[9]

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4 Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 84.

5 Smith, "The Christian in a Religiously Plural World," 47-48.

6 Ward, *Religion and Revelation, Religion and Creation, Religion and Human Nature*, *Religion and Community,* and *Religion and Human Fulfilment.*

7 Ward, "Books."

8 Ward, "The Importance of Liberal Theology," 51.

9 Ward, "Liberal Theology and the God of Love," 198.

Francis X. Clooney writes that he is "in substantial agreement with Ward" while suggesting a "further step" that allows one's "faith itself [to be] . . . deeply infused with the spirit and influence of comparative work;" a "Ward-plus."[10] Clooney, considered today one of the main representatives of comparative theology, promotes a text-centric approach that commences in reading religious texts, "preferably scriptural and theological texts that have endured over centuries and millennia, back and forth across religious borders."[11] The method asks the theologian to read the religious texts of another tradition alongside the texts of her home tradition all the while striving to view each in light of the other with new eyes. The hope is for generation of fresh insights and questions that encourage rethinking and revision of beliefs, convictions, concepts, and worldviews. By crossing over into another tradition (in this case, the texts of another tradition), the researcher returns to her own tradition with "fresh theological insights."[12]

Defining Prefixes

Increasingly, it seems, there is no shortage of prefixes to employ prior to the term religious. Here I dwell on some of the most common, and seemingly most similar to one another. To really broaden our scope and to work towards, perhaps, an over-clarification of terms, I will briefly comment on, and distinguish from one another, the following: *uni-*, *intra-*, *multi-*, *cross-*, *inter-*, and *trans-* with, of course, our utmost concern on the last, especially in so far as it relates to and is distinct from *inter-*. Before applying these prefixes to the term "religious," it may be helpful here to place them in relation to one another by applying them to a term other than "religious" so as not to be distracted from their immediate differences and similarities. Thus, consider the following terms as applied to "disciplinary": *uni*disciplinary, *intra*disciplinary, *multi*disciplinary, *cross*disciplinary, *inter*disciplinary, and *trans*disciplinary.

Unidisciplinary simply entails drawing on one singular discipline or method. It could also refer to the approach of scholars from one discipline to a question, problem, or theme.

Intradisciplinary too, in a similar fashion to unidisciplinary, connotes scholars from the same discipline, method, or school of thought, working together to address a question, problem, or theme. In this regard, there seems to be little functional difference between these first two terms.

Multidisciplinary, as the prefix suggests, includes scholars from a multitude of disciplines, each drawing on their own disciplinary method, working to address common question, problem, or theme. However, each scholar stays within her or his disciplinary and does not draw on traditions other than their own nor do they blend disciplines.

Crossdisciplinary, perhaps the least commonly used of these terms, can refer to a scholar situated in her own discipline attempting to view, understand, and interpret the disciplinary perspective of someone outside their discipline. This approach may very well lead to inter- and trans- disciplinary approaches, but the key here remains the rootedness of the scholar in her own discipline. Further, it prioritizes the scholar's own discipline as the primary and normative approach in her scholarly agenda.

Interdisciplinary gets the closest to, and is often conflated with, transdisciplinary. Interdisciplinarity sometimes involves a synthesis of approaches to form an integrated framework in the approach to a question, problem, or theme. When this synthesis of approaches is present, interdisciplinary nudges closer to transdisciplinary. Interdisciplinary can also simply refer to scholars of different disciplines working together without an intention for a shared synthesized approach. In this case, interdiscipinarity nudges closer to the aforementioned multidisciplinary.

Regardless of which understanding of interdisciplinary it employed, the term transdisciplinary involves an element neither of them explicitly have. This is the formulation or creation of something new. Therefore, transdisciplinary involves scholars from across the disciplines synthesizing their approaches in the creation of new perspectives and approaches. The important element here is an element of something new that arises

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10 Clooney, *Comparative Theology,* 45.
11 Ibid., 58.
12 Ibid., 10.

out of the collaboration that does not exist in any of the disciplines alone. In this manner, transdisciplinary generates new approaches by working across the disciplines and pushing towards something original beyond them all. This brief excurses on these prefixes attached to the term "disciplinary" is intended to serve as an introduction to the relations and distinctions between and among them. One might more easily see these distinctions when applied to other commonly associated terms with them such as –cultural (e.g., intracultural, crosscultural, intercultural, transcultural) or –national (intranational, crossnational, international, transnational).

