

Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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Jon Paul Sydnor*

The Breadth of the Riches

Transreligious Theology, Particularity, and Universality

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Abstract: Is transreligious theology possible? Yes, but only as a very specific practice. If we accept the neologism „transreligious“ then we must understand it in contrast with the more traditional terms „interreligious“ and „comparative“. Interpreted this way, „transreligious theology“ describes religious discourse about ultimate reality between those with no particular religious identity. Their conversation is panreligious, treating all theological resources equally, without preference for any tradition over any other tradition. This conversation will be quite different from interreligious dialogue or comparative theology, in which participants claim a religious identity while remaining open to the insights of other traditions. Hence, „transreligious theology“ is a descriptive term rather than a prescriptive method. It is already practiced by the non-religiously affiliated who hold an interest in the spirituality of all religions. Even though it may be helpful to some, it is not a necessary practice, since effective theological development can still occur between those with specific religious identities, and by those who only study their own religious traditions.

Keywords: transreligious theology; comparative theology; interreligious dialogue; interfaith; comparative religion; theology; world religions; religious studies; epistemology; difference

Only the Particular Is Universal

“In the particular lies the universal,” asserts James Joyce.¹ This writer’s adage insists that we pay attention to life in all its texture, with all the specificity of place and person, admitting and expressing the absolute uniqueness of every human story. Symbolic literature fails existentially because not one of us is a symbol, not one of us is *Everyman*. In that 15th century morality play, the character Everyman faces eternal judgment by God. He begs the assistance of a variety of allegorical characters, including Kindred, Goods, Knowledge, and Strength, but they all abandon him. Through Confession and Penance, he is able to strengthen his Good Deeds, which agree to accompany him before God. Now confident, Everyman climbs into his grave, with his Good Deeds, to stand before God in judgment.²

Everyman was staged repeatedly in the 1400s through royal and ecclesiastical sponsorship. It was viewed widely because people had few other choices for entertainment. Today, literature students read *Everyman* out of historical interest, not because it speaks deeply to their 21st century condition. Indeed, the Everyman in the play has become almost Nobody today, in our radically changed culture. *Everyman*’s universal character, Everyman, has ceased to function as a symbol because no one is every one. Instead, every one of us is particular, a new and changing conglomeration of habits, idiosyncrasies, features,

¹ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 505.

² *Everyman and Medieval Miracle Plays*.

*Corresponding author: Jon Paul Sydnor, Emmanuel College, Boston, USA, E-mail: jonpaulsydnor@gmail.com

mannerisms, and values. All these variations within individuals, placed into relationship with other equally unique persons, constitute a social system. The decisions and actions of the constituents of that social system create history, the unfolding of forever novel human events in time. Infinite, overwhelming, flowing detail composes human reality. It is what we are. If a writer abstracts from that and writes of universal types that illustrate universal truths, if a writer strives for universal appeal by generalizing beyond the particular—then that writer will not be read, because that writer writes for no one.

So it is with faith. Every one of us is a particular person with a particular faith. Personally, I am categorized with one billion other people as Protestant Christian, but that tells you little about me. I share that categorization with biblical fundamentalists, Nigerian Pentecostals, and High Church Anglicans. Even if I tell you that I am Presbyterian, I still share that category with South Korean Presbyterians, Indian Dalit Presbyterians, and Westminster Presbyterians (USA), a small denomination that subscribes exclusively to a confession I believe to be outdated. Categories exist and are useful, but if we follow religious particularity to its end, we always end with an individual.

Transreligious Theology, Particularity, and Universality

Just as the only constant is change, so the only universal is particularity. Given this state of affairs, the concept of transreligious theology raises crucial questions about particularity and universality. Specifically, what would transreligious theology be? Dr. Jerry Martin suggests that transreligious theology would not be confessional theology identified with a tradition, but rather “Theology *per se*”. He proposes that we “extend current comparative work in the direction of theology writ large.”³ In this sense, transreligious theology would draw from all religious traditions for all religious traditions, for all religious people: “Transreligious theology makes the divine reality the subject-matter, to be accessed and reasoned about in whatever ways illuminate the subject-matter, rather than theology as the articulation of truths within a tradition,” Dr. Martin writes.⁴

With Gadamer, I do not think that human beings can think from a traditionless place. Our tradition gives us the content through which we engage the religious other. It gives us the questions we ask, as well as the self that we offer to our dialogue partner. Epistemologically, it is impossible for human beings to think from any objective, neutral position. We are intellectually constituted by our specificity. Moreover, our specificity—and that of our religious neighbor—is our greatest blessing. Transreligious theology risks compromising this blessing by claiming an epistemological position that does not exist and should not exist. Even if we could be objective, neutral, and transcendent, we should not. Our situatedness allows us to offer difference to one another, and through difference, transformation.⁵

Transreligious Theology Will Produce More Difference, Thankfully

The details of our unique thought worlds us to bless one another with dynamism. Through difference we perennially offer and receive the opportunity to change.

