

Is Transreligious Theology Possible?

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Transreligious Theology as the Quest for Interreligious Wisdom

Defining, Defending, and Teaching Transreligious Theology

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Abstract: This article seeks to define and defend the work of transreligious theology and invite a broad range of instructors from a variety of institutional settings to teach it. What is distinctive here is my definition of transreligious theology understood as the quest for interreligious wisdom. My central questions will be these: Just what is transreligious theology? Why should it be taught? Finally, this essay will take up the concrete question of how transreligious theology might be taught in a variety of institutional settings including undergraduate religious studies departments and even within the state university context.

Keywords: transreligious theology, interreligious wisdom, comparative theology, theology of religions

The Quest for Interreligious Wisdom

This article¹ seeks to define and defend the work of transreligious theology and invite a broad range of instructors from a variety of institutional settings to teach it.² What is distinctive here is my definition of transreligious theology understood as the quest for interreligious wisdom, a vital project in a time of robust religious diversity. My central questions will be these: Just what is transreligious theology? Why should it be taught? Finally, this essay will take up the concrete question of how. Just how might transreligious theology be taught in a variety of institutional settings including undergraduate religious studies departments and even within the state university context? I shall be mindful, of course, that the latter context raises some significant questions about the teaching of theology of *any* stripe.

Let me begin with the labor of definition. We all know definitions are never innocent, especially when a definition seeks to name and thereby constitute a field of study. Moreover, every definition of this sort implies and even amounts to a compressed theory. Transreligious theology, as I understand it, is constructive theology done in conversation with and drawing from the resources of more than one tradition. Several features of this definition require extended elaboration.

First, transreligious theology is not merely an exercise in comparing theologies. The transreligious theologian does far more than engage in comparison. Why? Because the comparison of theologies might

1 This article was initially given as the plenary address for the Mid-Atlantic Regional AAR conference. I'd like to thank then President Jill Snodgrass and other members of the Executive Committee for the invitation to give this lecture.

2 A variety of terms are now in use for normative constructive reflection that draws from the resources of more than one tradition. These include comparative theology, "theology without walls," interreligious theology, and now here, transreligious theology. I am not invested in any one particular term. All hold promise as well as limitations. In this essay, I join with those who prefer the term "transreligious theology" although I also use the term "interreligious" throughout.

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well be done for non-theological reasons. Just as comparative religionists compare rituals, myths, cultic practices, religious experiences and the like, so too they might well and indeed should compare theologies. Comparative religionists ought to compare the theologies of Barth and Madhva or, say, Tillich and Sankara, but such comparison does not itself make for transreligious theology. Comparison only becomes properly theological when comparison is motivated by and is made to serve theological purposes—when we seek to understand theological themes more completely by drawing on the resources of more than one tradition. To be still more explicit, if the transreligious theologian fails to advance constructive theological proposals—or at the very least engage in comparison for the sake of asking and eventually answering theological questions—he or she has not yet done transreligious theology.

Here, my definition resonates well with the definition of comparative theology offered by Francis X. Clooney, who is our most prolific and influential comparative theologian. Clooney writes,

*Comparative theology—comparative and theological beginning to end—marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.*³

With Clooney, I share the commitment to fresh theological insights. I would note only one subtle distinction. I speak of transreligious theology as constructive theology that learns from more than one tradition, but I do not seek to limit or specify the nature of the transreligious theologian's identification with any particular religious tradition or community.

Clooney is right to characterize comparative theology as customarily a process of crossing over and coming back—a process of encountering and learning from another tradition and returning to one's own home tradition. Nonetheless, I want to remain open to the possibility of other more complex and unpredictable patterns of affiliation and non-affiliation. I do not wish to make a neat and singular point of origin or mode of religious belonging normative for transreligious theology. The truth seeking work of transreligious theology might be of interest to persons who engage in multiple religious participation, double-belonging or even none. Seekers, the SBNRs (the spiritual but not religious) and other kinds of nones might still find themselves interested in truth seeking inquiry despite and even because of their complex and sometimes even ambivalent dispositions toward traditional modes of religious belonging. Insofar as the term “comparative theology” is identified narrowly with Clooney's definition thereof—a definition that seems to presume, at least at the outset, singular religious belonging—there is a virtue in using a novel term like “transreligious theology” to signal that normative theological reflection need not presume any particular mode of religious belonging. Other than this concern regarding identity, I do not sharply distinguish between comparative theology and transreligious theology. Hence, much that I say below about transreligious theology is applicable also to the work of comparative theology broadly defined.