Applying Prefixes to "Religious Dialogue"

Consider now the application of these prefixes to the term religious followed by the designator "dialogue":[13] *uni*religious dialogue, *intra*religious dialogue, *multi*religious dialogue, *cross*religious dialogue, and *inter*religious dialogue, and *trans*religious dialogue. For the purposes of this paper and the context of religious dialogue, here I operate with the working definition of dialogue as "a conversation on a common subject between [and among] two or more persons with differing views, the *primary* purpose of which is for each participant to learn from each other so that s/he can change and grow."[14]

Unireligious dialogue, in the context of the working definitions of the prefixes proposed above, is carried out by someone from one religious tradition and probably with himself, which kind of negates it from being considered dialogue in the traditional sense. Coincidentally however, this might also be understood as intrareligious dialogue in the unique sense proposed by Raimon Panikkar in his book by the very name *The Intrareligious Dialogue*.[15] In this book, Panikkar proposes intrareligious dialogue to refer to the conversation that takes place within oneself in a move towards deepening his or her own faith in light of encounters with persons of other religious traditions. However, intrareligious dialogue used colloquially and institutionally more often refers to persons who identify with the same religious tradition engaging in conversation.

Multireligious is used less commonly to refer to dialogue but is often employed in the context of service and worship. It refers to persons from many religions, each drawing on their own religious traditions, working together to address or respond to a common question, issue, or theme. For instance, this might be a multireligious worship service which could include a Rabbi, a Christian pastor, and an Imam each offering prayers and wisdom from their own tradition without an attempt to directly engage or interpret the other traditions in a critical manner, constructive or otherwise. The key here is that each religious leader keeps to her or his own tradition's resources in their response to the people and the sacred.

Crossreligious dialogue, a rather awkward phrase and certainly used the least commonly, might refer to someone rooted in her own religious tradition attempting to view, understand, and interpret a religious tradition other than her own. In this case, there may be little if any dialogue and might more accurately be labeled crossreligious monologue especially if it simply entails one attempting to understand a tradition other than her own. Further, if there is little to no impact on one's home tradition, then it would appear to violate the working definition of "dialogue" above which requires an element of growth. This is not to deem crossreligious dialogue useless, for it can very often lead, I suspect, to interreligious and transreligious dialogue.

In distinguishing between these terms and prefixes, the most lively debate usually occurs around the distinction between inter- and trans- religious [dialogue]. Fortunately, Norwegian professor Anne Hege Grung has already done some of the heavy lifting in this area in her work on these two prefixes in relation to relations between and among religions.[16] Unlike the discourse on "disciplines" above in relation to

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13 The definitions proposed for the terms and prefixes in this section are certainly debatable and will remain so. There exists no perfect agreement on their usage and meanings. However, the purpose here is to lay out some common working definitions in the interest of clarify and, even more, to set up the bulk of what follows in this paper in understanding how transreligious theology operates within the context of interreligious dialogue.

14 Swidler, *Dialogue for Interreligious Understanding*, 47.

15 Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue*, New York, Paulist, 1999.

16 Grung, "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religious."

these prefixes, Grung rightly and importantly reminds us of the fluidity and porous boundaries of religious traditions and persons claiming religious identity. With this in mind, interreligious dialogue, regardless of whether one adopts the component of synthesizing religious approaches, refers to an integration of religious approaches to a common question or theme. Transreligious dialogue, which certainly involves this component of synthesizing of religious approaches, also has the necessary element of generating something new. Further, it acknowledges, as Grung calls for, "a larger fluidity in the encounter between people of different religious affiliation, and opens it up for addressing thematizing *intra-religious* differences."[17] Taking these two components (fluid religious borders and the generation of something new) as necessary for transreligious dialogue, and only perhaps optional for interreligious dialogue, a harder distinction between the two begins to emerge. The two components are not unrelated, for unstable religious boundaries open opportunities for a "third place" or something new to emerge that does not exist in either or any of the religious traditions alone (or in the religious identities of those engaged in dialogue). Going forward, in the content of this article below, these components of transreligious will become more apparent as I consider them applied to the context of theology.

Applying Prefixes to "Theology"

Consider now the application of these prefixes to the term "religious" followed by the designator "theology": *uni*religious theology, *intra*religious theology, *multi*religious theology, *cross*religious theology, *inter*religious theology, and *trans*religious theology.