We cannot escape this difference. If only the particular is universal, then any transreligious theology, or theology writ large, or theology *per se* would be another particular theology pertaining to a particular person in a particular time and place. It would characterize an individual’s thought about God, and probably only that individual’s thought about God, given the uniqueness of every human autobiography.⁶

Indeed, transreligious theology would produce even more theological differentiation. The more sources we draw from, the more different our theologies will become. A large group of people studying the world’s theologies for inspiration will end up tremendously more diversified than a large group of

³ Martin, “What is Theology Without Walls?”

⁴ Jerry Martin, personal communication, January 11, 2016.

⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 276.

⁶ Hilbert, “Experience and Tradition,” 63.

Christians studying the Westminster Confession. Jonathan Z. Smith has powerfully argued that diversifying our sources will not and should not produce a monomyth, patterns in comparative religion, universal archetypes, or a mystical core, as Joseph Campbell, Mircea Eliade, Carl Jung, and Huston Smith suggest, respectively.⁷ Instead, diversifying our sources will produce a greater diversity of theologies.

Even syncretism contributes to diversity rather than resolving it. Every syncretism becomes a new religion, whether it is Islam drawing from Judaism, Christianity, and polytheistic Arab sources, or Sikhism's mystico-ethical union of Hinduism and Islam, or Akbar's attempt to unite all his subjects' religions into one, or Lin Zhaoen's Three Religions, or Bahai's self-conscious cosmopolitanism, or contemporary Unitarian Universalism. Any new metatheology that hopes to epitomize all theology will soon become a particular theology, competing with other theologies in the marketplace of ideas.

Indeed, every contemporary theology is a syncretistic theology developed from multireligious sources. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith argues in *Towards a World Theology*, history reveals that each tradition is a product of religions interacting.⁸ Religion is braided, and we are the contemporary stylists of those braids. By inheritance we practice multiple religious belonging.⁹ Read with an eye to surrounding cultures, even the Bible becomes an example of comparative theology. Purity has never and will never exist.

Hence transreligious theology, like every other syncretism in history, would inevitably become theology for a specific group of people in a specific time and place. As universalist and nonsectarian, transreligious theology might find a hospitable environment among academics in institutions of higher education, as Wesley Wildman has positively noted.¹⁰ It would not take place exclusively there, but primarily there.

The Premises of Transreligious Theology

Perhaps this meditation on syncretism is irrelevant, since the purpose of transreligious theology is *not* to discover a common core to all religions. "Disagreement is fruitful," notes Dr. Martin.¹¹ At the same time, he does allow that such a discovery "may make a useful contribution." He also implies that "what is ultimate" exists, and that we can "sort out" what is true about it. But if we accept that *an* Ultimate Reality exists, and that we have the criteria necessary to discern it, then we are starting our research programme with profound theological claims. Ontologically, there is one and only one Ultimate Reality. Epistemologically, we can know that Ultimate Reality. Axiologically, we have the criteria necessary to distinguish false statements about Ultimate Reality from true statements about Ultimate Reality.

Each of these claims is highly contentious and needs addressing. They also place the transreligious programme itself within *a priori* theological categories stressing the unity of the divine, the human capacity for religious discovery (rather than an exclusive reliance on revelation), and the human capacity to discern truth from falsehood (a capacity denied by many, most notably Kierkegaard in *Sickness Unto Death*¹²). What will happen when the transreligious theologian encounters theology that disagrees with the premises of transreligious theology?

"Transreligious" as Neologism

We should also note the neologism "transreligious". Although the term has been used before, neither "transreligious" nor "trans-religious" are recognized by the Oxford English Dictionary. The coinage suggests some deficiency within the current options, "interreligious" and "comparative".

⁷ Smith, *Relating Religion*, 28-34.