As a mode of truth seeking enquiry that draws upon the resources of more than one tradition, transreligious theology is, as already noted, different in kind from the work of comparative religion. Comparative religionists, whether they do their work as phenomenologists, historians, sociologists, or anthropologists, and regardless of whether they are explainers or interpreters, engage in comparison in order to understand the nature of “religion” as such or some more particular phenomenon within religion broadly understood. Hence, the comparative religionists might compare a variety of rituals in order to arrive at a deeper understanding of the nature of ritual. Likewise with myth, pilgrimage, or sacred place. There is every reason to believe that comparing how intellectuals within their various respective religious traditions do their work can also be an instructive enterprise for the comparative religionist.

The transreligious theologian will likely be interested in all of the above questions. Questions about the nature of myth, ritual, sacred place, sacred time, cosmogonies, the nature of religion, and the nature of the human are also of fundamental interest to the transreligious theologian. But that is not what makes the transreligious theologian what he or she is. The transreligious theologian is interested in the question of

³ Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

theological truth—the truth about ultimate reality, the world, and the human condition and turns to other traditions with the conviction that other traditions have much to teach us about such matters. The posture that the transreligious theologian brings toward other traditions is, therefore, notably different from that of the comparative religionist. The transreligious theologian's encounter with the other is a subject to subject relation—persons from other traditions are understood to be fellow inquirers into the truth about ultimate matters. This generalization applies even if the encounter with another tradition is textually mediated as is most often the case in Francis Clooney's case or in my own work.

Comparative *religionists*, by contrast, are not methodologically committed to questions about the possible or actual truth of claims, convictions, and practices of other traditions. Some within the field of comparative religion even maintain that the proper disposition of the theoretician to the religious person should be akin to the posture of the doctor to that of the patient. Here, I have in mind the work of Robert Segal, a provocative and entertaining theorist of religion. Segal writes,

The most apt metaphor for the modern study of religion is that of diagnosis. It is not that religion is an illness but that the scholar is like the doctor and the religious adherent like the patient. Just as the patient has the disease but defers to the doctor's diagnosis, so the adherent has religion but defers, or should defer, to the scholar's analysis. The scholar, not the believer, is the expert. The scholar's medicine kit contains what the believer lacks: theories. In religious studies, as in medicine, the doctor knows best.⁴

Now, it would be very easy to be distracted by the force and provocation of Segal's claim. But I appeal to Segal only to note that his is a radical but nonetheless permissible theoretical posture within comparative religion. The comparative religionist and others who advocate for a so-called scientific study of religion are under no methodological obligation to look to a variety of religious persons and communities as fellow inquirers into truth.

However, the transreligious theologian refuses such a reductive diagnostic and explanatory posture. Transreligious theologians are interested in the possible and actual truth of what believers from other traditions claim to know. Hence, their posture is not that of theoretical mastery or sovereignty but of *practical vulnerability*. To play with Segal's image in a mischievous fashion, the transreligious theologian—being one among the patients who “has religion”—remains open to the forms and versions of religion that other religious patients may have. The transreligious theologian is committed to remaining in such intimate proximity to other patients that he or she is open to contracting their versions of “the religious disease.” Put more plainly, the risks of conversion or multiple religious belonging remain ever-present possibilities for those who undertake the practice of transreligious theology.