Unireligious theology, in the context of the working definitions proposed above, is understood as drawing on one singular religious tradition, or being carried out by a theologian[18] from one religious tradition. Intrareligious theology too then refers to theologians from the same religious tradition working together to address a question.

Multireligious theology might refer to theologians from many religions, each drawing on their own religious traditions, working together to address or respond to a common question, issue, or theme. For instance, this might produce an initiative in which several theologians address ecological awareness as informed by their tradition alone without an attempt to directly engage or interpret the other traditions in a critical manner, constructive or otherwise. The key here is that each theologian keeps to her or his own tradition's resources in their response to the issue.

Crossreligious theology, perhaps as equally awkward as crossreligious dialogue, might refer to a theologian rooted in her own religious tradition attempting to view, understand, and interpret a religious tradition's theology other than her own. This may lead to little, if any, influence on her home tradition's theology. However, it is rather unlikely that a theologian could completely compartmentalize her study of another tradition's theology from her own faith traditions' theology without any interreligious impact taking place. Thus I suspect those who may engage in explicit crossreligious theology probably end up doing some implicit inter- and trans- religious theology.

As delineated in the discussion above, ground zero for these distinctions, and for this article, centers on the distinction between inter-and trans- religious theology. To reiterate, one of the main theses of this article is to suggest that transreligious theology may be unavoidable, at some level, in both interreligious dialogue and interreligious theology (or, as I sometimes phrase it, in doing theology interreligiously). As Grung stresses above, when religious boundaries are understood as fluid, transreligious becomes a more useful designator in the context of dialogue. I suggest that this is also the case with the distinction between interreligious theology and transreligious theology. Interreligious theology, like interreligious dialogue above, can include the adoption of synthesizing theologies from various religions, and refers to an

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17 Ibid., 11, *italics* hers.
18 Here the term "theologian" is understood rather broadly to include all persons who simply have a concept of God, the Gods, or the divine. In this case, even the person who claims "there is no God," is included under the rubric of theologian. The point is, this person is "doing theology" which here is simply understood to mean making claims about the divine and its relations between and among persons and the world – regardless of rationale.

integration of religious theologies in an approach to a common question or theme. Transreligious theology, which almost necessarily adopts this component of synthesizing of religious theologies, also requires the element of generating something new. Therefore, transreligious theology has the elements of synthesizing religious theologies (to various degrees), the recognition of the unstable boundaries that contain religious theologies, and the move to going beyond the religious theologies by thinking across them. In this manner, opportunities for a "third place" or something new emerges in the doing of theology transreligiously. This third place is a space that did not exist in either or any of the religious theologies (or in the religious identities of those engaged in the theological enterprise) alone. The distinction between interreligious theology and transreligious can be subtle. In what follows I will discuss the sometimes implicit presence of transreligious theology in the doing of theology interreligiously in an effort to argue that transreligious theology is unavoidable at a certain point in various theological endeavors.

Given the Complexity of Religious Identity, is Transreligious Theology Unavoidable?

Operating on the definition of transreligious theology as the process of theologians from across the religious traditions synthesizing their approaches in the creation of new perspectives and approaches, this section proposes that in the doing of theology interreligiously or engagement of interreligious dialogue, transreligious theology, to a certain degree, is inevitable and probably unavoidable. Further, for those engaged in theology, this should not be understood as scandalous nor inappropriate.

Recall that interreligious theology can include synthesizing theologies from various religions in an approach to a common question or theme. For instance, for an approach to the theological significance of the reality of suffering in the world, Christian theologians might be influenced by Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel's theology of divine pathos and the possibility of God's suffering (in some manner). As I understand it, part of the appeal of interreligious engagement and dialogue is not only to learn from a tradition other than one's own, but also to find adequate and meaningful ways to incorporate and adopt newfound knowledge into one's own horizon. In this way, interreligious dialogue meets the definition set out above by Leonard Swidler which requires the participants to change and grow. In other words, it is not simply about learning but must also be transformative in some way. A Christian concerned with the existence of God and the reality of suffering in the world might be enthusiastically open to encountering a non-Christian theology that has already dealt with such a question in a rather sophisticated way. Given that Judaism and Christianity are most certainly sibling religions sharing common roots, it would seem rather benign for one to be greatly influenced by the other when it comes to theological learning about the relations between and among God, world, and persons. The question then is whether this process then includes the generation of something new. Recall that transreligious theology, unlike interreligious theology, thinks across religions and requires the element of generating something new. It is arguable that in this particular case of the Christian theologian learning from the Jewish theology of divine pathos, little to nothing shockingly new is generated other than a Christian coming to terms with a helpful Jewish understanding of the Biblical God that can resonate quite well with Christian theology. It may force a rethinking of classical Christian categories and divine attributes such as the negation of divine impassability, however this need not be understood necessarily as pushing forth a radically new Christian understanding of God. Rather, it could be understood to be simply a retrieval of a lost, silenced, or an unexamined early Christian understanding of God. On the contrary however, something new is indeed generated in such a process and that is the application of traditional Jewish theological language and categories to a Christian theology and understanding of God.