⁸ Smith, *Towards a World Theology*.

⁹ Cornille, "Introduction: The Dynamics of Multiple Belonging," 1-6.

¹⁰ Wildman, Theology Without Walls Forum.

¹¹ Martin, Theology Without Walls Forum. <http://tww.freeforums.net/thread/6/theology-walls>. January 23, 2016.

¹² Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling* and *Sickness Unto Death*, 406.

Let us focus on “interreligious” for brevity’s sake. Why prefer “transreligious” to the more conventional and established “interreligious”? Alas, the prefixes themselves cannot definitively answer this question since they overlap considerably. “Inter” can mean “between” or “among”. “Trans” can mean “across” or “beyond”. But Americans use the *interstate* highway system for *transportation*. Two businesswomen might *interact* about a *transaction*.

Yet, “trans” does carry connotations that “inter” lacks. If we transcend our differences, then we go beyond them. If we are transformed, then we have gone beyond our former self. Christ’s divinity was revealed at his transfiguration. The elements of the Eucharist are transubstantiated.

So, what does “transreligious” mean that “interreligious” does not? I do not think it means “across religion,” as in Trans-Siberian railroad or Trans-Atlantic cable, because you can never reach the other side of religion. My concern is that “transreligious” might mean “beyond religion” or “beyond any one participant’s religion,” as if there were some uber-religion, above us, waiting to be discovered.

To an extent, this concern is warranted by Dr. Martin’s advocacy of “Theology from the Ground Up,” (*italics added*) which suggests vertical epistemological movement through comparative religion: “If we want to be open to the Ultimate on, you might say, *its own terms* rather than insisting that it conform to our familiar framework, we might proceed in a more open-ended, exploratory fashion. In either case, we will be engaging in Theology from the Ground Up.”¹³ At a conference in Boston I argued against this epistemological metaphor because any vertical movement, any movement toward the Ultimate “on its own terms,” is a movement from particularity to universality, from the textured to the general, from the situated to the transcendent. There, stultifying sameness dissolves all difference, leaving us with nothing to disagree about, hence nothing to learn.¹⁴

In my judgment, transreligious theology is *impossible* if it suggests any transcendence of particularity. According to the semantic analysis above, transreligious theology does suggest a point beyond the particular theologies that we engage. It suggests the ability to rise to a neutral, objective place above the religious specificities of particular religions. I would argue that such movement is impossible since no such place exists. For situated human thinkers, all epistemological movement is horizontal and no vertical movement is possible. We occupy a plane of particularity that we cannot—and should not want to—abandon. There is a transcendent vertical, insofar as there is a God, but for us that transcendent is only known through its immanence. We can only meet its power in our own particularity and in our neighbors’ inexhaustible difference.

According to Dr. Martin, transreligious theology or, as he also calls it, Theology Without Walls can be practiced by adherents of specific traditions. However, specific religious commitment would make transreligious theology methodologically redundant with comparative theology. According to Francis X. Clooney, comparative theology is open engagement with other religious traditions in order to develop your own tradition. As such, it is located but unboundaried, committed but dynamic.¹⁵ Practiced in this way, comparative theology is already theology without walls. It differs from Theology Without Walls in that it has a home tradition from which and for which it thinks. What is unique about Theology Without Walls is not so much that it has no walls, but that it has no home. (I mean this in an analytical and methodological sense, not pejoratively.) I have suggested, a little cheekily I must admit, that Dr. Martin call it Theology Without a Home, but we agree that such a clunky moniker is unmarketable.

Transreligious Theology Is Possible

Despite the reservations expressed above, there is a spiritual orientation and theological method that may be best described as transreligious. “Transreligious” would best describe those religious denominations and sociological groups that are equally open to all religions, with no preference for any one tradition.

¹³ Martin, “Theology Without Walls: Theology from the Ground Up (Opening Remarks).” *Italics added*.

¹⁴ Sydnor, “My Entirely Horizontal Spiritual Autobiography.”

¹⁵ Clooney, *Theology after Vedānta*, 7-9.