By practical vulnerability, I mean that transreligious theologians remain open in principle and in practice to the claims and aims that religious traditions offer when those traditions hold that they afford transformative access to dimensions of ultimate reality by way of their scriptures, rituals, spiritual disciplines, religious experiences, and the like. The transreligious theologian may even undertake the disciplines of a tradition other than his or her own in order to see and to know as the other does. In this respect, the transreligious theologian's orientation toward religious practice and reflection is quite unlike that of Segal who maintains, “No doctor defers to a patient in making a diagnosis. The patient may harbor the ailment, but the doctor is trained to identify it. Deferring to the patient confuses the subject—the patient—with the student—the doctor. The doctor may solicit information from the patient, who is the equivalent of the informant, but the diagnosis rests with the doctor.”⁵

By contrast, the transreligious theologian entertains the radical assumption that persons from a variety of religious traditions may enjoy forms of wholeness and health that he or she may not enjoy precisely because persons from other traditions have access to and have taken up therapeutic regimen that are marginal to or perhaps even unavailable in one's own tradition. To explain what I mean, I need to offer a very brief and somewhat hasty account of my working theory of the religious.

⁴ Segal, “All Generalizations are Bad”, 158.

⁵ Ibid., 161. It is worth noting that even this hierarchical and unilateral image of medical practice feels obsolete and antiquated as doctors and patients now work in a far more relational and collaborative fashion.

I hold that to be religious is to seek comprehensive qualitative orientation. Religious persons seek to be rightly oriented on the largest possible scale—that is to say, to the world as such. The religious quest, in a peculiar sense, is comprehensive. However, the religious quest differs from other large-scale projects of orientation—the scientific quest, for example—because the religious quest is comprehensive in a distinctive sense. The scientific quest is restricted not only because it only seeks to know the real so far as it is knowable by empirical means as augmented by technical equipment. The scientific quest does not seek, at least explicitly and methodologically, to offer *affective* orientation. It does not aim—again, at least not explicitly—to inform *and* transform persons so that they know whether they ought to be detached or to be attached, to cling or not cling, to the world as interpreted. The religious quest is explicitly a matter of erotics—a work of orientation that seeks to shape personal as well as communal affect and desire.

The religious quest seeks to orient the whole person—mind, heart and body—to the real. The religious quest is not merely conceptual but is corporeal and affective. Religious persons and communities seek authentic existential comportment to the real as rightly interpreted. Such orientation requires religious communities to develop *interpretive schemes* and undertake *therapeutic regimen* by appeal to the always shifting and contested elements of a tradition's repertoire. No tradition is an interpretive scheme. Every tradition contains multiple interpretive schemes—hence the presence of profound contestation within every tradition—which seek to offer a reading of the real for the sake of right orientation. But no interpretive scheme alone accomplishes right orientation because orientation in the religious sense is a matter also of comportment. Comprehensive qualitative orientation takes place only when interpretive schemes are, as it were, installed in the heart, mind and body, by means of the disciplines of a particular therapeutic regimen.

Interpretive schemes are generated by appeal to a whole host of elements: myths, symbols, narratives as well as more explicitly developed reflective categories and even metaphysical systems. Therapeutic regimens include a host of practical disciplines such as the reading and memorizing of scriptures, meditation, ritual performance, iconolatry, and the like. Both are necessary for comprehensive qualitative orientation.

Consider the difference between understanding the Four Noble Truths and experiencing satori or becoming enlightened.⁶ One might understand the Four Noble Truths and one might even grant notional or conceptual assent to their truth, but it is quite another thing to experience satori. In the latter case, the interpretive scheme offered by some particular reading of the Four Noble Truths is complemented by a therapeutic regimen which, when followed, brings about a comprehensive transformation of the person who has undertaken that regimen. That is the difference between conceptual assent and a radically new comportment toward the world as described by a particular interpretive scheme.