This is all to say that it is not clear whether it is truly possible to retrieve lost, silent, or unexamined aspects of one's tradition in a contemporary context without acknowledging, at some level, the genuine novelty involved. In other words, interreligious encounter or exercises in the doing of interreligious theology, often involve the generation of something novel and thus open up a "third place" between or among the religious

traditions and religious persons involved. This is especially the case if we operate, with the American Academy of Religion in Schools Task Force, on the assumption that the following three central assertions about religions hold water:

1. "religions are not internally homogeneous but diverse,"
2. "religions are dynamic and changing as opposed to static and fixed," and
3. "religions are collections of ideas, practices, values, and stories that are all embedded in cultures and not isolated from them."[19]

These are statements about religious traditions as such, but if this acknowledgement of religions' internal diversity is pushed even further, as is appropriate in this case, then it can be recognized, with Jeannine Hill Fletcher, that, in addition to the internal diversity that exists within religious traditions, peoples' individual "identities are not constructed on a singular feature (e.g., gender or religion) but that persons are located in multiple spaces and that these aspects of identity are mutually informing."[20] Hill Fletcher constructively draws on feminist thought to challenge the so-called "logic of identity" which proceeds by making distinctions between 'things' by appealing to some firmly set boundaries and criteria. For example, the formula that all Christians must do X and believe Y in order to be properly identified as a Christian employs the logic of identity. The logic of identity provides a way to determine what is in and out of a given class. Hill-Fletcher rightly recognizes the inherent element of exclusion operative in such mode of taxonomy.

Relevant to the inquiry of this article, an unfortunate implication of the "grouping of persons into the various categories of 'the religions' and the assumptions made on the basis of those groupings [can] too easily erase the diversity and difference within any one community."[21] Thus, as Hill Fletcher learns from Iris Marion Young, differences are dissolved. In short, just as religious traditions themselves are internally diverse, so too are individual religious identities. They can be diverse and complex. Religious identities are formed by a confluence of factors such as culture, race, gender, nationality, profession, socio-economic status, and so on. The result of such thinking yields the suggestion that there is no such monolithic Christian identity, but rather there are Christian identities. Hill Fletcher reminds us that feminist thought suggests that persons have (or can have) multiple aspects to their identities. The answer to the question "who are you?" probably does not result in simply an answer of a one-word religious identifier such as "I am a Muslim," "I am a Christian," or "I am Hindu." Clearly, the complexity of the question of "who are you?" is well documented and yields an almost inexhaustible array of answers and identifiers such I am a father, a son, a brother, a husband, a teacher, a friend, an American, a male, and so on. Identity, understood broadly in this manner, is a vast web of interconnected aspects with each one informing the others. A result is the destabilization of the category of religion. Persons, of course, do not usually identity wholly and fully with any one particular group. Within the various groups they affiliate with too, there will be aspects they do not align with.[22] In short, persons have hybrid identities and this does not mean that we ought to no longer identify with various groups, but rather suggests that we ought to simply accept that groups are fragmented and do not require perfect lock-step coherence among its members. Regarding her identity, Hill Fletcher reflects: "The hybridity of my identity means that although I do not identify completely with any one given category or community, I partially identify with many. The idea of hybrid identities and incomplete identification *within* a category can be embraced as the potential for Christians to forge solidarities *outside* the Christian community."[23]

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19 AAR Religions in Schools Task Force and Diane L. Moore, *Guidelines for Teaching About Religion in K-12 Public Schools in the United States*, 12-14.
20 Fletcher, "Shifting Identity," 14-15.
21 Ibid., 14.
22 There may be aspects of other groups that we align with even though we do not affiliate with that group. For instance, I like to run and have completed marathons, but I do not consider myself a "marathoner." Likewise, comedian Mitch Hedberg made this point when he said, "I like to boat, but I just don't want to ever be referred to as a 'boating enthusiast.'"
23 Fletcher, "Shifting Identity," 19 (*emphasis* hers).