For example, Unitarian Universalism is radically open to all inputs. For most Unitarians, a quote from the Buddha is as good as a quote from the Christ, and an Eastern spiritual practice is as legitimate as a Western one. Unitarian Universalists are a denomination, but they are a panreligious denomination. They encompass the religions more than, say, the Southern Baptist Convention, which shuns yoga and claims that Buddhists are going to hell (as well as Unitarian Universalists, probably).¹⁶

If a Southern Baptist engages in dialogue with an Orthodox Jew, then this dialogue would clearly be *interreligious*, since it would take place between two people with strong religious identifications. If a Unitarian engages in dialogue with a Bahai or Ramakrishna, then this dialogue would be *transreligious*, since both would make reference to multiple religious sources in their conversation. Similarly, a spiritual conversation between two non-religiously affiliated spiritual seekers would be better described as *transreligious* than *interreligious*, since it would take place across all religions, rather than between any two of them. In this sense then, *transreligious* theology is possible.

Transreligious Theology Is Not Necessary

Is *transreligious* theology as a method so fruitful that everyone should practice it? Dr. Martin implies that this boundary-less method is prescriptive: “It has become increasingly evident to many religious scholars that there is truth in more than one tradition and that an adequate understanding of the divine reality must include those truths.”¹⁷

I, even as a comparative theologian, respectfully disagree. Consider the Amish. Their theology is boundaried. They are not seeking to change their thought world through interreligious dialogue or comparative theology. They do not embrace the Enlightenment or pluralism or multiculturalism.

On October 2, 2006 Charles Carl Roberts IV entered an Old Order Amish schoolhouse in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania and shot ten girls, killing five, before committing suicide. How did the Amish respond? They immediately preached forgiveness of the shooter. They reached out to his family, visiting his widow, her parents, and Mr. Roberts’ parents. One Amish man held the shooter’s father while he sobbed uncontrollably. Thirty members of the Amish community attended the shooter’s funeral. The Amish created a fund to help pay the medical expenses of the attack survivors, as well as a fund to help the shooter’s unemployed widow and two children.¹⁸

I have been spiritually challenged by the Amish response to the massacre as much as I have been spiritually challenged by, well, anything. To see others forgive when I would hate and embrace when I would scorn is humbling. I am a comparativist, and the Buddha has made me a better Christian, but not as good a Christian as the Amish. So neither *interreligious*, *transreligious*, nor *comparative* theology are essential to spiritual maturity. Faith, devotion, and a supportive community are.

The Promise of Comparison

Dr. Martin’s invigoration of the term “*transreligious* theology” is helpful descriptively but not prescriptively. Utilizing his concept of *transreligious* theology and Dr. Clooney’s concept of comparative theology, I (for example) would be described as a comparative theologian. I think with other religions from and for my home tradition, progressive Protestantism. I could not be a *transreligious* theologian because I have a strong Christian identity, even as that identity remains open to challenge and contribution from other traditions. Moreover, I do not maintain my Christian faith so that I can be a comparative theologian. I am a comparative theologian because I and my community experience Jesus of Nazareth as our uniquely powerful and inexhaustibly challenging revelation of God. Hence, we refer to him as Christ and ourselves as Christians. “*Transreligious* theologian” does not describe me accurately, and I could not authentically accept any prescription of *transreligious* theology.

¹⁶ Southern Baptist Convention, “How to Become a Christian.”

¹⁷ Martin, “Is *Transreligious* Theology Possible?”

¹⁸ Kraybill, Nolt, and Weaver-Zercher, *Amish Grace*, 3-65.

Nevertheless, transreligious theology does accurately describe the practice of non-religiously affiliated spiritual seekers and exchange between panreligious denominations such as Unitarians, Bahais, and Ramakrishnas. As such, it joins comparative theology and interreligious dialogue as a method that invokes multiple traditions in the religious quest. Many religious practitioners will utilize this multireligious approach, but many will not. They will continue to find inexhaustible riches within the depths of their own tradition.

For those who are open to the breadth of the riches, comparison holds great promise. Infinite particularity invites us on an infinite journey in an infinite quest.¹⁹ The voyage will never be completed. If, thirsting for a resolution that cannot be had, we rise above particularity into objective, transcendent truth, then the movement stops. But if the movement stops so does growth.²⁰ The purpose of infinite horizontal particularity is to supply us with an inexhaustible propellant by which we can ceaselessly develop. The goal is not to transcend our particularity; it is to fill our particularity with the divine by seeing how others fill their particularity with the divine. Through our difference we shall bless one another.

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¹⁹ Sydnor, *Rāmānuja and Schleiermacher*, 197-199.

²⁰ Rescher, *Pluralism*, 195-197.