With this brief sketch of my theory of the religious in place, we can now return to the question of transreligious theology. Transreligious theologians seek to know the world, the human condition, and ultimate reality insofar as it can be known by way of the interpretive schemes and therapeutic regimens of other traditions. Does this mean that the transreligious theologian must actually take up those therapeutic regimens? Surely to know the world as Buddhist practitioners do, it cannot be sufficient merely to engage in a study of Buddhist interpretive schemes alone. Remaining with the medical metaphors that I have been employing so far, one might say that the difference between knowing as Buddhists know and having information about Buddhist ideas is like the relationship between reading a prescription and taking it. Perhaps that's not quite fair. Surely the theologian does not merely read the prescription but also has an extensive knowledge of pharmacology so knows about the ingredients in the prescription and also has an extensive knowledge of how the medicine is supposed to work. Such knowledge is hardly trivial. Nonetheless, even the well informed pharmacologist gains no therapeutic benefit from his or her extensive knowledge of the medical properties and effects of a given drug, a knowledge that will in many cases exceed the theoretical knowledge of the persons who are taking the medicine. Might this not also be a richer and non-reductive metaphor by which to describe the relationship between the theoretician and religious persons than Robert Segal's metaphor of the all knowing doctor and the patient who is ill?

There is a profound difference between the knowledge acquired by someone who actually takes up the therapeutic regimen of another tradition and the knowledge acquired by those who know only the

⁶ For a standard and lucid presentation of the Four Noble Truths, see Gethin, *Foundations*, 59-84.

interpretive schemes of another tradition. Let's try another metaphor to get at this difference: the difference between a swimmer's knowledge of swimming and the knowledge possessed by non-swimmer who happens to be an expert in fluid dynamics and the scientific principles involved in how swimming is possible. The latter may have an extensive knowledge about the properties of water, buoyancy, the relative merits of the breaststroke and the backstroke and the like, but her knowledge is rather different from the knowledge enjoyed by the swimmer. Throw this expert in the pool unaided and the difference would soon become apparent. Surely then, there is a difference between practical knowledge of ultimate reality and a merely theoretical knowledge of the same. For the sake of economy, let's call the swimmer's knowledge first-order knowledge. And let us stipulate that the expert's knowledge of fluid mechanics is second-order knowledge.

Not all or even most transreligious theologians are likely to subject themselves to taking up and performing the therapeutic regimens of one or more traditions. Only transreligious theologians who are also double-belongers, like Paul Knitter, do that. Other persons who have sought such knowledge include persons like Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton. Their knowledge of religious matters is different in kind from the knowledge enjoyed even by respectful and sympathetic theologians who are open to other traditions but have not engaged in the disciplines that belong to the therapeutic regimen of those traditions. Interreligious wisdom is in its primary meaning the result of integrating into personal and communal life first-order theological knowledge derived from more than one tradition by way of transreligious theology. One thinks, for example, of persons such as Ruben Habito, a Christian theologian who is also a recognized Zen master and whose theological work offers a deep fusion and integration of resources from both traditions.⁷

Transreligious theologians who elect not take up the therapeutic regimens of other traditions can nonetheless be vulnerable and open to learning from what others have come to know by way of embracing other interpretive schemes and practicing other therapeutic regimen. In other words, one can also be practically vulnerable by way of engaging second-order knowledge alone. People who do not take up double belonging can be open to the possibility that there may be modes of healing and wholeness that persons from other traditions have access to that they themselves may not. They hold that it is indeed possible that zazen or koan practice offers insight into the features of experience that Eucharist does not and vice versa even if they themselves are not practitioners of both Zen and Christianity. Hence, transreligious theology can be truth-seeking inquiry that takes other persons and traditions seriously for the sake of mutual transformation, but such truth seeking inquiry can operate in multiple modes.

This multiplicity of modes is just as true for transreligious theology as it is for any academic study of theology. Differences in institutional setting and context will require different kinds of theological engagement. Theology within the context of monastic life is different from theological inquiry in seminaries, undergraduate liberal arts classrooms, and theology within the context of a state university. Some contexts permit actual engagement with therapeutic regimen; others do not. But even in the latter context, there can be a deep openness to and willingness to learn not just about but also from the interpretive schemes of more than one religious tradition.

Teaching Transreligious Theology: Possible Responses to Some Objections

With this theoretical discussion of transreligious theology in place, let's turn now in the direction of teaching transreligious theology. Can transreligious theology be taught? And if so, how, and in what sorts of institutional contexts? The work of teaching transreligious theology requires at least two elements. To begin with, teachers must explain and demonstrate the plausibility of the very idea; they must be prepared to refute the charge that transreligious theology is not a coherent or meaningful notion.