A word of caution here about taking Hill-Fletcher's point about the "logic of identity" to its logical conclusion when applied to religious identities. If carried to the "Nth degree," I suppose, then it is possible that religious identities (of any kind regardless of varied hybridities) become endangered of losing all meaning whatsoever – so much so that ground is lost for recognizing an "inter" and "trans" in interreligious and transreligious theology and dialogue. This is simply to say that certain limits, at some point, ought to be identified, even if established for temporary constructive working purposes. In other words, even though religions are internally diverse, it is not the case that contrasting definitions between traditions and identities can no longer be made. As Hill Fletcher reminds us, at the end of the day persons still do identify with certain groups but just not wholly and fully. This point on acceptable limitations is revisited below in the context of syncretism.

Hill Fletcher leads the way towards the constructive bridge between embracing hybrid identities and interreligious engagement in her suggestion that partial identification within one religious community can foster solidarity with those outside it. Her rationale suggests that since religious persons are "at home" with others who identify with their religion even though they do not identify with them wholly and fully (since, after all, religions are fragmented, complex, dynamic, internally diverse, and embedded in cultures), then there ought to be other groups with whom they will also feel "at home" with despite not identifying with those groups wholly and fully. For instance, it is not uncommon for some Christians to identify more closely with some non-Christians than they do with their fellow Christians based on shared culture, language, values, and even theological beliefs with those non-Christians. It is no stretch of the imagination to imagine how a mainline Protestant Christian might identify more closely with a Reform Jew or secular humanist than with an Evangelical Christian for several reasons due to shared hybridities between and among those of the Protestant, Jew, and humanist. Within such interreligious relations, contends Hill Fletcher, exist the potential for interreligious solidarity.

However, within such forged interreligious relations of solidarity a new "third place" is generated thus accommodating the inevitable instance of transreligious engagement. Further, if the focus is on theologies then transreligious theology occurs. The reason for this, again, is due not only to the fragmented, complex, dynamic, internally diverse, and cultural embeddedness of religions, but even more so due to the complexity and ever dynamic multiple hybridity of personal individual religious identities. Grung recognizes the value of interreligious encounter in this understanding of religion,

> Religious boundaries and religious traditions as such are not to be regarded as fixed, but rather flexible or fluid. Other human differences such as gender, ethnicity and social differences may then be recognized and thematized. To openly challenge religious differences creates space for more criticism of the traditions in the dialogue, including criticism of gendered power hierarchies and colonial discourses embedded in religious interpretations. . . . . This way of conceptualizing interreligious dialogue opens up the possibility for the dialogue not only to change the broader society but also to create new interpretations of the religious traditions themselves and possibly transform them."[24]

Acknowledging hybrid religious identities, as Hill Fletcher and Grung have done, creates opportunities to constructively exploit the inherent internal diversity of religions. This gives rise to the phenomenon of multiple religious identities. There are countless instances of this in history and many more emerging as globalization continues to bring cultures together in intimate and interpersonal ways. Hill Fletcher recognizes some common ones when she writes:

> Rather than perceiving a deep gulf between "Jewish" and "Buddhist," we can identify "Buddhist-Jews" being shaped by and participating in both communities. Looking at the Christian community through the lens of hybridity, we can also recognize theologians shaped by the multiple traditions of Hinduism and Christianity. I have friends who recognize Confucian elements in their practice of Christianity, and I have heard of Vietnamese American Catholics who maintain a Buddhist shrine in their homes. A colleague from Nigeria describes how his Christian uncle often turns in times of crisis to African traditional religion so that he might connect with the spiritual realm alive in Africa.[25]

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24 Grung, "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religious," 12-13.
25 Fletcher, "Shifting Identity," 21-22.

If it is the case that transreligious theology holds to: a) that the particularity of individual religious identities of those within religious traditions ought to maintained, respected, and acknowledged (thus upholding the robust internal diversity of religions), and b) a novel third space is opened up in the process of interreligious encounter, then the case might be made that interreligious theology is often (perhaps most often or always) transreligious. Catherine Cornille, in her well-known work on interreligious dialogue, proposes what she believes to be five "conditions" under which constructive interreligious dialogue ought to take place: humility, commitment, interconnection, empathy, and hospitality.[26] If it is the case that these ought to be in place, then it may be that interreligious dialogue is always predisposed to include, become, and/or simply function as transreligious dialogue and theology. In particular, the first condition of humility makes this apparent in its call for the "recognition of the very possibility of change or growth within one's own tradition."[27] Cornille focuses on doctrinal or epistemic humility, without which one often exhibits the attitude of an arrogant "know-it-all" with the view that other religions have nothing to teach resulting in a dead-end interaction without much hope for change and transformation through dialogue. When practitioners in a given religion innovate and push for change and growth, "each new interpretation pretends to preserve the original and unchanging truth revealed to its founder. As such, the reality of change and growth tends to be minimalized, ignored, or effaced, as every new tradition or school of interpretation claims to offer a more authentic or faithful interpretation of the original revelation."[28] Thus, Cornille expresses the rarity of genuine innovation. However, if these innovators who push for change within a given tradition, due to encounters with other religions, are able to let go of this idea that somehow they are simply just tapping into the original ("more authentic or faithful") interpretation of their religion, and instead see their progress as something new arising out of the various pressing historical and cultural questions of their time, then perhaps they can knowledge their progress as leading to something entirely new without denying the authenticity of what those in their religious tradition believed and practiced before.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith refers to this as a "continuous creation" view of religious history for which he famously advocates.[29] Instead of assuming all religious truth was revealed at the origin of a religion's history, the continuous creation view holds that religious truth unfolds over time in and through a historical process. Some traditions have more resources for supporting this view than others. Smith points to Western Protestant traditions as being especially threatened by this attitude of always retreating to the origins for the fullness of truth at the expense of what has unfolded since. Moving from the either/or mentality of striving for the authentic teachings of a given tradition, Smith advocates for accepting all teachings in the history of a religious tradition that have proved spiritually insightful and influential for those identifying with that religion. He operates on the premise that all "the various religious movements of the world, Christian and other, have been constructed, and have kept being constantly reconstructed and modified, by human beings - in response (in part) to something that transcends the movement and that they have recognized as transcending it."[30] If the process of modification includes the discarding of older constructions, then that is fine so long as those older constructions are not denied their rightful place as being spiritually relevant to those who were influenced by them. New constructions emerge within religions, sometimes adding to, and other times replacing, existing constructions, which make for rather complex internally diverse ever-blossoming traditions. When this takes place as an outgrowth of the encounters between and among religious traditions, the emerging new constructions can be affirmed without denying old ones. If this is the case, then with interreligious encounter and its resulting theology, it means that it is probably often the case that these encounters are also instances of transreligious encounter that produce transreligious theology.

A further case might be also be made that the approach of transreligious theology implicitly takes place in the doing of all theology, including both inter- and intra-religious theology. This is especially the case the broader one's understanding of the terms "God" and/or "religion." Michael Himes recounts his time as

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26 Cornille, "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue," and *The Im-Possibility of Interreligious Dialogue*.
27 Cornille, "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue," 21.
28 Ibid., 21-22.
29 Smith, *Towards a World Theology*, 152-79.
30 Smith, "Idolatry in Comparative Perspective," 59; also quoted in Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 82.

a graduate student at the University of Chicago where Paul Tillich was a professor. Himes remembers how Tillich sometimes, on the first day of the semester, stood in front of the class and looked out at his students. After a pause, Tillich uttered the word "Gott" in a German accent. After letting that sink in with his students, Tillich explained, "Whatever came into your head when I said the word 'God,' is not God."[31] Tillich's main point may be that no matter what we say or think about God is inadequate, and a further point might be that if theology is simply "talking about the divine," then anyone with the concept of God (no matter how inadequate) is a theologian. Even further, I'd like to suggest, that if all the students in the class were to compare their concepts of God I suspect that no two concepts would be perfectly identical. Even if they all self-identify as Christians, it is probably the case that they all have their own unique concepts of God in the sense that no two of them are exactly and perfectly identical.