For example, even on the terms laid out above, some might hold that one simply cannot entertain more than one interpretive scheme let alone take up in one's life more than one therapeutic regimen. Consider for example the following objection with respect to therapeutic regimen: you might well hold that just because

⁷ See, for example, Habito, *Zen and the Spiritual Exercises*.

your neighbor's medication works for her, that is no reason for you to raid her medicine cabinet. Mixing and matching therapeutic regimens seems a fraught and risky proposition. Challenges of this sort must be vigorously and compellingly met. Questions such as these demonstrate that the teacher must defend transreligious theology on both theological and ethical grounds. Secondly, the teacher of transreligious theology must offer an introduction to some relatively accessible methods for the practice of transreligious theology.

First, how might we respond to the challenge that transreligious theology isn't even theology? Doesn't theology proceed by appeal to scriptures and other sources that are regarded as revelatory by one's home tradition? How then can the theologian turn to scriptures and other sources from outside one's home tradition? Isn't theology dependent on divine disclosure apart from which it cannot proceed? Isn't the theologian bound and constrained by what his or her tradition believes to be God's full and final self-disclosure? If the Christian, for example, believes that God has revealed herself fully in the life of Jesus the Christ, why then should the theologian be *theologically interested* in other traditions? You might want to know something about other traditions for the sake of being a good neighbor, but why a properly *theological* interest in another tradition? How can one hope to learn from another tradition if all that can be known about God is already comprehensively known here at home?

The transreligious theologian is often not held back by the need to answer these questions when he or she works as a scholar. He or she is more interested in getting down to the work of transreligious theology and less interested in generating a prolegomena that would defend transreligious theology prior to its inception. Transreligious theologians typically prefer a "by their fruits, you shall know them" test. However, the teacher of transreligious theology has to address these questions, at least in some preliminary fashion, as these questions are sure to be present in the minds of many students. Let us call this set of objections insider or confessional objections.

Transreligious theologians also face non-confessional objections—the sort of objections that might be leveled against the teaching of theology as such. Theologians are altogether familiar with such objections. Many hold that theology can and must only be taught at confessional institutions such as seminaries or church-related institutions. We are all only too aware that the distinction between *teaching about religion* and *teaching of religion* is practically indispensable for the very existence of religion departments, most especially in state universities, and the field as such. In this light, transreligious theology with its call to practical vulnerability to the truth of more than one tradition seems problematic because it appears, at first glance, to be an instance of teaching *of* religion. In sum, transreligious theologians have to face charges of incoherence and impossibility from both sides—from both confessional insiders and critical outsiders. How can one teach transreligious theology without facing up to and responding to these challenges?

Let me turn to the insider or confessional challenges first. For over four decades now, theologians of religions—my preferred term is theologians of religious diversity—have offered persuasive reasons for defending the idea that God has not left himself without witness in other traditions (Hebrews 1). Inclusivist and pluralist theologians have defended the reality and presence of God's saving power in other traditions. The transreligious theologian must appeal to this literature in the classroom and outside it in order to argue as follows: 1) Save for some hard core exclusivists, most Christian theologians have for some time now argued that God's saving presence and power is available in other traditions; 2) God's saving power is inseparable from God's revealing power; God saves by giving Godself as what saves is God not anything less than God. 3) If God's saving and revealing reality is found in other traditions, other traditions also have knowledge of God/ultimate reality. 4) That knowledge is likely to find expression in language, categories and thought forms that are markedly different from one's own. 5) Hence, it is quite likely that others have access to dimensions of the divine life or of ultimate reality that may not be found in our own or, more likely, underemphasized, neglected, or even marginalized in our own. 6) If God has made Godself known in this way to others, we who desire to know God more fully have theological reasons for studying other religious traditions. We can and ought to be driven by what Krister Stendhal calls "holy envy" for what others have come to know about God/ultimate reality by way of their distinctive traditions. Hence, transreligious theology is in fact both possible and desirable.