The term religion can also be understood quite broadly. Tillich's well-known definition of religion as simply "the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of our life,"[32] makes it theoretically possible that each person holds and maintains their own unique religion regardless of whether they identify with Christianity, Judaism, and so forth. To be fair to Tillich here, he never had in mind that all of the ultimate concerns that people devote themselves to are ultimately true, valid, and to be placed equally alongside all true ultimate concerns. However, the point about the possibility of each person pursuing their own unique ultimate concern as their religion (regardless of its validity in the eyes of Tillich) stands. So it may be the case that transreligious theology not only finds fertile soil in the context of interreligious encounter, but also in intrareligious encounter since at a significant and deep level of an individuals' faith it is just that, individual. Certainly there is a very important, perhaps the most important, communal aspect to faith which often informs and influences an individual's faith. Nonetheless, the faith and agency of a religious person stands firm as a rather unique instance at deep, significant, and complex level of personhood. A truly transreligious theology is ever new and dynamic due to the intense personal nature and particularity of individual religious faith and practice.

If it is the case that transreligious theology takes place much more often than explicitly recognized, then perhaps it need not always be understood as an ultra-meta-transcendent pursuit of theological discourse that takes place beyond all religious identifiers such as Jewish Theology, Hindu Theology, Islamic Theology, and so on. Those doing transreligious theology may still carry their respective trump cards. That is, a self-identified Christian need not leave her tradition and no longer self-identify as a Christian or a Christian theologian in order to do transreligious theology. Rather she can engage in Christian theology done transreligiously. Likewise, Islamic theology can be done transreligiously, Hindu theology can be done transreligiously, and so on. Christian theologian Keith Ward's approach might be understood this way. He understands that in the meeting of religions and their theologies, "the opportunity exists for conversations in which each tradition is modified by its greater empathy for the insights embodied in other traditions."[33] In the process, something new is generated thus satisfying one of the main criteria of transreligious theology, and thus leading to "a more expansive truth"[34] without being uprooted, or disqualified, from Christian theology proper. In this manner, transreligious theology may be often unavoidable and, if engaged, most certainly appropriate and welcomed.

Lingering Challenges

There remain understandable obstacles and challenges for embracing a theological discourse as open as transreligious theology. Perhaps the main challenges and perceived threats are nothing new, and grow out of the two components stressed by the understanding of transreligious theology put forth in this article. Recall that the two components of transreligious theology are that a) it takes seriously the fluid, dynamic,

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31 Himes, *Doing the Truth in Love*, 9.
32 Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions*, 6.
33 Ward, "Liberal Theology and the God of Love," 198.
34 Ibid.

and porous borders of religion and religious identities, and b) it calls for the generation of something novel beyond the religious traditions involved. Lingering challenges stemming from these components include the knee-jerk revulsion to the possibility of syncretism, and "frustration overload" that might result from the sheer overwhelming complexity and messiness of religions and religious identities.

Regardless of one's openness to interreligious discourse and engagement, syncretism, it seems, remains a popular charge, and a negative one at that. For any properly ordered and constructive conversation on the topic of syncretism, it is helpful to draft a working definition and understanding of syncretism before going on with battering it into the ground as something to avoid. The reason for this is because the word syncretism is similar to words such as "spirituality" and "religion," two words often taken for granted in that many assume they know what these words mean until they have to define them.[35] "Hard" syncretism is often understood as the combining of several different aspects from different religions to form some new religious view that is not found in any of the religions being drawn from. This is usually a worrisome form of syncretism and rather threatening to many who identify as rooted in a particular tradition (especially ones being drawn on). Grung recognizes that the use of the prefix trans- "may be understood as a challenge or a threat to religious boundaries [because] the participants in the dialogue wish to keep stable in order to feel secured in their own religious identity."[36] The worry, of course, is the construction of a whole new religion *in toto*; something that is altogether different from the two or more religious traditions originally in conversation. However, "soft" syncretism can also be understood as a manner of combing elements of two or more traditions with an aim to clarify or enhance practices, ideas, and concepts already present in one or more of the traditions. This is clearly much less threatening. An example of soft syncretism might be Aquinas' use of Aristotle and Greek philosophical language and categories in the articulation of his Christian theology, or John Keenan's Mahayana Buddhist philosophy and language to enhance the Christian understanding of Jesus.