A second way of defending the plausibility and meaningfulness of transreligious theology is to insist that theology has always proceeded transreligiously. The Church Fathers, like Gregory of Nyssa and others, were explicitly aware of and indebted to a whole set of extra-Christian resources. Moreover, the earliest Jesus followers had no “Christian resources” from which to do theology. This fragile community had to appeal to Jewish traditions, mystery religions, the philosophical and cultural legacy of Greek and Hellenistic traditions to express their conviction that something world changing had happened in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. The very language and categories that Jesus followers had to use to express that conviction were dependent upon a history of revelation that took place in non-Christian traditions. The earliest modes of theological thinking were thus necessarily comparative and constructive at the same time. The notion that construction by way of comparison is a novel development is therefore mistaken. For these reasons, transreligious theology is not only possible but actual. We’ve been up to it for some time now. The Christian theological tradition is itself a hybrid reality that owes its origins and its development to a vast range of extra-Christian resources.

A third defense of transreligious theology appeals both to confessional detractors and nonconfessional detractors. I have argued elsewhere that “ours is a time in need of what I call binocular vision, the capacity to see the world through more than one set of religious lenses and to integrate so far as possible what is seen thereby. In former times, persons were often accounted wise if they embodied the theoretical and practical wisdom of a single tradition. Call to mind Shantideva or St. Francis of Assisi. But our age also requires another kind of wisdom: the capacity to see the world through more than one set of lenses and to integrate insofar as possible what comes into view through those lenses.”⁸ Can Buddhist notions of *sunyata* and *karuna* be held and lived together alongside notions of God and *agape*? If so, how? The quest for such wisdom is indispensable in an age in which many of us live routinely and intimately with persons from a variety of traditions. Our neighbors and even our partners are often not co-religionists. Indeed, increasingly we ourselves are hybrid and multiple. We must find some way to understand the meaningfulness of the fact that we do vipassana on Wednesday and Eucharist on Sunday.⁹ How do we hold Wednesday and Sunday together? If we are give a sense of integrated meaning to the diversities and multiplicities that mark our lives, then we need the resources of transreligious theology.

But we need binocular vision not just for personal reasons. If we are to gather resources to address the dire ecological issues of the age, if we are to work together to end global poverty and inequity, if we are to work together for gender justice, we need all the resources that we can muster. We need the vision and wisdom of all our traditions to confront these world-threatening issues. Binocular wisdom is not just a personal need but a global necessity. Hence, we need to gather wisdom by way of transreligious theology.

Now, let me turn to the work of addressing outsider challenges to the work of transreligious theology. Here, I believe we must argue firmly that transreligious theology is a vital counter to the reductive theoretical gaze of the sort advanced by Robert Segal and many others who are committed to a putatively neutral or scientific study of religion. Transreligious theology is vital precisely because it offers access to a mode of comparative study that refuses to treat religious persons merely as “native informants” who give us data for our theories of religion, human nature, and the like. In transreligious theology, the religious other is not merely the object of my study. He or she is my conversation partner. I study the texts and traditions of my neighbors not merely because I find their traditions to be intellectually fascinating but because I recognize that the claims of those texts and traditions might be true. And if I come to recognize them in some sense to be true, I must be prepared to revise what I already thought I knew in light of what I am now learning. Transreligious theologians cannot immunize themselves from the reconstructive work that is often provoked by a serious encounter with other traditions.

Hence, the ethical drive of transreligious theology is unmistakable because transreligious theology is marked by an ethos of mutuality. Transreligious theology is constituted by relational give and take with religious others even when that work takes place by reading the texts of others. Teaching students how to engage in respectful, intellectually serious, critical, constructive, and appreciative engagement with

⁸ I borrow this language from my own brief Op-Ed piece, Thatamanil, “Binocular Wisdom”.