Transreligious theology, as described above, opens opportunities for something novel, the so-called "third place." At first glance, this component of transreligious theology seems to make it vulnerable to the hard syncretism defined in the preceding paragraph. However, this something new being produced need not hi-jack the entire tradition so as to make the religion *in toto* unrecognizable compared to what it was prior to the innovation. For instance, if a transreligious theological project drawing on Christianity ended up producing the claims that Jesus was not the messiah (in any sense of the term), Jesus has no redeeming value, and that Jesus' teachings should be ignored, then we would be hard-pressed to find any followers of Christianity that would endorse such a view as coming anywhere close to Christian teaching of any stripe. However, if the project is more akin to what S. Mark Heim does, in his attempt to describe the impersonal dimension of the Christian concept of the Trinity by drawing on the Buddhist concept of *anicca* (emptiness) and Hinduism's *Vedanta*,[37] all without making it something utterly unrecognizable to Christians, then such syncretism need not cause scandal among those worried about such inter- and transreligious comingling. Perhaps a simple test for those worried about syncretism (which not everyone is) and engaged in transreligious theology is simply to ask whether the novel component produced fundamentally alters the religious tradition(s) *in toto* and/or makes it/them unrecognizable to its/their adherents.

Religions are complicated and internally diverse. Religious identities are messy, multiple, and hybrid. This can most certainly be overwhelming and lead to frustration overload. I see this in my students and have experienced it myself (and still do). If my students experience this type of "brain-pain"[38] in our class on religion, I have succeed in doing part of my job. However, if they remain frustrated and without adequate means for coping with it, and without recourse to constructively process it, then I have failed in doing part of my job. The sheer overwhelming complexity of the nature of religion and religious identity can

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35 Phillip Sheldrake writes, "Spirituality is one of those subjects whose meaning everyone claims to know until they have to define it." Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History*, 40.

36 Grung, "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religious," 11.

37 Heim, "A Trinitarian View of Religious Pluralism."

38 "Brain-pain" here refers to the necessary, difficult, and challenging work of forcing ourselves to rethink traditionally over-simplified (uncomplicated) views of reality in an effort to reconstruct a more thoroughly realistic and complicated view of reality.

be stifling, and unproductively so. It can hold us up and make us reluctant to get our hands messy. As Grung points out in the quote above, it can be a perceived threat to our own religious boundaries and security. Religious communities do not desire to be actively destructive of their own tradition and identities (and usually they do not desire to be destructive of traditions and identities outside their community as well) and, perhaps even more so than my students, religious communities do not want to be overwhelmed with the complexity of religion to the point of frustration overload. This is the challenge. A possible way forward is to provide communities and students with resources and models that facilitate the move out of the seemingly desperate deconstruction of religious identities and categories. Once boundaries have been threatened, destabilized, deconstructed, frustrated, and knocked-down, then reconstruction, regeneration, and emergent growth can happen. When a student or community realizes this, the "brain-pain" becomes more welcome and liberating. In short, destruction becomes welcome when seen in light of reconstruction. Grung recognizes this at play in the context of dialogue.

> This way of conceptualizing interreligious dialogue opens up the possibility for the dialogue not only to change the broader society but also to create new interpretations of the religious traditions themselves and possibly transform them. It would not promote religious values over secular, but rather discuss the relationship between the two. This model creates instability – or rather takes into consideration the instability existing in the field, and although the model it could be criticized to deconstruct religious boundaries and challenge religious traditions, it opens up such things as canonical scriptures and religious norms and practice for feminist and postcolonial criticism.[39]

The welcome and liberating possibilities become particularly evident when oppressive and unjust social structures can be criticized, rooted out, and eliminated.[40]

Religious and interreligious dialogue is currently in need of this push from transreligious theology and dialogue. It can nudge religious and interreligious theology and dialogue out of their usual secure comfort zones and possibly oversimplified view of religious identities and pull them into the liberative and imaginative growth-filled spaces of transreligious theology. This can only encourage interreligious encounter, which may chart the course for an unavoidable encounter with transreligious dialogue and theology. This process, although perhaps involving "brain-pain" and stretching, does not need to be perceived as a threat or challenge to our religious traditions and identities, but rather an opportunity for growth and innovation.

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39 Grung, "Inter-Religious or Trans-Religious," 13.

40 Grung recognizes this can include both religion and secular values (secular here connoting "non-religious" and not "anti-religious"). For instance, Oddbjørn Leirvik concretely demonstrates this in the context of Muslim-Christian relations in contemporary Norway in his book *Interreligious Studies: A Relational Approach to Religious Activism and the Study of Religion*.

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