⁹ See Thatamanil, “Eucharist Upstairs”.

religious diversity in college and university classrooms is a non-negotiable skill to cultivate in students who must learn how to be religiously literate and ethically engaged citizens in pluralistic nation-states. Transreligious theology has the capacity to cultivate such skills in students and can do so across a variety of collegiate and university settings.

Having defended the plausibility, desirability, and ethical power of transreligious theology, one further question remains to be addressed: how might we go about teaching students to do transreligious theology? Transreligious theology as a term of art has not yet caught on in academic circles. Its closest cousin is comparative theology, which can be traced to the work of Robert Neville, Francis X. Clooney, Michelle Voss Roberts, Keith Ward, and Raimon Panikkar among others. Most of these figures are still alive and writing. Comparative theologians are still generating the primary scholarship that will become a basis for transreligious theology. Few have turned to the work of generating a literature on how to teach comparative or transreligious theology.¹⁰ This work remains very much ahead of us.

I commend here one method for teaching transreligious theology that I have used both in my writing and routinely in my teaching, a method that has worked for first year freshmen as well as for doctoral students.¹¹ I developed this model when I first taught a freshmen course called, “What’s Wrong With Us and How to Fix It? The Human Predicament in the World’s Religions.” Put simply, I encourage students to bring to texts and to religious thinkers “a medical model” derived from the Buddha’s Four Noble Truths. I invite them to put the following questions to any given text or thinker: how does this text/thinker diagnose the human predicament? What is etiology of that predicament? What is the prognosis? What is the therapy? These questions are remarkably generative and especially good for prompting students to engage in close comparative reading of texts. Even 18 or 19 year old freshmen are able to turn to texts that they have never before encountered with some questions to bring to the text, questions that they readily recognize as important and existentially meaningful. This approach has also worked well for me in graduate seminary courses on Hindu-Christian Dialogue and introductory seminary courses on religious diversity.

I have found that students are unable to remain silent about these questions, even if only to challenge the questions themselves. Such resistance is central to the work of comparison: transreligious theologians must ask whether the questions they bring to the texts of another tradition are actually questions that are meaningful to that tradition. Does every tradition have some account of the human predicament? And would they name that predicament as a kind of illness? In this way, we can teach our students that transreligious theologians must be self-reflective and self-critical about the questions they bring to the texts and traditions being compared.

Asking such questions brings students close to the primary concerns of religious thinkers without requiring students to take up the therapeutic regimens of other traditions where such engagement is inappropriate. However, when and where appropriate, it is possible to introduce students to elementary forms of the disciplines of other traditions. As I am now situated within a seminary, I can routinely teach elementary forms of mindfulness meditation, particularly when Buddhist traditions are under study. Such practice, always optional and never required, provides a richer and participatory element in the work of teaching transreligious theology. Where such practices can be inaugurated and eventually deepened, one can hope for first order knowledge of God/ultimate reality. Where such practices have to be curtailed or put altogether under suspension—the state university for example—transreligious theology must be oriented to second-order knowledge. Transreligious theology in this vein is not qualitatively different from the work of cross-cultural philosophy of religion, a discipline that should entirely be at home even in the most resolutely secular of contexts.

For the most part, students are immediately engaged and constructively committed to joining the fray on these questions, and only a few of my Christian students are reluctant to engage in the attendant practices. As classrooms, even in seminaries, become multireligious and also include many who identify as Spiritual

¹⁰ For a brief piece on teaching comparative theology, see Thatamanil, “Comparative Theology”. And just hot off the press, see Brecht and Locklin, eds, *Teaching Comparative Theology*.

¹¹ To see this model employed as the architecture that provides crucial comparative categories for cross-tradition comparison, see Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine*.

But Not Religious (SBNR), transreligious theology will of necessity enjoy greater prominence. Even without practical engagement in spiritual disciplines, intense and sustained comparative reading is often sufficient to invite students to clarify and if necessary revise their own primary intuitions on ultimate matters. It has been my experience that once such powerful questions are mobilized, it is not a difficult matter to involve students in the work of doing constructive theology through and after comparison. In this way, I am able to demonstrate to students the promise and virtues of transreligious theology by inviting them into the very practice of transreligious theology.

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